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Spa Buyer 101

Important Spa Buyer Information

Owning and using a spa is a fantastic experience. They're great for therapy, relaxation, or for social occasions. Proper research and knowledge before purchase will ensure that you remain a happy spa owner, and hopefully you'll encourage others to own a spa also. That way, the industry thrives - everyone's happy!

When purchasing a spa, it is very important that you know what you want before you approach a retailer/dealer. It is particularly important that you understand all aspects of the spa you are considering, and any equivalents, before purchasing.

Never Purchase a Spa without Test Soaking it

Never buy a second hand spa without a pre-purchase inspection

What do you want? What issues will determine your purchase? What are you getting for your money?

For most consumers, a spa purchase is primarily based on price. Secondary to that may be colour, pump size, appearance, number of seats or size. Most are after the 'BEST' spa for their budget. This spa is difficult to identify, because the information you receive will be biased toward the particular spa model you are concentrating on. The following information is provided to give you, the spa buyer, the best knowledge to make an informed decision prior to purchase. Cosmetics of a spa do not indicate the operational ability of it. Only getting under the spa to the equipment and plumbing, etc. will give you the information you need for proper comparison.

Spa vs. Swimming Pool

A lot of buyers toss up whether to purchase a pool or a spa. Swimming pools are great for kids and entertaining for a limited time per year due to weather. It also consumes a large area of a back yard. Serious swimmers will need to

for to Public pools or install a long lap pool. Generally pools do not get the use you would hope for, particularly as kids get older. Maintenance costs for chemicals, and time taken for cleaning is significantly higher than a spa.

Spas on the other hand, offer all year round use due to heat, enjoyable socially, kids can still splash around, only a small area is required, they are therapeutic, and more likely to be used frequently.

Spa Pool vs. Spa Bath

A spa bath is a bath tub in your bathroom fitted with water (and sometimes air) jets. They are significantly cheaper to purchase, but have some disadvantages - they use a large volume of water which is wasted to the drain after each use, cannot maintain heat without an optional heat pump, limited number of users, less therapy and performance. A spa pool is in the form of a timber tub, portable, in-deck, or in-ground which is permanently filled and heated as needed. They are usually capable of seating between 4-10 people.

We will only be discussing Spa Pools in the following information.

Residential/Commercial Use

The use for which the spa is being purchased should be stated at the time of negotiating your purchase, particularly for commercial customers. The warranties and conditions of sale surrounding a commercial spa purchase are almost always different from a residential/domestic warranty. This is due to the fact that the spa is likely to experience far greater use and that the spa is an asset likely to generate income.

Generally, spas installed for commercial use have **LITTLE TO NO warranty beyond the date of delivery (typically 0 - 3 months compared to domestic 2 - 5+ years). ie if the spa has ANY failure after 1 week, it may have no warranty at all.**

Be very careful - if you are the developer or builder, you risk voiding any warranty that may exist, if you buy the spa - the original owner is the only one who can receive warranty (although this is usually relaxed in these instances).

Commercial use can be classified as a situation where a spa is installed in the following manner:

In a gymnasium, health club, sports club, hotel, motel, rented holiday unit, or any other installation allowing multiple or communal use.

Ensure you read the warranty documents even more carefully if you are a commercial buyer.

Colour/surface finish

Spa pool manufacturers utilize a number of different coloured and textured finishes. Smooth - solid or marbled, or a rougher granular type finish. Some surfaces are impregnated with Microban, an antibacterial making cleaning easier. Most major manufacturers use the same brand/suppliers of acrylic

sheet in their production process. What varies is the method of reinforcement and acrylic bonding.

Number of Seats

Spa pools can be purchased with seating for between 1 and 10 or more persons (avg. 5-6 persons comfortably). Manufacturers often include extra areas as seating in their brochures - this should be taken into consideration. We recommend buying a spa with a minimum seating capacity of 5-6 persons unless space available is a limiting factor. Do not assume that a 5 person spa will comfortably seat 5 adults simultaneously. Look at the seats as a weight station - a different jet pattern workout from every seat.

Overall spa size - dimensions

Consideration must be given to the space your new spa will occupy once in position. Sizes can vary dramatically, however most spas are from 1900mm - 2400mm square. Don't forget to check/test access into and through your property - take into consideration the eaves height, downpipes, fences, retaining walls, etc. In some cases a crane deliver will be required.

Therapeutic or Party or Combination

The purpose for which you require a spa is a major consideration. Spas can be generally categorised as - therapeutic, party, or a combination of the two.

A therapeutic spa should have a larger number of well positioned hydro (water) jets with comfortable seating, with a variety of jet positioning between different seats. Most have 2-3 large capacity pumps. Jets should be mainly rotational for better massage. These spas are at the upper end of the price range. This type is an excellent choice for maximum benefits and limited numbers of users.

A party spa is designed with open planned seating to accommodate a large number of users at a time - generally having bench seating. Little consideration is given to the number, type or positioning of jets. If you are buying for the kids, this is probably the type for you if you will seldom use it yourself. Typically, these spas are at the lower end of the market.

A combination spa is basically somewhere between a therapeutic and a party spa. These are the most popular due to price and performance combination.

Low Maintenance

DON'T BE MISLEAD - ALL SPAS are high maintenance. Spas are high performance products. With performance comes component stressing and failures. It is not a regular occurrence, but you should expect that repairs will be required along the way.

Higher quality components are typically North American manufactured and used by most upper end spa manufacturers.

Chemicals MUST be used in every spa

Warranty

The warranty you receive with your spa is probably the most important individual factor in your decision. The warranty will set out your protection against failure of the spa shell structure, shell surface, plumbing and electrical/electronic components. Particularly the length of time the electrical/electronic are protected for should be the main focus as this is where the greatest expense can be, post warranty.

Warranty Exclusions and Restrictions

Be aware that there can be many warranty exclusions or restrictions on the spa you purchase. Most spa manufacturers pass on warranty claims to the respective equipment manufacturer. In almost every case the spa or equipment manufacturer will not warrant heater failure due to corrosion, which will only occur as a result of improper chemical care.

Pump mechanical seals, fuses, lights, pillows, and accessories or parts fitted after factory manufacturing will generally not be covered by warranty beyond the delivery date

Most manufacturers do not cover travel for warranty repairs. If you do not live in the dealers service zone, expect to pay for travel.

Replacement Parts

Replacement parts for a spa may be required some years after sale. It is possible that the part you want will then be obsolete. USA made components are utilized by many manufacturers in Australia as well as the USA made spas. These parts will probably be available for more than 20 years. Some lower end spas may include some parts which are Chinese copies of better jets, made to the budget that you may be able to afford. These jets may become unavailable at any time.

Regardless of long term availability, anything can be upgraded to current equipment if necessary.

Particular Feature

You may have your heart set on a particular feature of a spa, such as a jetting arrangement, waterfall, double recliner, etc.

In our opinion, it is more important to look at the overall package than to dwell on one specific feature, but you are the customer - if you want a feature only one spa can deliver - that's the spa you'll be buying.

Comfort

Make sure you try before you buy - what may be comfortable to someone else may not be comfortable to you.

Non Operational Features (or gimmicks)

Practically all spas will be supplied with non operational features - the market demands more for your money. These features have little to no value to the operation of the spa, but can enhance your spa experience. Examples include - lights, fibre optics, stereos, waterfalls, aromatherapy.

Pump Ratings

Never judge a spa on its claimed pump horsepower or kilowatt ratings. This information is commonly used to help sell spas. HP rating is actually a measurement of power consumption of electricity. It is not a measurement of output. A more accurate way of promoting pump size, is by stating flow rates - the amount of water pumped per hour. In reality, it is far more complex. What this rating is attempting to show is the spas performance. To properly configure a spa to perform to its optimum, there are a number of factors to consider: pump flow, pipework size, plumbing design, and the number of jets. If the pressure felt at the jets is to your satisfaction when you test soak - THAT IS ALL THAT MATTERS.

Number of Jets

Too few jets will not provide effective massage and therapy if that is what you are looking for. On the other hand too many jets will result in poor performance at each jet. Do not automatically assume that more jets is better. Consider the number of pumps supplying the quantity of jets when comparing spas. The factors stated above in 'pump ratings' are the most important.

Type of Jets

Directional and rotating jets are the main two styles. They will have varying names with different manufacturers, even for an identical jet. For good hydrotherapy, more rotating jets are better, combined with seats containing multiple directional jets, usually designed to penetrate into deep muscle tissue.

Diverter Valves and Diverter Jets

Diverter valves are fitted to pump plumbing to allow more jets to be fitted and maintain good performance. They allow one set of jets to operate one minute, switch the diverter valve over, and another set of jets operate. At half way, all jets will work, however the performance can be average in some spas as a result of an excessive number of jets. If you intend to use the spa with a large number of others on a regular basis, make sure you test out the diverter valve performance to ensure adequate performance in all seats simultaneously. Diverter Jets act in a similar way the valve, except that you

rotate the jet face to cause water to flow to different regions including the diverter jet itself.

Running/Operating Costs

Most spa manufacturers will claim running costs of less than \$1.00 per day. Some can be as low as \$0.35 per day. A fully foamed spa with a well insulated cover will cost much less than an unfoamed spa shell, and a thin cover. The use of chemicals is always required, and will be a greater expense than the electrical running costs. Spas are high performance equipment. With performance comes expense.

Spa Shell - Polypropylene, Acrylic or Concrete

Spa shell materials vary between these types. Polypropylene is generally found on spas at the lower end of the market, Acrylic, with fibreglass reinforcement is the more common method and is utilized around the world by many manufacturers. For in-ground spas, concrete is a popular choice due to varying and custom designs and available finishes.

Acrylic finishes - most spas have acrylic shells - be aware that there can be large variations in acrylic sheet patterns. Therefore, there are large variations in a similar spas appearance with the same acrylic colour and style. You may not get exactly the same pattern or style as the display spa you may be basing your purchase on.

Electric or Gas Heating

Electric heaters are the standard type for most portable spas, and in most cases the only option. Gas is commonly used for in-ground spas, and spas without covers for a more rapid heating time. Electric systems are demand operated for constant temperature control and will need covers fitted for efficiency. Gas heaters are more expensive to purchase, but cheaper to run. Electricity is available at all residences.

Heat on Demand, or Timeclock Heating

Heat on demand is a method of heating utilized by all portable spa manufacturers. The thermostat automatically controls the pump and heater to operate as required to maintain a preset temperature. Better systems use 2 speed pumps - low speed for near silent heating at all hours of the day and night.

Timeclock/manual heating - used on in-ground electric and gas heating systems - the heater can only work once the pump is running and if the set temperature exceeds the actual temperature. The pump can be set to filter without heat, and can be prevented from running at night time.

Power Requirements

Electrical supply requirements vary greatly between spas - 10A, 15A plug in or 20-40A Hard wired. The supply requirement depends on heater size, pump number and size and whether the system load sheds. Most spas require 15A or 32A connection. Almost all spas require single phase connection. A couple of systems are capable of 2/3 phase connection as an option.

Load Shedding

This is a term given to the function where one or more components of the spa are prevented from operating simultaneously to limit the total power load to the connected supply. Load shedding is used to allow maximum options with minimum connection requirement. This is usually an automatic feature of all 10A and 15A spa systems. It is also utilized on 32A-40A spa systems with 3 pumps or to allow variable connection amperages where supply is limited. Typically the heater or air blower will be deactivated with load shedding. You need to realise that you may not be able to have every function of a particular spa simultaneously. If the heater is loadshed (which is the most common), it will have little effect on the spa except when the temperature drops in winter time. The heater will be unable to recover the lost heat until a pump or blower is stopped.

Electrical Wiring Considerations

All spas require safety switch (RCD) protection regardless of power requirements or connection method. A spa requiring 15A+ supply, must have a separate safety switch protected circuit run directly from the electrical switchboard. In some cases, particularly older homes, it may be necessary to upgrade the power supply to the house and the switchboard to enable supply to the spa, even for a 15A model. It would be wise to investigate this potential additional cost before choosing a spa, and allocating money aside.

Ensure that your spa is safety switch protected - preferably a separate safety switch- it is a legal and safety requirement regardless of connection method.

Make sure your electrician is licenced correctly and ensures proper voltage is maintained at the spa when running under full load.

Chemicals

ALL SPAS REQUIRE THE USE OF CHEMICALS . Proper chemical care is critical to the life of your spa and your own health, jet bearings, and equipment. Your spa should come with chemical care instructions, and your dealer should set you up with the correct information. Warranty is in jeopardy if chemical use is not correct. It is important that all necessary chemicals are used: Sanitisers, Oxidisers, pH adjusting chemicals and pH buffer.

Ozone

Ozone is an excellent addition to your spas sanitation system if set up correctly. 24 hour systems are far more effective at maintaining water condition with minimal chemical addition. The best system utilises a

circulation pump running 24 hours per day, with ozone being drawn through a mazzei venturi injector, and returned via a specific ozone fitting. The mazzei injector effectively shatters 99% of ozone into the water as it passes. All systems still require the use of all chemicals, some in only small doses due to ozone's effectiveness.

Aromatherapy

Many spas now come with Aromatherapy systems fitted as standard. They use fragranced beads in a canister which release via the blower system air injectors or air venturi controls. They offer a pleasant fragrance to provide aromatherapy and mask chemical odours.

Insulation

The efficient heating and heat retention of a spa relies on its insulation. All electric heated spas should have a thermal hard cover fitted. Floating foam covers are largely inefficient. Foam on the spa shell or cabinet under the spa will prevent heat loss under the spa. However since heat rises, the thermal cover is the most important insulation for the spa.

Fencing Requirements

In most regions, your spa is classified with the same requirements as a swimming pool. A thermal hard cover is rarely sufficient to conform with legal child protection requirements.

Generally you will require - 1200mm high fence with horizontal rails no closer together than 900mm, gaps between vertical slats no greater than 100mm, with an outward opening, self closing and latching gate. No items are to be placed in proximity to the spa which may be dragged across to the fence or climbed upon to gain access over the fence or to the gate latch.

Always check with your local council as to current legal fencing requirements for your area.

Spa Installation Preparation Requirements

Nearly all spa manufacturers require a reinforced 4" concrete slab or timber deck adequately supported, to maintain shell warranty. Very few manufacturers will allow precast pads, paving, or direct ground contact as a base. Make sure you check these preparation requirements carefully in the spa manual or contact the spa manufacturer if in doubt, prior to making an area ready for your new spa.

Spa Access

For ease of maintenance access, it is preferable that a space of 500mm minimum be left around all sides of the spa. This is also a requirement for warranty service for all spa manufacturers. Should you choose to position the spa so that one or more sides is inaccessible, be aware that it will be your

responsibility to move the spa to allow access for warranty service prior to attendance, should service be required.

Second Hand Spas - Specific Issues

Be very careful when purchasing a second hand spa.

Pro's - much cheaper than new equivalent spa.

Con's - original warranty is not transferable under any circumstances, regardless of age, equipment can often become obsolete, parts may be almost worn out.

In some cases the repair costs to fix a second hand spa that requires replacement parts due to the original parts becoming obsolete, may exceed the cost of a new equivalent spa.

If you intend to buy a second hand spa, have a pre-purchase inspection to ensure you are buying a good spa. Even if you don't want to buy new, we recommend that you look at new spas anyway, to get an idea of worth - you don't want to pay near new price for a second hand spa.

Do shop around - no spa is identical to another in either appearance or construction.

Don't buy on impulse.

Don't buy unless you are confident that you understand all the above information.

Definitely don't buy without test soaking first.

We are the Spa Manufacturers, and Spa Equipment Manufacturers Authorised Service Agents, and Parts Distributors for in excess of 15 major companies.

We can guarantee you that the information above applies to those manufacturers' spas and equipment, as well as all others. If you discover otherwise, please contact us, so that we may amend our records.

You are welcome to contact us directly to discuss the above information, or any other, in greater detail.

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