

FRENCH LESSONS

BY COLLEEN FRIESEN

The Business of Beauty

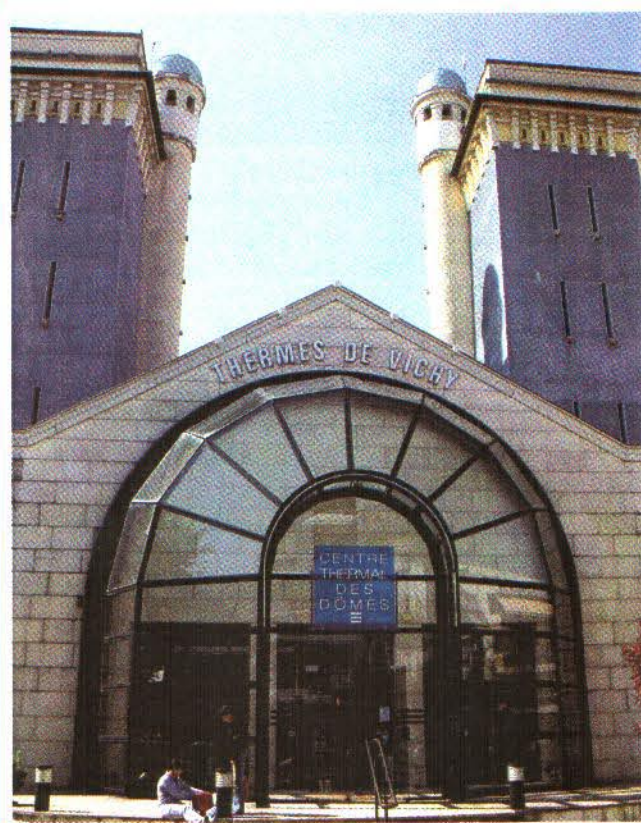
When I pictured myself “taking the waters” in Vichy, France, I envisioned low lights, scented oils and me, languid and relaxed. But, I had a hidden hope, a wish for more than the usual. I wanted something else to happen. Something... French.

Maybe this *séance* would gain me entry into the hidden world of divinely elegant women all over this country of fine food and velvet wines. Perhaps, my *thérapie* would let me in on the beauty secrets of my French sisters whom I see perched on café chairs sipping espressos from Barbie-doll cups or pointing perfectly manicured fingernails at *pâtisserie* cases. I, too, wanted to be the kind of woman that entices a scarf to float, cloud-like, around my neck. Surely, after a four-handed massage treatment I would be transformed. Elegant and poised with a glowing *visage*.

I am still clinging as desperately to that thought as I am to the stainless steel handicap bar that has been thoughtfully placed on the white-tiled wall. I am buck-naked in a brightly-lit room that resembles a small operating theatre. A short slim woman in a crisp lab coat is pressure-washing me with a hose that would work well for crowd control.

The water blasts off the coarse sea-salts crusting my skin. Before this, four strong hands had given new meaning to exfoliation. I had been quite sure that my epidermis had been sanded off with their rubbing - but I was wrong - the hose is doing that.

The woman mimes me turning and lifting my arm but points out that I should always keep my other hand firmly on the bar. *Bien sur*. She nods as I turn and raise my limb. And then she sweetly points the jet and blasts more therapeutic Vichy water at the skin under my armpits. I make a silent promise to never pressure-wash my deck again. Finally, she's done. As am I.



“pressure-washing me with a hose that would work well for crowd control.”

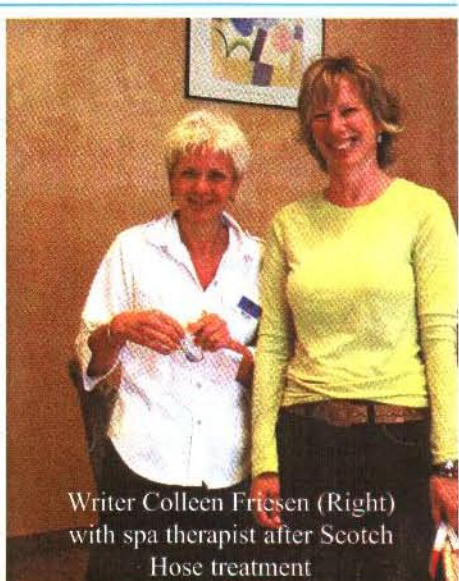
The hose falls thickly to the tiles. The other hospital-coated woman comes over and takes me by the elbow to guide my weakened self to the little changing area. With her minimal English and my rather useless French, I understand that I am to dry myself off. I start to leave.

“Mais, non,” she says and leads my mottled red body back to the table. There's fresh plastic. Apparently, we're not done. I'm beginning to get why they call it a beauty regime.

I lie on my back. She places a bucket between my ankles. “Masque,” she says, holding a gooey handful of black mud up to my face for verification. Starting at my toes, twenty fingers knead, smear and rub muck into each joint. My belly is kneaded and squeezed like defiant dough. I feel the mud heating up as they slather more and more into my muscles. It's creamy, but thick and slightly resistant to their pushing. Reaching my hairline, they stop and ask me to flip over. I slide my slimy body into position, my face on a fresh towel. More muck. More massaging. And then, the four-nozzled shower bar I had seen earlier is swung into position over the table. A monsoon cascades onto my tenderized body. Fingers slip and sluice the muddy water off my tingling skin. I realize I am moaning into my towel. I can't stop, I feel so good, I'm quite sure it can't be legal.

“I'm quite sure it can't be legal.”

Stunned, I re-enter the outside world. I blink and almost stumble as I step onto the sidewalk, and then I remember...I'm in on the secret. I arrange my big sunglasses on my glowing face, and walk, sure-footed, towards the shops. I'm buying a scarf.



Writer Colleen Friesen (Right) with spa therapist after Scotch Hose treatment

