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NEW HOTSPOTS

# THE ROAD TO WELLNESS

## SOUTH BEACH STYLE

Hip hotelier **André Balazs**' newest venture is **The Standard Miami**, an innovative spa and inn unlike anything yet seen in the U.S.

BY GERALD AND TRISHA POSNER  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEN HAYDEN

With an infinity pool that merges seamlessly into Biscayne Bay, hotelier André Balazs has created an oasis of tranquility at The Standard Miami, a new South Beach retreat he expects to redefine relaxation in the world of high-end travel.



## THE STANDARD

**T**he rumors had swirled for months. A story in the November 2002 *Miami Herald* reported that the Lido Spa, the Miami Modern-styled waterfront building on Belle Isle, a lushly landscaped residential island along Biscayne Bay just a five-minute walk from South Beach, might be for sale. Owned for 39 years by the Edelstein family, and formerly the two-story Monterey Motel, the Lido was a local institution for hundreds of lively Jewish women, many of whom made it the centerpiece of their annual winter pilgrimage. The regulars barraged Chuck Edelstein with questions about whether he was selling. Gerda Rosner, who ran the aerobics class for 30 years, worried where she would take clients if the Lido closed. But the ladies knew that nothing would easily replace the package deals of \$75 a night, double occupancy, meals, exercise, entertainment and daily massage included. And when Edelstein sent a letter to all long-time employees that the Lido was closing in June 2003, many were heartsick.

But the Lido was not about to suffer the fate—demolished for a luxury condo tower—which has befallen many other storied Miami Beach buildings. The man who bought it was André Balazs, an arbiter of hip who had successfully redone hotel institutions such as Hollywood's Chateau Marmont and South Beach's Raleigh. Balazs had kicked off a hotel-industry trend with his two Standards in Los Angeles—and soon-to-be New York—in-vogue hotels that were magnets for young guests who loved the \$100-a-night rates mixed with a clubbing aura that meant nonstop fun.

A friend had tipped off Balazs that the Lido might be for sale, and he knew he wanted it when he first stepped inside four years ago. "When we came to the property, the little old ladies were shuffling around in their sundresses and robes, playing cards and getting treatments," he told us. "Chuck Edelstein used to stand at the stairs to the dining room and greet each lady by name. All the tables had boxes of matzos. It was a time warp. South Beach had exploded all around this place, and here on Biscayne Bay, only blocks from Ocean Drive and Collins, time seemed to stand still."

To some, the sale to Balazs conjured images that the gold-columned circular driveway would soon be crammed

**"South Beach had exploded all around this place, and here on Biscayne Bay, time seemed to stand still."**

with idling Hummers and Escalades instead of the large vans that loaded the ladies for sightseeing tours. But for André, "It was never my idea to come in and change the spirit of what the Edelsteins had so carefully created. It was, after all, modeled after the great European spas," he said during a recent personal tour of the property, now renamed The Standard (complete with the trademark upside-down logo).

Balazs seems more compact than his 6' frame. His face sharply angled, with short curly dark hair, the 48-year-old looks more like a model or actor than a hotel magnate (that he currently dates Uma Thurman doesn't hurt the matinee-idol image). He is intense, with his eyes locked on anyone he talks with, and he jumps effortlessly in his conversation from Eastern philosophy to politics to the bureaucratic frustrations regarding obtaining City permits in Miami Beach. But once you know a little about his eclectic background, it's not hard to understand that he is a developer of a different kind. Raised by Hungarian parents who had fled their Nazi-occupied homeland in 1944, André was born and grew up in Boston. Both his parents taught at Harvard (his father as a molecular biologist), and infused their son with an inquisitiveness that led him to dabble in several businesses before setting into his

Up until two years ago, the Lido Spa Hotel was an institution for hundreds of lively Jewish women, who used it as a centerpiece for their annual winter pilgrimages. The historically protected facade is happily being kept intact.

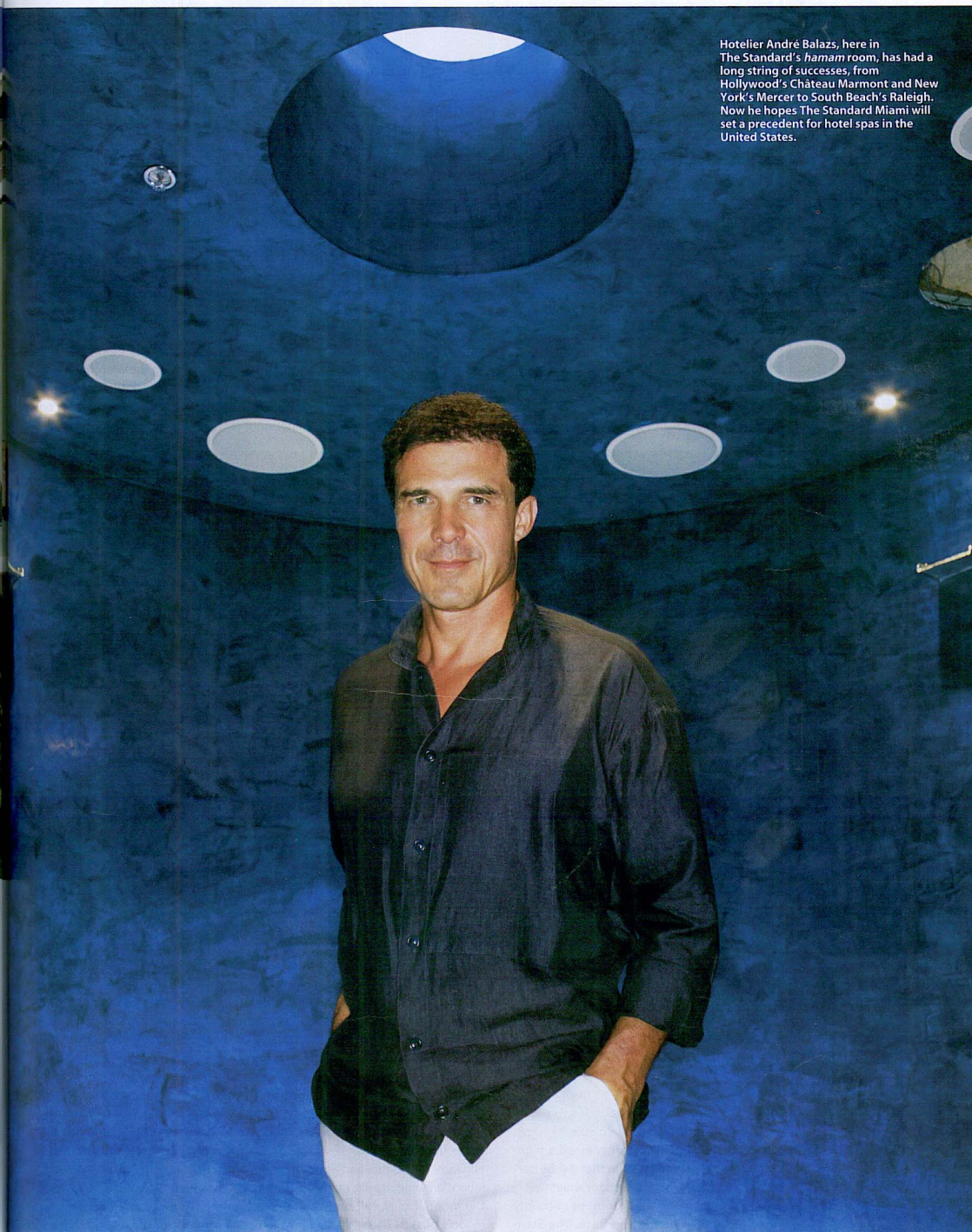


hotel success. André received his master's from the Columbia School of Journalism, but after deciding that being part of the media was not for him, went to the Rhode Island School of Design, which ignited an interest in contemporary furniture and made him briefly toy with becoming a sculptor. Then in an instant, at 23, he switched again, this time to start a biotechnology firm—Biomatrix—with his father (he spent one summer collecting umbilical cords to help his father's research to invent a medical treatment to radically help severe burn victims).

But by the mid 1980s, André was satisfying his political interests by working for powerhouse New York Democratic political consultant David Garth. Still, by 1988, André had decided that designing political campaigns was not his calling, and together with Eric Goode, owner of a popular nightclub, Area, and a few other investors, he opened MK in Manhattan. It was an instant success and celebrity hang-out. Not everything he touched became gold, however—his BC venture in Los Angeles flopped—but the nightclubs got André interested in doing something more ambitious. "Clubs are pretty simple," he told us. "They are environments, and you're usually only dealing with a few hours, and often a person sitting in one place."

Hotels offered a much bigger challenge. The opportunity, he says, was to create a stage setting that made people feel comfortable and less inhibited.

Hotelier André Balazs, here in The Standard's *hamam* room, has had a long string of successes, from Hollywood's Chateau Marmont and New York's Mercer to South Beach's Raleigh. Now he hopes The Standard Miami will set a precedent for hotel spas in the United States.





## THE STANDARD

He came to the business using a mixture of tools from his earlier endeavors. Disdainful of professional training grounds like Cornell's School of Hotel Administration, Balazs used his journalism background to "research and find a story to the culture of the hotel," and then his design and architecture pursuits to create the new environment, while keeping his club days in mind when "trying to invent something that lets you escape from daily boredom."

Balazs, as opposed to most high-profile owners, does not merely put up his money and hire an architect and contractor to complete the hotel before handing it over to a management team. Instead, his trademark is staying involved at every stage. There isn't a single chair bought or tile pattern selected that does not get his personal attention. And he is accustomed to transforming places such as the Lido into something wonderful. His first Standard, only 200 yards down Sunset Boulevard from the Château Marmont, had been the Golden Crest retirement home. Then he magically transformed the 1950s world headquarters of Superior Oil in downtown Los Angeles into his second style-on-a-budget Standard. In New York, he's converting meatpacking warehouses.

It was hard not to have some of Balazs' enthusiasm rub off on us. As we walked around the property, with the spa's new infinity pool sparkling against the bay, a speedboat slowly drifting near the shore, a plane arching overhead in the brilliant blue sky, and the sprawling views afforded from most of the site, it was clear that



Balazs with girlfriend Uma Thurman in New York.

few locations in Miami Beach are like this.

"Everything is new," says Jason Harler, the director of spa development and well-being. An identical twin who was formerly a Seattle-based clothing designer, Harler looks like Central Casting sent him for his Zen-master role. Tall and tan, with long brown hair, and his arms and chest covered with an intricate story of incredible tattoos, the 6'1", 35-year-old Jason is the overseer who insures André's vision is fulfilled.

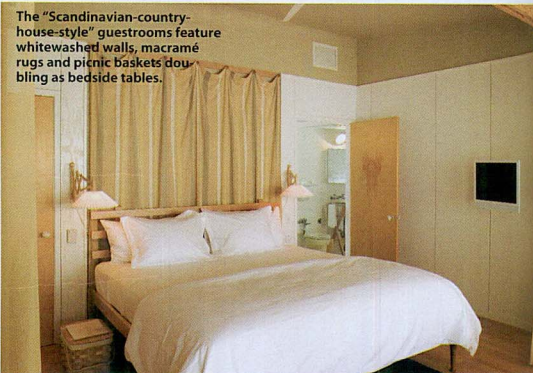
More than \$20 million later and with a staff of nearly 200, the new Standard offers a spa and hotel experience that might be the first of its kind. "The idea here," André says, "is to take the Lido back to its glory days as a spa, but make it the antithesis of what is in South Beach." He was inspired by ancient bathhouses and their communal lifestyle. Long before he set eyes on the Lido, he had been a fan of Manhattan's 10th Street baths, a relic from the days when Russian-Jewish bathhouses crammed the Lower East Side. But he has also visited some of the most upscale spas in his research for The Standard (at a French spa, Les Prés d'Eugénie, he discovered a high-powered jet hose that will be part of the hotel's outdoor amenities).

The environment certainly feels young and fresh. The Stan-

dard Miami is, as André says, "the absolute opposite of the Hollywood and downtown L.A. Standards. Those hotels are in very urban settings. This is on a tropical island." There is none of the glitz that marks hotel spas at the Four Seasons or the Mandarin, or the formality of the Golden Door or Arizona's Sanctuary. The credits go to the tropical yet modern interiors done by Shawn Hausman, landscaping by Madison Cox, and slick architectural elements by Alison Spear.

It is impossible to digest everything at The Standard in a single visit. From the front lobby—with its combination design of Modern Danish/South Pacific/1950s Florida tropical, including a small dose of Ikea-styled furniture—to the sprawling waterfront "yoga lawn," a visitor instantly knows this is a resort of a different breed. The main-floor lending library, with stacks filled with literature and potboiler mysteries, is just off the bar. Next door is the restaurant, with its striking dark-blue, glazed-brick wall, offering a broad range of organic food, from meat and fish to vegan and raw (the chef is Eric Ripert of New York's heralded Le Bernardin).

Different spa rooms have different themes. The most striking may be the circular Turkish-inspired *hamam*, seemingly carved from a small mountain of thickly veined white Carrera marble. Literally meaning "spreading the warmth," it is a room of medium heat and humidity between an adjoining black-tiled aroma-infused steam room and a light-cedar-designed sauna. The *hamam's* floor is glazed concrete with inset river stones, and an enormous large amber ceiling light dominates the



The "Scandinavian-country-house-style" guestrooms feature whitewashed walls, macramé rugs and picnic baskets doubling as bedside tables.

room. The extrawide marble slab benches are large enough for lounging and look out on several imposing stainless-steel baths for those who want to be submerged in water while relaxing. The lighting automatically adjusts to complement discreetly placed skylights that cast shadows around the indented "love nooks." The sound system would make most DJs drool, but the tunes here will be soothing, not danceable. And while in the *hamam* room, it's possible to order from The Standard's menu of light snacks and finger food.

The sleek gym has free weights, cardio machines (each equipped with their own LCD televisions), Gyrotonics, Stott Pilates equipment and even martial-arts classes. The scrub room boasts two enormous limestone tables and has a large hose for the ultimate body wash. The nearby Roman waterfall hot tub, with its eight-foot cascade of 103-degree water, will loosen muscles in only a few minutes. And the yoga room is serious business. "It's the heart of the spa," says Jason. It will have morning meditation classes, different yoga masters teaching throughout the day, and occasionally special retreats.

For those who want a little pampering, there's a skin-care room, an ultramodern salon for everything from simple pedicures and manicures to waxing. With great bay views, it is finished in sea-blue epoxy walls bordered by a brown leather banquette reminiscent of an Hermès design. There are also private rooms for massages (more than a dozen different types), microcurrent treatments (electrical impulses to enhance skin texture and firmness) and aromatherapy conditioning. All creams and lotions are biodynamic, made from ingredients harvested according to the phase of the moon. Facial, full-body and detox treatments also vary depending on the moon's phases. There are so many choices for holistic or Chinese medicine baths

The Standard Miami's front lobby is a combination of Modern Danish, South Pacific and 1950s Florida tropical design.



**"The idea is to take the Lido back to its glory days, but make it the antithesis of what is in South Beach."**



## THE STANDARD

that it would take a couple weeks to try them all. Seventy-five percent of the spa treatments can be given in the privacy of one of the hotel rooms, made possible by mobile "apothecarts" designed to André's specs. And if you want to improve your health and not just your skin, there is a natural clinic where a staff naturopath or acupuncturist offers the latest treatments—how about an ion-charged foot bath or hot- and cold-towel hydrotherapy treatment to stimulate your vital organs?

Outside, there are Italian kayaks to take on the bay, and the infinity pool itself is set so seamlessly against the horizon that it looks like it has been there forever. Speakers beneath the water immerse swimmers in revolving sounds. A Mud Lounge lets you pick from red earth, detoxifying clay or a spirulina smoothing mud. And you can wash off in the Wall of Sound Shower, a circular waterfall filled with the healing sounds of global DJs.

It is evident Balazs has created a spa that is otherworldly, combining understated luxury and overt sensuality with moderate prices. "In New York and L.A., the spa experience costs \$100 an hour or more," André says. "Our idea is to get you back to a time when baths were a communal experience, where friends gathered and helped each other bathe."



Outdoor baths allow guests to share a communal experience.

**"We are offering a chance to get away from clubs, the velvet ropes, the attitude."**

The 105 guestrooms, all with private verandas and large outdoor tubs, will go for \$300 a night during season to just over \$100 off-season. André describes the rooms as "Scandinavian country-house style," reflected in the whitewashed walls and macramé rugs. "I grew up in a house that was Danish contemporary before that was popular," Balazs notes. There are some nice twists on the ordinary, including picnic baskets doubling as bedside tables and cotton cozies draping LCD televisions. The Nordic design is one of André's surprises for guests, since "it is one of the last things you would expect to see in a tropical climate."

But the Standard wants to be more than just a one-week hotel stopover for trendsetters wanting a holistic-tinged holiday. It is concentrating on becoming the place for South Floridians to gather for relaxation, pampering, toning and mental stimulation. Party-ready South Beachers who might think that Standard-brand condos in the minibars, or steam rooms, herald the hedonism of 1970s gay bathhouses or straight swinging clubs like Plato's Retreat are in for a disappointment. "We intend to become a modern, contemporary, holistic culture center that cannot be found anywhere else," says André.

He has built it. Now the question is will South Beach, Hollywood and New York hipsters and celebrities who have packed other Standards and made them party-362 Ocean Drive November 2005

central hangouts marked by DJs, performance artists and tattoo parlors come to unwind, get toned, and feel refreshed? "We are offering something different here, a chance get away from clubs, the velvet ropes, the attitude," he says. "A lot of people have never even tried a spa experience because it has been too expensive or hasn't been in an environment they can relate to. Americans aren't as used to this communal experience as much as Europeans. But once they are given the chance, they will respond." And in an era when many people run into friends while working out at the gym, rather than strung out in too-noisy clubs, André has the odds on his side.

But Balazs knows that with only 105 rooms, The Standard cannot be an enormous success unless he also attracts a steady local clientele. Florida regulars can keep the spa busy when hotel bookings fall off during summer months. To that end, The Standard is offering specially priced memberships available only to locals. Costing between \$100 a month for unlimited access to the baths and gym to \$200 to include unlimited yoga classes, the memberships also provide entrée to the Center for Integral Living, which offers specialized lectures, author readings, body cleansings, film screenings and even multiday retreats.

Balazs is used to naysayers who think his projects won't work. Many predicted



Jason Harler, a former Seattle-based clothing designer, is now The Standard's director of spa development and well-being.

his Château Marmont redo would ruin the decades-old ambiance regulars loved, but instead he thoroughly updated it while keeping the spirit intact. The same is true of the Raleigh. And when he opened the Standards in Los Angeles, industry "experts" thought it was not possible to make a decent profit with rooms going for \$100 nightly, attracting a 20something crowd that had no loyalty to a brand built by frequent bonus stays or corporate discounts. Again, his success there has spawned imitators such as New York's Hudson and Santa Monica's Viceroy.

Now industry observers are waiting to see if Balazs can turn a moderately priced communal spa in a spectacular setting into the next "must-stay" spot. He is not someone who gambles recklessly with his, or his investors', money. But despite all his market research and intuition, he might have made a wise choice by leaving intact one kitsch relic from the Edelstein era—a Bavarian-styled wishing well. A little luck always helps.



The circular Turkish-inspired hamam room, constructed of thickly veined white Carrera marble, features extrawide slabs large enough for lounging and stainless-steel bathtubs.

**Balazs was inspired by ancient bathhouses and their communal lifestyle.**



The Roman waterfall hot tub boasts eight-foot cascades of 103-degree water.



Private rooms offer massages, microcurrent treatments and aromatherapy conditioning.



Elements of kitsch blend with the stunning tropical surroundings.