

# natural healing



*Relaxation  
on the rocks  
helps the  
stressed-out  
unwind*

a “hot rock massage,” uses a combination of heat, rocks and a person’s hand to achieve its soothing effects, said Connie Cox, owner of The Stress Less Step, a massage center in Scottsdale that offers the newest wave in relaxation—hot rock massages.

“At first I thought it was a gimmick,” Cox said. “We heard that a lady down in Tucson (Mary Nelson-Hannigan) had developed the technique and was claiming that it was very successful, so we sent one of our therapists down there and he thought it was a great message.”

A hot rock massage consists of placing heated lava stones near sensitive muscles, joints and “chakras” — any of several points of physical or spiritual energy in the human body according to yoga philosophy — to

achieve positive relaxation effects on the body. According to Cox, the benefits include: decreased pain from muscle strain and arthritis, restored circulation, enhanced muscle relaxation, increased flexibility and a balancing of energy and chakras.

Most massage clients ask for a “deep-tissue massage,” Cox said, but for those that don’t like getting one, but like its effects, the “hot rock massage” is a great alternative. She added that it’s really recommended and popular with older people, because of the added benefits of the heat.

Nelson-Hannigan, founder of “LaStone Therapy” — hot rock massage — claims in her website that during a meditation in 1993, she received visions and verbal guidance from a spirit guide to awaken humanity to the “Stone Clan People’s healing properties.” And it’s from that the “hot rock massage” was born.

Although the modality has only been around for a few years, Hilda Franco, a massage therapist at The Stress Less Step spa, said she has already given over 200 hot rock massages and she sometimes has several appointments in a single day.

## The hot rock experience

I stepped into the lobby of The Stress Less Step spa without really knowing what to expect — except that I

had a 3 p.m. appointment for a “hot rock body massage” by a masseuse named Hilda.

I was told over the phone to arrive early and to bring a swimsuit — and an open-mind — which would supposedly enable me to more fully enjoy the facilities and the experience. I have to admit that I was a little nervous, especially since I don’t particularly like heat or rocks and the combination of the two seemed like a bad idea.

I guess I just had to see it to believe it. The whole idea of rubbing a bunch of steamy rocks on the human body to feel good, seemed plain silly, let alone the fact that the brochure advertised that it “balances energy and chakras.” But admittedly, I was wrong. It only took an hour alone with the rocks, the oil and the therapist to figure that out.

Hilda Franco greeted me in the lobby and quickly led the way through a pink door, which had a sign hanging off of it reading, “quiet please.” The hallway, which the door emptied into, was lit by a rosy tinted bulb and had several small rooms coming-off of it. Most of the pink curtains, which served as doors, were drawn closed to offer their occupants privacy, and calming music from hidden speakers filled the corridors.

Halfway down the hall, Franco stopped in front of a

# reflexology

Reflexology, also called zone therapy, is an ancient natural healing technique in which it’s believed that there are reflexes in the feet and hands that correspond to every part of the body.

The feet are considered to be mini-maps of the entire body with each organ, gland and body part connected to the foot through a network of nerves. By stimulating and applying pressure to the feet — and hands — there is an increase in circulation and muscular functions.

If there is a block in the nervous system and a corresponding body part is adversely affected, proponents of reflexology believe that by applying a steady, gentle and even pressure to specific points on the foot, the pressure will break down any blocks and improve energy flows.

According to a 1996 China Reflexology Symposium report, foot reflexology was 93 percent effective in treating 63 different disorders. Dr. Wang Liang reported that it was significantly effective in helping to cure 48 percent of all cases presented.

tiny room and drew the curtain open asking me to follow. A small, but powerful candle burned in the corner, providing most of the room’s light. And in the middle, was a hospital-like table, covered with blankets and towels, that I was asked to lay -on.

Lying face up, I watched as Franco opened a mini crockery pot filled with rocks and water. I heard small, clinking sounds as she used cooking utensils to gather the rocks. I quickly reminded myself that I had agreed to leave my apprehension and inhibitions checked in at the front door of the lobby and would remain open-minded. Instead, I tried to focus on the music, the dancing candle and the quiet hum of the room.

Franco told me to close my eyes and let her do all the work, and within seconds, I felt warm oil being rubbed on me. It took awhile to figure-out that it was actually oil-soaked rocks that were being effortlessly rolled over my skin and not hands. There wasn’t any abrasive material, nor where the rocks too hot, in fact they were the same temperature of comfortably warm bath water.

Wrapped only in a towel, Franco placed steamy rocks over me and rubbed my arms, legs and back with them. I slowly felt myself relax and started to think that this wasn’t such a crazy idea at all, in fact it started to all make sense. The all-natural heated rocks actually do some of the massage therapist’s work.

According to Connie Cox, owner of The Stress Less Step spa, most clients ask for a “deep massage,” which is just a strong massage. The hot rocks provide an excellent alternative, to deep massages, she said because of their weight. It allows the therapist to do a strong massage without using so much pressure.

After the massage, I felt woozy as I sat up. Franco said that a lot of clients feel a little spacey because of the rock’s heat. Often times, she said she suggests that they sit around in the “relaxation room,” which is equipped with vibrating chairs and a water cooler until they feel fully coherent.

Franco, who has been a massage therapist for over 30 years, said she has already given more than 200 “hot rock massages” even though it’s a modality that’s only been around for a couple of years.

“I just like making people feel a little better, Franco said. “After doing so many massages, therapists get a sensitivity in their hands and can tell when people are really stressed and the ‘hot rock massage, helps relax them.”

## Fighting for legitimacy

The Stress Less Step spa has been in Scottsdale for about six years, although it was founded in New York City. Cox said she started the company about 16 years ago specifically to offer men a massage center.

“Years ago, when I would go to the spa, the men would whine that they didn’t have a place like that, because at the time, massage centers were just for women,” Cox said.

She added that she met Franco around the same time — Franco was her therapist at the center she frequented in New York — and Franco said if Cox started a business, she would follow.

Cox claims that she began the first legitimate massage center for both men and woman and had to make it clear that “tips weren’t allowed,” since “tips” were a buzz word for sex. She added that it was difficult in the beginning because she would (and still does) get numerous calls every day from people looking for a “massage with release.”

“Years ago, it wasn’t OK to say, ‘massage,’ so we would call ourselves a ‘stress reduction center,’” Cox said. “‘Stress’ was about the only word that didn’t have a pornographic undertone. We had to print ‘no tipping’ in our brochures and yellow page advertisements, because we couldn’t write, ‘no sex.’”

She added that when she moved to Arizona to set up her business, she wanted more elaborate facilities than what she has in her New York spa. So when I arrived with my bathing suit in tow, I was taken on a brief tour of the grounds, which included a swimming pool, Jacuzzi, steam room, complimentary fruit and juice bar and a Russian sauna.

Although the hour-long massage ended up being very soothing, I discovered that the best was yet to come. On the drive home, I didn’t experience my daily dose of “road rage,” instead I calmly allowed drivers to cut in front of me, without swearing under my breath. I actually felt a sense of “oneness” with humankind and nature — for about an hour that is — before the euphoric effects wore off — perhaps that what the pamphlet meant by, “a balancing of the energy and chakras.”

Too bad they can’t bottle that feeling.



all photos by David Soto/State Press  
Masseuse Hilda Franco of the Stress Less Shop gives SPM reporter Kim Prendergast a hot rock massage.

# places to relax

Below are a few recommended places nearby that offer therapeutic, deep tissue, relaxation or hot rock massages.

## The Stress Less Step

5115 North Scottsdale Rd.  
Scottsdale  
480-945-7066  
Offers a variety of massages including deep tissue and hot rock  
\$65 for one hour includes unlimited use of the facility’s two saunas, steam room, whirlpool and cooling pool. Seven days a week by appointment.

## The Heart Space —A holistic healing center

Rural and Broadway  
Tempe  
480-968-4202  
Offers prenatal, relaxation, therapeutic, deep tissue and hot rock massage  
\$55 for one hour of regular massage which includes aromatherapy and hot pack treatment.  
\$80 for a 75-minute hot rock massage  
Monday-Saturday 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. by appointment.

## Rainstar

413 N. Goldwater Blvd.  
Scottsdale  
480-423-0375  
[www.rainstargroup.com](http://www.rainstargroup.com)  
A school and therapy center offering all kinds of different massage treatments, reflexology and aromatherapy from your choice of licensed or student therapists.  
\$43.50 for first-time student massage. \$29 after that for an hour-long session  
\$49 per hour with licensed massage therapist.

## Biolink Therapy Systems

627 S. 48th Street, Suite 110  
Tempe  
480-966-2120  
Student or licensed therapist massages, trigger point, relaxation and deep tissue.  
\$25 per one-hour student massage  
\$45 per one hour with a licensed therapist  
Appointments Monday through Friday 9 am to 4 p.m.

# lifestyles