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Spa Buyers Guide

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Spa Buyers Guide

Buying a spa can be confusing and difficult, read our spa buyers guide below to help make it a bit easier. With multiple features and options to consider and conflicting information from spa retailers and the internet making it even harder for you to make the right decision.

- **We have divided this guide into several sections:**
- **Facts about spa ownership**
- **What you need to know about the delivery process**
- **Other important things to consider**
- **Things to look for while you're shopping**

FACTS ABOUT SPA OWNERSHIP

COSTS OF OWNING A SPA

While there are a few things to learn, with a little training and ongoing advice it takes just a few minutes after use and once a week to keep your spa clean and ready to use at any time. All you need to do is add water treatment products and clean your filters.

The cost to keep your spa heated and ready to use will depend on a number of factors including how often you use it, for how long, the size of the spa, the amount of insulation, where you live and the location in your home.

In general a small spa will cost around \$7-\$10 a week to keep heated and a large spa \$10-\$15 a week. Extra large spas will cost more but with a heat pump this can actually be less.

In summer if you choose to run the spa cold the running costs will be just \$2 to \$3 a week. The cost to use your spa will again depend on the size and ambient temperature but will cost approximately \$2 to \$3 an hour to run the pumps and re-heat the water – less than a cup of coffee. The cost to treat the water can be from \$250-\$500 a year depending on usage and spa size.

For something you can use all year round – hot or cold and with so many benefits it is no wonder why spas are so popular.

SPA OR SWIM SPA

If you regularly swim and like the idea of being able to do so whenever you want in the comfort of your own backyard then a swim spa is worth considering. We have a separate swim spa buyers guide that can help you here.

Please remember that if you buy a swim spa and you regularly want to have a hot spa then you should consider buying a separate spa (with a greater choice of seating and massage options) or a “dual zone” swim spa (with separate spa) as it is costly and time consuming to heat a swim spa with such a large body of water.

BEST SIZE FOR YOUR NEEDS AND LOCATION

Once you've decided on either a portable or in ground spa, your main choice is what size of spa will suit your needs. This decision should be based on:

- The size of the area you have available.
- The number of people you want in your spa at one time.
- If you like a feeling of roominess in your spa or don't mind if people are close together.
- The style of seating you want – as recliners take more space.
- The size of the people who will be using the spa.
- Running costs – as the larger the spa the more water you have to heat.
- Your budget – larger spas are more expensive.

Remember that just because you have lots of people at your house doesn't mean they all want to be in the spa together.

PORTABLE VS IN GROUND

In-built spas (either in the ground or in a deck) used to be very popular and they can look great when incorporated into a landscaped outdoor living area. In the past people would buy a spa “shell”, dig a hole and plumb it to the pump and equipment which would be placed separately away from the spa (like a pool).

These days we would recommend using a portable spa and either building this into your deck or sinking it into a “pit” in the ground (and then decking around it). This is due to the many benefits offered by portable spas, as detailed below:

IN GROUND SPA

- Difficult and expensive to install
- Equipment must be placed externally
- Less power to the jets due to longer plumbing
- Higher running costs
- Manual push button controller
- Can't move or sell it
- Noisier
- MAJOR problems if the spa leaks (tree roots etc)
- Restricted lighting options + no stereo option
- Limited choice of suppliers and installers

IN GROUND SPA

- Portable Spa
- Simple to Install
- Everything is located under the spa for easy servicing
- Maximum power and hydro massage
- Lower costs due to better insulation
- Programmable filtration and heating
- Can move or sell it at any time with minimal cost
- Quiet as all equipment built into the cabinet
- Easy to repair as the cabinet is fully removable
- Full lighting and stereo options
- Heaps of choices, options and accessories

TYPES OF SPAS

The types of spas that you can choose from include:

- An affordable entry level spa – mainly for cooling off or soaking in hot water
- A mid price “all rounder” – that has more features and offers a good level of hydrotherapy
- Top quality “hydro massage” spa with premium features and usually more jets, power and therapeutic benefits.

This decision will determine your everyday spa experience, the price you'll pay and the power supply you need. If you want a therapeutic spa then make sure the jets are positioned to provide the massage you want.

SEATING LAYOUT

Spas have four main types of seats:

Recliner Lounges are designed for lying down and are perfect for when you want to fully relax. These seats often have jets along your legs and on your feet as well as on your back to provide a “full body” massage – but remember they do take the same amount of room as 3 upright seats.

Therapy Seats have lots of jets which target muscle groups on your back (and often your feet) to provide therapeutic relief for aches and pains.

Neck and Shoulder Therapy Seats have jets that are located at or above the water line to target your neck and shoulders. They can be very deep and can also be restrictive for tall people so make sure to sit in them before buying.

Bench Style and Other Upright Seats. These seats often have less jets and are best for children and socialising as they are usually shallower, upright and allow you to fit more people in your spa.

If you are unsure about what is best for you, sit in some spas – or even better, ask for a “test soak”. Be aware that some people tend to “float away” in recliners, especially if the recliner is quite flat. Make sure the recliner(s) have a pronounced well for your bottom or moulding around your knees – so look for this when shopping.

PRICE OF SPA

The price you pay will be determined mainly by the number of pumps and jets as listed above but is also determined by what level of features and quality you expect and how much customer support you require.

BUYING A SPA OVER THE INTERNET

If you are prepared to take a risk on buying through an internet based supplier you may save money in the short term but there are many risks including:

- Not being able to see the spa to check the quality before you buy
- Not being able to test if it suits your size and height
- Not knowing the level of equipment and insulation – meaning high running costs
- Having a limited warranty which often does not even include labour costs.

The majority of internet based spa suppliers go broke after a short period of time or have a bad history when it comes to supporting their customers and providing spare parts, leaving you to find the parts and someone that can fix your spa.

If you're considering an online supplier, Google them to see what type of experiences other customers have had.

RUNNING COSTS

If running costs are important then you need to look at:

- The layers of insulation – the more layers the better (they work like clothes in winter).
- The thickness of the layers – the thicker the foam, the lower your running costs will be.
- How well the base of the spa and the inside of the cabinet panels are insulated.
- How big a gap there is between the shell and the cabinet – a large gap allows heat to escape and cold air to enter.
- If the controller is a "smart controller" that monitors usage and adapts filtration and heating to minimise costs
- If the spa is smart meter ready – if your home has a smart meter, you can use off-peak power for heating and filtration.
- If the spa is fully heat pump ready – if so you can fit a heat pump and save up to 70% of heating costs.

EXTERNAL HEATERS

Most spas are now designed to be permanently heated using a relatively small electric heater element. You leave the power on and set your required temperature and your spa is ready to use at any time. Turning your heater off after each use means it will take up to 12 hours to heat your spa before use – and will usually cost you even more to run than heating it permanently.

For spas with good insulation, it is not viable to use a heat pump or gas heater as the installed cost of the heater will not be covered by the savings in heating costs. These heaters also take up space, but they are worth considering:

- If the spa is very large – and this is where a heat pump is the best option as it can heat a large body of water for up to 70% less than an electric heater and is both cheaper to buy and run than gas.
- Your spa has minimal insulation or no other features to reduce running costs
- You are in a very cold climate (where you may otherwise want to keep the spa heated)
- Quick heat up times are very important i.e if you use your spa infrequently or if the spa is at a holiday home.
- In this case a gas heater is the best choice. For a holiday home a heat pump could still be the best choice as long as your spa has a wireless module fitted that allows you to control and heat your spa in advance using a phone app.

Look for a spa that is fully heat pump compatible as this will allow you to run your heat pump from your spa touch pad, use both heat pump AND electric heater for extra fast heating and also use your heat pump to cool the water in winter.

POSITIONING YOUR SPA

Spas can be placed inside or outside. If you are placing your spa outside, we suggest positioning it:

- Close to where you do most of your socialising as you will definitely use it more
- Not too far from your house so you don't get too cold when you get out
- Close to your toilet and fridge (for a cold drink)
- Away from sight lines of neighbours
- Away from cold winds if possible or use a blind or wall to block the wind
- Under cover is usually better for shade in summer and under cover so you can use it when it's raining in winter.

SPA FOUNDATION

The spa foundation should be solid and flat. The foundation must be strong and must not move as if it does then your warranty will be void and the spa could crack due to movement and stress to the shell. In general, the base must be able to support 500kg per square metre and for swim spas 1000kg per square metre.

Surfaces that suit are:

- Concrete Slab – for spas you require a level base of 100mm (4") minimum thickness with F72 mesh (subject to soil conditions). For swim spas it needs to be 150mm (6") minimum thickness also with reinforcing mesh but as the weight of a swim spa is much higher you may need to consult a specialist about your soil type.
- Pavers are OK as long as they are flat and are bedded well (concrete base or cement mixed with crusher dust).
- Compacted Granite or Crusher Dust can be used as long as it is prepared in a way that will not move.
- A Timber Deck is also suitable as long as you check with a builder and / or engineer that it is structurally sound and can handle the weight (per square metre) mentioned above. You need to support both the external edges AND under the foot well (centre) of the spa.

You can put a portable spa into a pit or deck as long as the spa is supported underneath (and not by the lip) and that you can get access to the equipment inside the spa cabinet.

In general all sides of your spa will have some form of fitting that could potentially leak so access all around or the ability to move the spa to get access is necessary.

You will need to build trap doors into the deck or have access from underneath the deck so you can remove the cabinet panels. Make sure that the panel screws are not covered by any deck framing.

The minimum space required around a spa for access is 600mm – preferably 900mm. Talk one of our dealers if service access is restricted.

FENCES & PERMITS

Portable spas usually don't need a permit but in most cases a permit IS required for your fence (or "safety barrier") so you need to discuss your local regulations with your spa retailer.

Obtaining permits is best handled by an independent certifier but if you've got the time and can accept possible delays you can deal directly through your local council.

POWER REQUIREMENTS

Basic spas come with a power cord with a plug on the end and can be plugged into a standard 10 amp power point.

You will, however need to make sure than the “circuit” that this power point is connected to has enough power supply as the spa will draw almost 10 amps on its own and there may be many other appliances connected to this same circuit. It is usually best to have a dedicated circuit for your spa. Either way this circuit must by law have a circuit breaker attached to it.

Most spas with 1 jet pump require 15 amps. These can come with a 15 amp power cord that

can be plugged into to a special 15 amp power point (you may be able to upgrade the face of a standard 10 amp power point) or you need to have a dedicated circuit and power point fitted.

Otherwise it can be hard wired with a 15 amp power supply and isolation (on/off) switch. Spas with 2 or 3 jet pumps will require a 25 or 32 amp direct wired power supply and isolation switch.

If you are planning for a heat pump then you may need a separate power supply. This is not the case if the spa has a “Spa Net” brand controller (heat pump compatible). Gas heaters will need a separate 10 amp power supply. It is the responsibility of the spa owner (or retailer) to use a Registered Electrical Contractor (REC) to install all relevant power requirements for your spa to the relevant codes and standards. Upon completion of the work, your REC is required to supply you with an Electrical Safety Certificate.



THE DELIVERY PROCESS

Spas can be delivered in a number of different ways:

- Crane Truck: With varying reach, this method can be used to deliver spas over a fence or straight into position and is safe, easy and relatively cheap.
- Large Crane: While more expensive, this option would be required if the spa needs to be delivered long distances such as over your house. Craning your spa into position is easiest but you may need to get a site inspection done if the ground is uneven, the spa needs to be craned more than 20 metres, there are power cables above your home or the crane needs to be set up on a public road or space.
- All Terrain Forklift: Useful for deliveries over muddy or difficult terrain when a crane can't be used.
- Trolleys: Spas can be trolleyed into position flat or on their side. If delivered on their side, you'll need to make sure that the ground is quite flat otherwise it can be dangerous. To work out accessibility, if the spa is delivered vertically, the thinnest part of the delivery route must be no less than the normal “height” of the spa (when flat) plus 5cm and the lowest part of the delivery route must be the normal “width” of the spa (when flat) plus 5cm. If the spa is being delivered flat then the thinnest point of the delivery route must be at least the width of the spa plus 5cm.
- By Helicopter: If all else fails, but this is also subject to power lines and trees.
- By Hand: This is generally not an option as spas are very heavy and awkward to hold onto.

So you can discuss possible options with your spa retailer, please advise them:

- If you have steps? If so, how many? And are all the steps together or are there multiple sets?
- If using a crane, is the ground uneven and are there powerlines above? If so, you will need a site inspection.
- Are there branches in the way of the delivery path? If so you may need to trim them back.
- Is there a gate the spa has to get past? If so, what is the height and the width? If it is restrictive, are you able to remove a panel? If so, it would be a good idea to do this before the delivery of your spa to ensure a speedy delivery.
- Do I have a clear delivery path?
- Are there any obstructions from where the truck will be to where the spa has to go? If so, what are they and remove them or advise what they are before the delivery day.

Remember that if access is limited you may be able to deliver your spa via a park next door or through a neighbour's property – but you should get written consent first. If you are not sure on the best method for your delivery, ask the retailer who will arrange the delivery and/or crane company to do a pre delivery inspection (and quote).

OTHER IMPORTANT THINGS TO CONSIDER

AUSTRALIAN STANDARDS

Many cheap spas that are sold online are being imported without the necessary Australian

approvals, leaving you with a spa that cannot be legally repaired by any service person (assuming you can get replacement parts). You must insist to see a valid copy of the approval by the retailer or you will end up with a spa that can't even be used. You should also check that the spa has a metal compliance plate with an approval number on it.

LEVEL OF ASSISTANCE

People often shop for spas without understanding exactly what is involved and what help they will need to get their spa legally in place and ready to use. You will need to consider if you need help organising.

Tradespeople: You might need an electrician, someone to lay a concrete slab or a landscaper or builder or a fencing company to complete your project. These people will require information including power requirements and drawing that show frame layouts and equipment access points.

Council Requirements: Make sure your supplier can provide advice regarding possible council requirements as well as documents that the council (or your certifier) may need.

Certification: Using a certifier is the best way to get your spa approved so you should ask the retailer if they work with someone that knows the council and the brand of spa to make the whole process go smoothly.

Delivery: Online and budget spa retailers consider delivering your spa to the footpath in front of your home "arranging delivery" but spas are difficult to move and require specialists to get into site. Others use contractors, but you need to clarify how many people they will supply and if they have the correct Insurance?

Remember that spas are mechanical products and like a car you'll need replacement parts from time to time. And you'll need advice to look after the water quality.

Most importantly, cheap spas are prone to shell failure which will require a potential warranty claim if it needs to be replaced. Budget and direct sales companies talk about saving money by cutting out the middleman but this often means there is no-one to back you up and no money to cover repairs and warranty claims – and this is why these companies fail over and over again.

WARRANTIES

Different warranties cover different components for different lengths of time. Some pay claims on a pro-rata basis and others have so many limitations they are basically worthless.

Also, legally and in many cases practically it is your retailer who covers your warranty so you need to ask the retailer how long they have been trading under their same name. Not many have been around as long as the warranty they are offering.

PUMP SIZES, ENERGY STAR RATINGS AND RUNNING COSTS

Be aware that a 4.8 BHP (brake horse power) pump is exactly the same as a 3 HP pump.

No government body has ever given efficiency ratings to individual spa brands so where star ratings are shown they're simply being "made up".

Some manufacturers promote running costs that don't include heating. Other manufacturers base their claims on incorrect power rates and unrealistic assumptions. And a few brands promote "low amp" filter pumps but as they run 24 hours a day they actually cost you more. If claims are made, ask how they are calculated.

The only things that effects running costs are:

- The amount of insulation (how many layers, how thick etc)
- If the spa have a sealed base
- If the spa uses a low cost filtration pump
- If the spa have a Spa Net "smart controller"
- The size of the gap between the cabinet panels and spa shell
- The size of the heater (the quicker the spa heats the sooner the pump turns off)
- If you are able to use a gas heater or heat pump (which offers savings of up to 75%).

SALT WATER SPAS

Salt can only be used to sanitise water when it is transformed (by a salt chlorinator) into chlorine. But as this form of chlorine does not suit hot water you'll have to add extra chlorine or bromine. This basic form of chlorine created by salt chlorinators is very corrosive and will damage your heater element so be wary of "chlorine-free" salt water spas.

BACKLIT JETS

While they look good in the showroom, in most cases you won't see these lights as people will be sitting against them. Also, these clear plastic jets break more easily and if water quality is not maintained they can become opaque (slightly white). As the LED lights can also be hard to replace when they fail we would suggest other forms of in-spa lighting.

UV STERILISERS

This form of water treatment is only successful when a very large UV bulb is used (16 watt minimum) and when the water has enough contact time with the UV bulb. The standard UV system with a chrome/ stainless metal tube is only designed for water flow from a tap and will NOT kill germs – plus you need to replace the UV bulb yearly at significant cost.

Unless you fit a large, more expensive system like "Ultrazone" unit that combines UV and Ozone to create hydroxyl radicals, then don't expect any benefits, only maintenance.



ONCE YOU START SHOPPING

Once you've identified your needs then it's time to start shopping. Your long term satisfaction will usually depend on how much you spend. Pay a little more and you'll get a better spa experience, better components and lower running costs. Your spa will last longer and your total investment will be less in the long term.

Before ordering a spa:

- Use the shopping list in this guide and keep focused on spas that suit your needs.
- Look for quality, value and long term ownership costs rather than the initial price.
- Make sure the spa is comfortable to sit in and is the right size and shape.
- Buy from a salesperson that asks questions, understands your need, discusses options, can explain features and can prove how their product is better than their competition
- The retailer and brand should have a good reputation and been around long enough to support you for years to come

SPA COMFORT

Many spas on the market are poorly designed, with uncomfortable seats, recliners that make you float and small foot wells that aren't big enough for everyone's feet. In general spas that perfectly suit one customer will be terrible for another due to differences in size and height.

So it is **ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY** for as many of the users as possible to sit in the spa before you buy it – and ask to try it out wet if you are unsure.

Check the following:

- That the spa suits your size, height and shape – you don't want it too deep or shallow
- That the spa is big enough to give everyone the space they will expect
- That all or most of the seats are comfortable
- That the recliners hold you in place – if they are flat then you will float away when water is in the spa
- Can you fit under the neck jets (if the spa has them)
- Do the jets stick in your back or are they positioned on your spine (which is not good)
- If there is enough room in the foot well when all the seats are being used

BUILD QUALITY

Knowing if you are looking at a quality spa can be tricky if you don't understand what to look for. Just check:

- If the interior of the spa surface is smooth and well designed or if it is rippled or badly designed or moulded?
- Do the fittings and headrests fit properly and feel solid?
- How neat is it **INSIDE** the cabinet (insist that they show you this)?
- Does it look like care has been taken when making the spa?

INSULATION

The more layers of insulation on the base and sides of a spa and the thicker the insulation on the spa shell the better. A good insulation system will save you thousands of dollars over the life of your spa and also makes the spa quieter.

Insist on seeing the amount of insulation yourself and if possible ask to hear the spa running.

SHELL THICKNESS

While shopping around, use your fingers to gauge the thickness of the shell by feeling underneath the spa lip (where the shell meets the cabinet). The thicker it is, the stronger your spa will be. A thick shell, especially when combined with proper moulding technology (check for a smooth flat top edge) also says a lot about the manufacturer, who is obviously not building the spa based on price alone.

CONTROLLER AND HEATER SIZE

Look for a Spa Net control system as they feature “intuitive technology” that analyses your spa use and adapts to minimise running costs. They also use much larger variable output heaters so your spa heats up quickly and won't go cold during extended use. If you have a smart meter this control system can heat and filter using off peak power to save up to 50%.

SPA BASE

The best way to add strength and insulation to any spa while protecting the frame and equipment from water and pests is a solid wrap-around fibreglass base. If not, there should be an ABS sealed plastic base to help stop pests and moisture entering the spa.

OZONE SYSTEM

Ozone (like UV) is not a sanitiser and by LAW it cannot replace the need for an authorised “sanitiser”. Ozone is an “oxidiser” that breaks up body oils to clear water and reduce chemical use and to work well, they need a “mixing” or “de-gas” chamber which improves efficiency while ensuring excess gases don't harm your health or your spa.

HEAT PUMP AND GAS HEATER

Heat pumps are the most efficient way to permanently heat a spa. They are currently not viable for most spas but are the only affordable way to heat extra large spas and swim spas.

To “future proof” yourself against possible electricity price rises and retain the option to cut your running costs by 75% if the future, choose a control system that is fully heat pump compatible and buy a spa with the pump, connections and plumbing in place to fit this type of heater.

JETS

Hard white or soft black plastic on the back of most jet bodies disintegrates with chemical use. Clips that are used to hold many jets in place break easily (every jet costs \$30-\$60) and they also make the jets hard to remove.

Many jets have bearings which clog up and need regular cleaning. Jets with no bearings, a screw out mechanism and HARD black PVC on the rear of the jet insert are self cleaning and are by far the most reliable and long lasting.

SPA FRAME

Spa frames can be made of steel or plastic but by far the most common and proven framing material is treated timber. Cheap and older spas use normal timber and can fail but treated timber provides protection against rot and termites and is still used by almost every leading brand while at the time having the flexibility to adapt to uneven concrete slabs.

The lifespan and success of plastic frames is unknown as plastic does not have the structural strength or flexibility to adapt to uneven surfaces without constant stress on the joints. Look for thick framing with cross bracing on the base (under the foot well), strong corner framing and supports under the seats.

STILL UNSURE?

- ABOUT THE DELIVERY - Ask the retailer to do a site inspection to make sure your spa will fit and how it needs to be delivered.
- ABOUT THE RETAILER - Check the Internet for blogs and feedback.
- ABOUT THE SPA - Ask to try it first and you'll know exactly what you will be getting.