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THE TIMES SPA GUIDE

Nuxe spa, the Balthazar Hotel, Rennes

Relaxing treatments and fabulous food make this a great place for a weekend getaway

Jane Knight
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The stylish spa hammam features plenty of blond wood and a hydrotherapy pool

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In a nutshell

Forty-five minutes from the ferry terminal at St Malo and in the heart of the old town, this ultra-cool hotel in the heart of Rennes makes a great place in which to relax before or after a Channel crossing. Previously an elegant townhouse, it has been converted into a highly individual modern hotel that is the epitome of rustic chic. You get a feel of what to expect in the large reception/lounge bar area with its wood floors, bare-brick walls, dandelion-clock lights, a glass-enclosed fireplace and funky cowhide seats. The spa is an outpost of natural cosmetics brand Nuxe, which aims to combine nature and luxury in its products and whose spas highlight its expertise in face and body skincare.

What's it like?

The spa is as stylish as the rest of the hotel, set in a modern basement area with plenty of blond wood and slate. The real treat is a hydrotherapy pool with various stations, which is the centrepiece of a darkened room. Around it are comfy loungers for relasing, as well as a sauna, hammam and a waterfall shower (aka a bucket with a rope to pull). There's also an experience shower, with the option to enjoy the warmth of the rainforest with accompanying birdsong or to go for something chillier with the feel of the Atlantic breeze. There is a relaxation room but it's brightly lit and not nearly as soothing as the pool area, and there's also a tiny fitness room. Normal spa formalities don't seem to be followed; this is the first I've visited where I haven't been asked to fill out a health form beforehand and where the therapist is happy to look for you within the spa area when it's time for your treatment.

The treatments

As you'd expect, there are plenty of facial treatments using Nuxe products, some designed to give radiance, but others using botanical active ingredients or that promise to fill established wrinkles or to help to correct the appearence of spots. Body therapies include scrubs, wraps, and massages, or you can enjoy a couple of treatments together as part of a longer "escape". My 45-minute massage was a bit "one size fits all"; although I mentioned tense shoulders and upper back, the masseuse didn't do any extra work there but carried out the same treatment I imagine she gives to everyone. That said, being smothered in the lovely frangipani-scented Nuxe oil was very relaxing, and left me with a satiny smooth skin rather than an oily one. And there's a nice touch at the end, a two-minute "wake-up" massage when you sit up.

Who goes?

Expect plenty of Bretons, who check in for a weekend of R&R, as well as Brits on a mini-break.

What are the rooms like?

They are as hip as the rest of the hotel, done out in black and white with lots of wood and funky wallpaper. Mini-bars have free soft drinks and you'll find Nuxe products in the bathrooms. Of the four categories of rooms, only the top two have baths instead of showers. If you can stretch to it, it's worth booking one of the junior suites because they come with large terraces where you can lie on a sunbed and gaze over the rooftops of Rennes.

What about the food?

It's absolutely delicious. Eat it in the sleek modern restaurant or outside, either at the front of the hotel or in the inner courtyard where there is a plant wall and water trickling down clear plastic tubes. My red tuna with sesame wasabi (€23) was perfectly seared and came with such a tasty side dish of perfumed rice that I forgot my no-carbs rule while my son's duck breast came in a divine sauce. And we both had a corner of room left for the deliciously evil chocolate pudding. The market menu costs €29 for three courses at lunch.

The lowdown

Double rooms cost from £116.33 a night (sofitel.com). Note that if you're not staying at the hotel, there's a €20 parking charge (00 33 2 99 32 32 32, hotel-balthazar.com). Massages are €55 for 30 minutes and €80 for 45 minutes. Brittany Ferries (0330 159 700, brittanyferries.com) has 11-hour overnight trips from Portsmouth to St Malo from £183 return for a car plus two passengers, or £215 with an overnight cabin.

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