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CONSUMER'S GUIDE TO BUYING A SWIM SPA

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FOR CENTURIES, PEOPLE HAVE FLOCKED TO PUBLIC POOLS TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE HEALTH BENEFITS OF SWIMMING.

Today, people around the world continue to agree that there is nothing that can give the same exercise value as swimming. The fact that it is a no impact activity that uses every muscle, swimming is still looked at as being the number one activity for healthy people.

While public pools are easy to find, the inconvenience of having to drive to the health centre or swimming pool to swim with other people makes it difficult to follow a routine. The modern homeowner can easily bring this experience to their backyards with a swim spa. Buying one, however, can be overwhelming, given the number of styles and added features available on the market today.

As with many major purchases, perhaps the best way to approach buying a Swimspa is to put together a checklist of the specifications and features you want and then rate the swimspas you see accordingly. Being prepared will help you avoid getting caught up in 'deal of the day' promotions or feel pressured into making a purchase before you're ready.

IF YOU DO YOUR HOMEWORK, YOU CAN ENSURE YOU'LL BUY THE SWIM SPA THAT BEST SUITS YOUR NEEDS.

The first rule of swim spa shopping is not to get fooled by the bells and whistles designed to distract you. As a consumer, there are six basic things you should look for when buying a swim spa:

1. THE SWIM EXPERIENCE
2. FUN & FITNESS
3. COMFORT, DESIGN & MASSAGE
4. REPUTATION
5. INSULATION
6. EASE OF MAINTENANCE

1

THE SWIM EXPERIENCE

There are 4 things to look for when researching the swim experience of a swimspa. The first is the pump design, Make sure the system has enough power to achieve the results of the user. Whether you are an every day athlete or a triathlete, the power of the pumping system including the size of the plumbing will help determine your experience. The Second thing to look for is the Swim Jet System. Look for a system that provides a smooth turbulence-free swim current. Make sure that the swim jets have a consistent flow rate that is able to produce a current that is flat, powerful.

The third thing is the ability to “Dial In” the resistance. This will allow the swimmer the ability to customize their swim and achieve the desired results. Adjustability of the current is crucial for a high level swimmer as it allows for interval training while at the same time providing a lower level for all other swimmers.

The final feature that is crucial to the swim experience is the shell design. Having a wide and deep channel with no protruding steps or seats allows the swimmer an unob-structed swim with a more consistent smooth water flow.

Look for the shell to produce little if any backsplash as it will push the swimmer out of the swim lane and disrupt the swim experience. Finally the shell should be designed to keep the swimmer in the swim lane.

Look for stabilization jets that push the swimmer to the middle of the swim lane instead of any other type of strap or harness system. Also, make sure the unit has focus points like swim lines or LED lit swim jets to help the swimmer identify their position in the swim spa.

2

FUN & FITNESS

ONE OF THE MOST OVERLOOKED AREAS IN A SWIM SPA IS THE ABILITY OF THE UNIT TO PROVIDE BENEFITS OUTSIDE THE SWIM AND MASSAGE.

Although the swiiming aspect is important today's customers are looking for a aquatic centre in the backyard that can provide hours of entertainment for the whole family. Some of the features to look for in a swim spa that can provide this type of an experience are fitness related. Rowing machines, tethered swim cords or in wall stair climbers and provide the customer with a home gym that is both convenient and versatile.

Some of the fun features to look for in a swim spa that can increase the family's enjoyment in the backyard can be as easy as adding some LED waterfall fountains that the kids can swim under, or a stereo to increase the fun. Some swim spas even have a built in wave pool feature that allows the kids both young and old, to enjoy hours of fun using a tethered boogie board to simulate riding a wave in open water.

3

COMFORT, DESIGN & MASSAGE

THERE ARE MANY CONTRIBUTING DESIGN FACTORS THAT CAN MAKE A SWIM SPA MORE OR LESS COMFORTABLE FOR BATHERS. MAKE SURE TO SEE IF THE SWIM SPA SEATS ARE ERGONOMICALLY DESIGNED TO FIT YOUR BODY'S NATURAL CURVES.

It's important to make sure you fit comfortably into the seats in order to get the best possible soaking and massage experience. Don't be afraid to climb in and test out the seats yourself.

What's even better, ask to do a 'wet test,' in which you sit in a fully operational version of the swim spa. If a seat is not comfortable when it's dry, odds are it will not be any more comfortable when it is wet. You should also take a close look at other design features of the swim spa. For example, is there multi-level seating so all body types are able to sit in it? Does the swim spa have a large enough foot well to accommodate multiple bathers? Are there safety steps to enter the swim spa, or are you forced to step on a seat when climbing in?

An area that can help with your installation is to inquire whether the swim spa can be sold with or without a cabinet. In other words does the cabinet support the swim spa or does it have a self-supporting cradle, that allows the customer to install the swim spa without a cabinet.

Check to see if there is a place to put an ice bucket or place drinks. No detail is too insignificant. One of the most appealing element of a swim spa is its massage capabilities. When added to the soothing feel of hot water, it can truly make or break your swim spa experience. As such, it is important to learn as much as you can about this aspect before buying. The jets are the most vital variable of the massage equation. Look for jets that do not have any bearings in them, as these can corrode quickly. Also, look for a model with optimized hydraulics to ensure an even flow of water is provided to each jet for a smooth, comfortable massage.

4

REPUTATION

LOOK FOR A SWIM SPA MANUFACTURERS THAT HAS BEEN IN BUSINESS FOR A WHILE AND HAS A PROVEN RECORD OF RELIABILITY. THE INTERNET IS A GREAT PLACE TO START.

Check out the company's website and do a quick search for independent reviews of their products. You can also ask friends or family members with hot tubs or swim spas about their experiences with particular models.

You should also take into consideration where the manufacturer is located this makes getting parts and service a lot easier if for whatever reason the retailer stops carrying the swim spa brand that you purchased and ensure they are supported by a reputable retailer and distributor.

Also, investigate whether the products they offer are covered by a reasonable warranty. Be careful of the small print as many warranties are pro-rated in the industry. A good warranty should consist of a 10 year structural warranty, 5 year acrylic surface and 3 year parts and labour warranty. When it comes to swim spa retailers, many of the same criteria applies. Investigate how long the store has been in business and whether it is a member of any professional associations. Research the company online to determine its reputation, including a search for customer reviews, referrals or complaints. Of course, visiting the store on a fact-finding mission can also be helpful.

Speak with a salesperson to see if they take the time to determine what swim spas would best suit your particular needs, or just push products on you without asking questions.

Check to see if the store has an onsite water testing lab an in-house or outsourced ser-vice department for ongoing maintenance support.

If you decide to buy from a sales representative at a home show, parking lot sale or other type of one-off event, be sure to ask whether the seller has a bricks-and-mortar retailer location that can support you with a warranty and service department.

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5

INSULATION

This factor is significant because of its link to energy efficiency, First and foremost, look for a swim spa that is approved by the Commission for Environmental Co-operation (CEC), a North American body that addresses regional environmental concerns, helps prevent potential trade and environmental conflicts and promotes the effective enforcement of environ-mental law.

Investigate how long it takes for the swim spa to filter 100 per cent of its water. The less time this takes the more energy-efficient the swim spa will be. Also look for models that use low-amperage filtration pumps.

A good hardcover can also provide added insulation and energy efficiency. The industry standard is a 50 to 76-mm (2 to 3-in.) tapered cover; however, a tapered 76 to 101-mm (3 to 4-in.) cover will more effectively retain heat.

Adjustable venting is another factor to consider.

Any swimspa that uses a heat lock technology which uses the motor's waste heat to warm up the swim spa water during colder months then is able to release some of the heat in the warmer months.

6

EASE OF MAINTENANCE

No matter what swim spa you choose, you need to make sure it is easy to service. The last thing you want to do is pull the swim spa out of a deck and flip it on its side every time service is required. Ask the salesperson to show you where technicians can access vital systems (and keep these details in mind when considering where to place the swim spa in your backyard). When it comes to swim spa maintenance, there are two primary factors you need to address—filtration and disinfection.

FILTRATION

In a swimspa, dirt can only do two things. It is either light enough to float on the surface or heavy enough to drop to the bottom. When assessing a swim spas filtration capabilities, but sure to ask how long it takes to filter 100 per cent of the water.Also check to ensure the skimmer is sufficient. Does it provide enough filtration to remove debris and does it have a floating door to skim the surface of the water? Also, does it come equipped with a floor vacuum to clean the dirt off the bottom of the swim spa? If not, you will have to purchase a separate vacuum. Also ask the salesperson whether the swim spa has a suction side filter or pressure side filter. The suction side filter offers less expensive filtration, but is not as effective; it will only filter 50 per cent of the swim spa water. Conversely, pressure side filters are more expensive, but since 100 per cent of the water passes through the filter, all of the water can be cleaned quicker and more efficiently.

DISINFECTION

To keep your Swimspa safe and pleasant to use, you will also need to disinfect the water regularly. Ideally, look for a swim spa that has an in-line chemical feeder as opposed to a floating dispenser. While floating dispensers work well, they also need to be removed every time someone enters the swim spa. If you choose to use an ozone system, which is designed to reduce your overall chemical requirements, look for a model that uses an injection system. This technology reduces off-gassing and increases the ozone's saturation and killing power. If you opt for a saltwater bromine system (which uses saltwater to generate chemicals for disinfection), be prepared for a bit of a learning curve. Make sure your retailer truly understands these unique systems and embraces the technology. Once you understand the system, it will be easy to use and should make a for a very pleasant soaking experience.

GO FORTH AND SHOP

Although looking for a swim spa can be confusing at times, you can make the process less complicated by narrowing down your search criteria to the above five areas. By finding a retailer you trust and walking in armed with this knowledge, you can surely find the swim spa of your dreams.

THE HIDDEN COSTS OF SWIM SPAS

There are two hidden costs to buying a swim spa that most retailers won't discuss - installation and electrical hook-ups. It is vital that you understand the costs of these two expenses.

INSTALLATION

If you are going above ground, you should budget between $1000 and $2,000, depending on where you are going to place your swim spa and whether you will be using a concrete pad or patio stones to support it.

The non-cabinet style of installation is very common in high end projects either inside or outside as it allows the designer the ability to finish the swim spa the way they envisioned it; in ground, in a floor etc. Even minor features should not be ignored. For instance, if the swim spa comes with pillows, ensure they are comfortable and easy to remove and clean.

When deciding where to install the swim spa, consider the following questions:

1. Will the location provide you and your guests with enough privacy?
2. Does the location provide the proper support for the swim spa?
3. Will it be easy for the retailer to deliver the swim spa?
4. Can the swim spa be easily serviced if something goes wrong?
5. Is there a place nearby to put a hard cover when it is removed?
6. What view will bathers have when sitting in this location?
7. Does the location make is easy to get in and out of the swim spa?
8. Is the swim spa close enough to an electrical source to ensure an easy hook up?

OTHER THINGS TO CONSIDER ARE...

ELECTRICAL HOOK-UP

On average, this second hidden expense will cost you roughly $1,200. However, this can vary quite drastically, especially if you require any upgrade to the electrical panel. Keep this in mind when figuring out your budget. To get a better idea of the overall amount, ask the sales-person about the swimspas electrical requirements and compare them to what your panel can provide.

AN ABUNDANCE OF OPTIONS

While there are certain basics by which to guide your Swimspa search, there are also some unique add-ons to consider when comparing models. These are just a few of the more popular upgrades on the market today.

1. AUTOMATIC SWIM JET VARIABLE SPEED OPTION. This will allow the customer at the touch of a button to increase or decrease the flow rate of the jets.

2. FRAGRANCE DISPENSER: This allows you to use specially designed spa fragrances in your swimspa, to add an element of aromatherapy to your soak. This can take your swim spa from a mere luxury to a multi-faceted wellness centre.

3. WATER FEATURES: These add-ons (e.g. waterfalls, streams, etc.) can add both esthetic and therapeutic benefits to your swim spa.

4. AIR THERAPY: These systems inject numerous tiny air bubbles into the water to provide a full-body massage. If you choose this type of feature, make sure it uses heated air; there is nothing worse than having cool air ruin your swim spa experience.

5. LIGHTS: Colour therapy can be a beneficial addition to the massage and wellness experience. All swim spas have a standard number of lights; it is up to you whether you add more lights to add to the experience. A couple of different options for lighting could be cabinet lighting or even some top lip lighting.

BUYER'S NOTES AND THOUGHTS...

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