

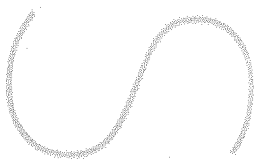
THE ULTRATRAVEL TOP 10 LIFE-CHANGING SPAS

A few years ago when **Carla Powell** went to a spa to lose weight, she ended up eating the cabbage wrap in which her body was encased. This time, she prayed the experience would be more uplifting



JASON FORD

Beauty without any beastliness



Some people eat to live. I live to eat – everything: pasta, rice, salami, oil, wine. It shows – and did so particularly on my 65th birthday, when I looked in the mirror. Spreading bottom, bulging waist, creeping cellulite. I'd been hiding it from myself and everyone else for years beneath tent-like kaffans. But self-deception only works for a while. We have a saying in Italian: *Scavarsi la fossa con i denti* – "Dig your grave with your teeth". That glimpse in the mirror was a wake-up call.

I found my salvation in the Marc Mességué Health Centre near Todi, in the hills of Umbria in Italy. The Mességués are the royal family of herbs and health centres. Father Maurice Mességué was a famous herbalist and author of a chilling book, *Your Daily Poison: the Foods That Will Kill You*, and brother Alain runs a health centre in the north of Italy which is strictly disciplinarian. (A few years ago there, I was nearly hauled before the magistrates for devouring the cabbage wrap in which my abundant body was encased, such was my desperate hunger.)

The Marc Mességué Health Centre is, by contrast, more relaxed and tolerant, and even a little jolly, with excellent although carefully chosen food, a smoking room, and temptation sited a convenient distance away. The medieval village of Melezzole is a stiff walk, and there are no towns within striking distance – a deliberate choice, as Marc Mességué's first health centre was in Bordighera, on the

Italian Riviera, and it was too easy for inmates to slip away for a blow-out in neighbouring restaurants. His belief is that cures for physical ailments and afflictions can be achieved only by a period removed from day-to-day problems and stress. Hence his choice of the ancient castle Torre Ertrighi, surrounded by woods and hills, where visitors can find a balance of physical and mental wellbeing. (A week before my own stay, Italy's prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, had come to the centre to achieve precisely that in the face of the financial crisis enveloping Italy and the world.)

Mességué debunks a great deal of modern practice. He inveighs against "Dietomania" – starvation and single-food diets – as well as spas and beauty centres which provide only temporary relief from stress. Because he believes that what suits one person does not suit another, each visitor gets a tailor-made programme

adapted to specific needs. The programmes all take the same format, though. First, dieters are given a thorough medical check-up and test; the Mességué Centre is unusual in having several medical doctors, to ensure that every treatment has a sound medical base and is well monitored. The second element is a consultation by Marc Mességué himself. He believes the key to wellbeing is for the body to shed its "toxic assets" – bankers please note – and that using herbs is the best way to detoxify. These herbs are both part of the diet and the basis for many of the treatments, being applied through the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet in secret recipes handed down through four generations of Mességués.

The clinic is not a slimming centre as such, even though the ambition of most of the clients is to lose weight. After a first day of starvation to rid the body of poisons, the diet is careful rather than painful, with the aim being progressive loss of weight rather than frontal assault. Instead of drastic one-week or one-month diets, which are usually followed by binges, he recommends one-day dieting every week, eliminating carbohydrates, fats and above all salt, but permitting meat, fish and vegetables in abundance.

In addition to medical tests, the centre offers the full range of treatments that our spoiled generation has come to expect: massages, beauty treatments, Turkish baths, inhalations. The rooms within the castle's ancient walls are airy, modern and comfortable, and there are 42 staff to cater for a maximum of 42 guests, so there is no danger of feeling neglected.

The cynical will say there is a lot of mumbo-jumbo in all this. If so, it worked remarkably well. I lost three kilos in six days without really trying, the cellulite is in retreat, and I emerged feeling a different person ("If only", as my notoriously waspish husband commented). If you want further proof, just switch on a television and watch the frenetic passage of a rejuvenated Berlusconi as he dashes from Beijing to Washington, elbowing his way into the front row of every television picture. I don't know what effect the treatment had on his posterior, but it visibly electrified his performance.



The Mességué Centre, Umbria, set in a rural ancient castle, a stiff walk away from the nearest village, and the temptations of Italian restaurants

All inclusive programmes at the Marc Mességué Health Centre (00 39 0744 951666, www.marcmessegué.it) range from a day spa visit (£140pp) to ten-day stays (£3,167). Prices exclude flights.