

Miri at La Spa has relocated to a beautiful setting overlooking the Welcombe Hills just outside Stratford. Gill Sutherland went along to meet Miri and find out what makes a visit there such a brilliantly unique experience



As a working mum of three in her sixth decade I don't exactly put in a Kardashian-like amount of effort into my appearance or wellbeing. My look might be summed up as 'frizzy meets frazzled': hair long overdue for a salon appointment; and mind, body and soul in desperate need for some TLC.

It is in this weary state that I turn up at Miri at La Spa, a short drive out of Stratford on the Warwick Road – I even found it without a Satnav, and I usually need GPS and a bloodhound to find my own handbag, so not hard or stressful. Plus when I arrive I am delighted to find plenty of private parking spaces on the doorstep – a rare pleasure for us Stratfordians.

Set in an old red brick former farm building on in the bijou Hatton Rock Business Estate, with divine views across the Warwickshire countryside and over the Welcombe Hills, La Spa is already working its de-stressing magic before I even step through the door... And when I do step through the door and I can only liken it to what I imagine are on the other side of the Pearly Gates.

La Spa looks and smells heavenly. Owner Miri Ahmet greets me and explains that the super seductive aroma is a White Company's winter spice candle, her favourite (I make mental note to buy in bulk for the festive season).

I'm here at La Spa to talk about its recent move from Temple Grafton, and Miri has also offered to give me a couple of treatments – which of course in the interests of investigative journalism I accept.

Miri first of all shows me around the new spa. With its white walls and white leather sofas, it has a clean and elegant feel; while the divine landscape views out of the windows and rustic original beams overhead lend it a country chic appeal.

There are a number of treatment rooms off the large main room – perfect for bigger gatherings – where in pride of place a large portrait of Audrey Hepburn sets a sophisticated but joyful tone: girls just want to have fun... and look beautiful.

I quickly learn that La Spa is the kind of place where treats are served alongside treatments. While I enjoy fresh coffee and a



IN GOOD HANDS: La Spa owner Miri Ahmet, *centre*, with her team, Sam White and Paula Scott

Treats and treatments

yummy cream cake (fizz, fruit and even a light lunch are also on offer), Miri sets to work transforming my hands, with their mix-match nail lengths and shapes, into something altogether more Audrey-like.

I ask her about the impetus for the recent move.

"I'd been at Temple Grafton for just over seven years, renting the premises and then this came up to buy I didn't hesitate," says

Miri. "It's closer to Stratford and the location is perfect."

Miri explains that her husband Tony, who works in property management, helped oversee the building's refurbishment, which took just over a month in July. "This was one big shell when we moved in. We started on the flooring and then added the treatment rooms – everything you see we've done. I hope I've created a relaxed

ambience that's not restrictive. I've kept it minimalistic – I don't like clutter and I like to keep the colours soft."

Miri continues: "We're really pleased with it. I've settled in so well, I feel like I've always been here. My regular clients have followed me here too, which is great."

I can see why Miri's clients would follow her – like her interior design choices, she has a lovely natural warmth and friendliness; you feel relaxed and trusting in her company.

As she deftly applies some sumptuous black cherry varnish to my newly filed nails, she tells me about her approach and La Spa's philosophy.

"La Spa is not a pavement salon – such as those in Stratford's town centre – nor are we a day spa attached to a hotel. We are a hybrid, so quite unique."

Although the spa feels intimate and personal, it is also big enough to host larger parties, and offers a diverse range of treatments: from waxing, tanning, facials, body treatments, massage, Jessica and Shellac nails, eyebrow tidy, brow and lash dye to make up services.

Miri continues: "Our uniqueness also stems from the fact that this is such a tranquil space and I get to spend time with my ladies. I get to know them, and get to know their skin. No one feels rushed here."

I should explain that at this point Miri has moved me into one of the private treatment rooms, where my feet and legs are being massaged as part of a pedicure treatment. It is so relaxing and I am in the 'no rush' vibe so much that I'm on the verge of nodding off – talk about sleeping on the job!

Miri continues: "Women may feel a bit intimidated when they walk into some spas or hair salons, but I hope they would feel relaxed here. A lot of my clients say it's the only time they get to relax and read magazines."

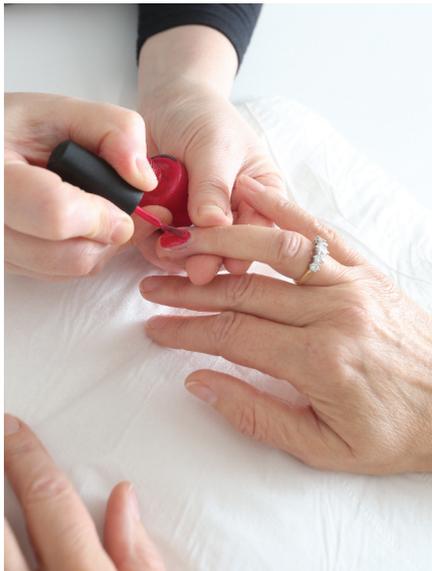
La Spa's obvious great bonus is that with her small team Miri offers a very personal service. "I have a good rapport with my ladies," says Miri. "They treat me as a friend – I'm a neutral, and whatever is said here is private and confidential, and I think they have that trust in me to offload."

Twinkle toes

Feet done, and with toes feeling twinkly, I move on to the bed where, after a long chat



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about my skin, Miri gives me a Hyaluronic Smooth & Fill Facial – which is hydrating and anti-ageing, just what this old mum needs.

Miri, who herself is a mum – to Evren, now in his 20s and living in London – explains that she has been in the beauty business for many years: working at Bodyline in Stratford for over seven years, before she became the manager at the Billesley Manor Hotel spa, and eventually setting up her own business ten years ago.

"When I was younger, growing up in Manchester, I did think of going into nursing or orthodontics, but really beauty has always been my passion, and I have no regrets. I love what I do – I never get up in the morning and think I don't want to go to work."

As she chats, Miri gets going with the facial. She uses Thalgo marine-based products – a well-established brand from France whose treatments, after many years research and experimentation, Miri reckons

FEATURE Miri at La Spa

are among the very best. The Hyaluronic facial consists of a double cleanse, exfoliation, massage and then masque – where cooling moisturising strips are placed over my face. Which sounds odd, but is actually incredibly soothing.

While this is happening, Miri massages my hands, arms and shoulders. It is simply the best massage I have ever had.

"My technique has evolved over the years," explains Miri. "We go on regular training courses as I think that is vital so you don't become too set in your ways."

Miri is clearly not one to rest on her laurels.

"We're are hoping that we will evolve as we grow," she says when I ask her what's next for the business. "One of our aims is to build relationships with other local companies. For example we've got a brilliant relationship going with Stratford Racecourse. We've come up with the Beauty and the Beast package where ladies can have a fantastic day out – they start here with a glass of champagne and canapés, enjoying a couple of treatments; then go on to the racecourse for an afternoon or evening race and have a three course meal.

"We are also planning a fashion show here with Justina, and a wine tasting evening with Vin Neuf – where we will offer mini treatments. The evenings will be fun and unpressured."

Miri also has her sights on making sure the business offers new beauty treatments and approaches to wellbeing.

"Over the next

12 months the spa will become a bit more of a centre for wellbeing but still with beauty at its core," she says. "We will be looking at advanced aesthetics – including microdermabrasion and fillers – podiatry and reflexology too, and will be getting the right experts in to join the team."

My time at La Spa is at an end. I don't want to leave this haven – but family duties mean I must. Before I go Miri generously gives me a bag of beauty goodies and a mini bottle of Prosecco. At home I pop it open, I smile to myself: I've gone from feeling frizzy and frazzled to fizzy fabness.

Thanks Miri! ■

See reader offer on page 29.

