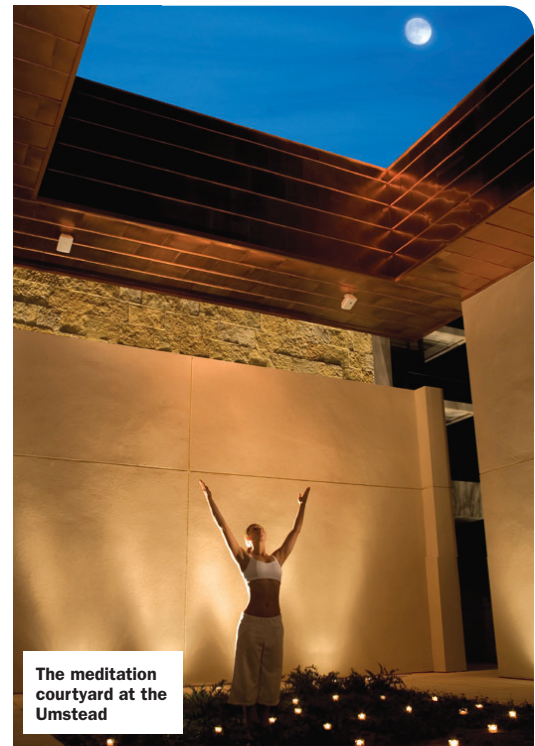




Get a Scotland feel at Renaissance Ross Bridge

FIVE SPAS WORTH THE DRIVE

MICHAEL CLEMMER—GOLF LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY



The meditation courtyard at the Umstead

COURTESY OF THE UMSTEAD

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

While dipping stocks and a scary economy may have you second-guessing vacation options, we believe you deserve and need a relaxing break. A resort spa can give you the biggest bang for your buck, helping erase stress in mere minutes. Whether you stay overnight or for a full week, after being pampered by professionals you'll definitely leave feeling better than when you arrived.

Of course, there are several resort spas within the state of Georgia that we like just fine. But our neighboring states boast some resort spas so exceptional that they're worth the extra gas it takes to cross the state line.

THE UMSTEAD HOTEL AND SPA

Cary, N.C.

Distance from Atlanta: Approximately 400 miles
Why It's Worth It: At North Carolina's only AAA five-diamond hotel, you'll find a peaceful oasis overlooking a tranquil three-acre lake, and be lavished with the regal treatment you absolutely deserve but too rarely experience.

Not-To-Miss Treatment: The delightful customized massage incorporates Swedish, reflexology and stone therapies to address individual needs (\$105 for 50 minutes; \$130 for 75 minutes).

Amenities: Rejuvenate in the steam room, sauna and whirlpool; meditate in the serene courtyard; or retreat to a poolside cabana.

Best For: Romantic getaways and individual retreats.

Other Reasons To Go: Savor first-class dining at Heron's, tee off at a championship golf course, explore the wilderness trails at the Umstead State Park, or head into Raleigh and monitor progress on the capitol city's \$3 billion renaissance.

More Information: Call 919-441-4000 or visit www.theumstead.com.

THE RITZ-CARLTON, AMELIA ISLAND

Amelia Island, Fla.

Distance from Atlanta: Approximately 300 miles
Why It's Worth It: Boasting a spectacular Atlantic Ocean view, this sophisticated sanctuary makes it easy to find your bliss.

Not-To-Miss Treatments: Nourish your skin and soul (and tantalize your taste buds) with the delightful "salt at the spa" package, which includes a margarita salt scrub, wrap, vichy shower, pedicure and tasty margarita (\$460 for 2.5 hours). "Heaven in a hammock" is, as the name promises, a perfect blend of massage and rhythmic rocking (\$200 for 60 minutes).

Amenities: In keeping with the resort's AAA five-diamond rating, spa butlers deliver personalized services while you relax in the steam room, sauna, cascade whirlpool, plush relaxation lounge, indoor pool or adults-only outdoor pool.

Best For: Romantic or girlfriend getaways.

Other Reasons To Go: Savor a behind-the-scenes dining experience inside the kitchen at Salt, the on-site five-diamond restaurant, get personalized instruction to improve your swing at the Anne Cain Golf Academy or explore the barrier island's rivers and marshes on a kayak tour.

More Information: Call 800-241-3333 or visit www.ritzcarlton.com.

RENAISSANCE ROSS BRIDGE GOLF RESORT & SPA

Birmingham, Ala.

Distance from Atlanta: Approximately 160 miles
Why It's Worth It: You'll be treated like royalty at this AAA four-diamond resort modeled after a Scottish manor. While the sound of bagpipes and smell of lavender suggest a faraway time and place, guest rooms are equipped with all the modern conveniences.

Not-To-Miss Treatments: "Mind, body and spirit" isn't just a detoxifying mud wrap, it's a cocoon of tranquility (\$170 for 75 minutes). By including pressure points on the hands and scalp, the "Highland foot therapy" is an invigorating way to revitalize more than just your step (\$55 for 25 minutes; \$95 for 50 minutes).

Amenities: The spa's quiet room, sauna, whirlpool, steam room and plush relaxation lounge invite lingering and offer multiple ways to refresh and renew.



The spa couples room at the Umstead

COURTESY OF THE UMSTEAD

Best For: Double dates.

Other Reasons To Go: Located on the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, the 8,191-yard championship Ross Bridge golf course beckons to casual and serious players. Don't golf? Some of Birmingham's best shopping is nearby.

More Information: Call 800-593-6419 or visit www.rossbridgeresort.com.

OAK HAVEN RESORT AND SPA

Sevierville, Tenn.

Distance from Atlanta: Approximately 200 miles
Why It's Worth It: Spacious cabins are outfitted with all the amenities of home (perhaps more), and boast breathtaking views of the Great

Smoky Mountains. Before or after your spa treatments, enjoy a relaxing soak in the hot tub on your cabin's private screened porch.

Not-To-Miss Treatment: The luxurious signature massage promotes deep relaxation with long strokes, warm mud and hot stones (\$150 for 90 minutes).

Amenities: The signature massage includes a spa CD and bottle of massage oil to help you recreate the mood at home.

Best For: Large groups, such as friend or family reunions.

Other Reasons To Go: Find entertainment nearby with golf, outlet malls, Dollywood and other attractions in Sevierville, Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg.
More Information: Call 800-652-2611 or visit www.oakhavenresort.com.

DAUFUSKIE ISLAND RESORT & BREATHE SPA

Hilton Head Island, S.C.

Distance from Atlanta: Approximately 285 miles

Why It's Worth It: Since the only way to reach Daufuskie Island is by ferry, there's a genuine "getting away from it all" feeling. Once at the resort, you'll be pampered with friendly, attentive service.

Not-To-Miss Treatment: The hot stone massage combines the heat and weight of strategically placed stones with the benefits of massage therapy to coax you into a dreamlike state (\$135 for 50 minutes).

Amenities: The 1,200-acre resort offers cottage, villa and inn accommodations, six dining destinations, two 18-hole championship golf courses, pools and a white sandy beach.

Best For: Family vacations.

Other Reasons To Go: The equestrian center offers horseback riding lessons, as well as beach, trail and carriage rides.

More Information: Call 800-648-6778 or visit www.daufuskieislandresort.com. **SP**