

# Held by the calorie police

## Luxury

### Lugano

**L**AST YEAR proved pretty stressful: a hysterectomy left me feeling a bit battered, while the loss of my beloved father dealt a further blow to my morale. High time, I decided, for this recent grandmother — all right, relatively recent — to give her body a treat.

My husband reacted as men always do when confronted with a dysfunctional female: "Can't think why — your body looks fine to me," he said, failing altogether to notice the state of my soul, which he claims to be unable to see without his glasses.

It was quite a step to acknowledge even to myself that I needed help. I had a healthy country upbringing in a remote Alpine valley. As a result, I have always enjoyed a strong constitution and taken good health for granted: the idea that the years might just, conceivably, be beginning to take their toll was hard to admit.

A connoisseur of spas and health resorts had told me of the Centro Benessere — or Wellbeing Centre — in the hills near Lake Lugano, just inside the Italian border. It was, I was advised, the ideal place to relax and take care of one's health. But would I be pampered? Well, not exactly, was the reply. The regime is strict, which would be difficult for an undisciplined character like mine. But I would, undoubtedly, feel the better for it. And after taking the eight-day course, sure enough, I did.

The centre was founded by Dr Alain Mességué, a world expert on alternative medicine, and treatments are based on the use of aromatic and medicinal herbs. The Mességué family has been involved in collecting traditional herbs and researching their effects for several centuries — Dr Mességué's father, Maurice Mességué, treated both Churchill and Adenauer, while he himself has become an international expert on the curative powers of herbs. He stresses that his remedies are

a supplement to traditional medicine rather than a substitute, but his techniques are not uncontroversial, and frustration with the stuffy attitudes of French medical regulators led him to quit France for Italy.

I admit to some initial scepticism about the whole concept of alternative medicine, not helped by my husband's sniffy comments about "witch doctors". I grew up on herbs and berries in the post-war years, so the idea of paying to go to a clinic to "discover" them was not easy to accept.

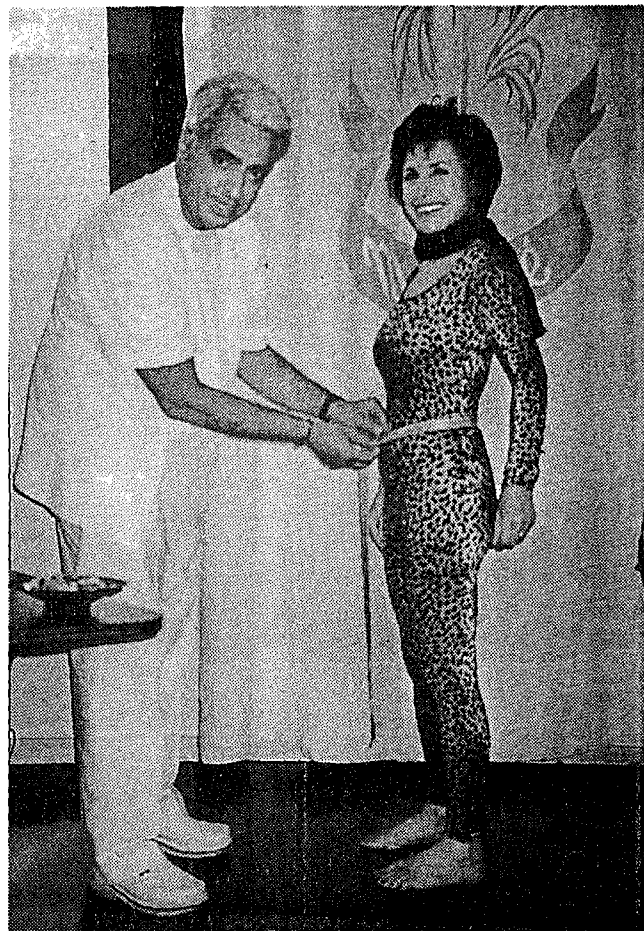
Alain Mességué's centre is in peaceful and attractive surroundings, the sole distraction provided by the nearby Museum of Smuggling (the world's only, apparently). I have childhood memories of watching smugglers assemble in our own village squares of an evening, their rucksacks stuffed with lira to be exported to Swiss bank accounts, and then returning over the mountains in the early hours laden with cigarettes.

The spa building itself, the Villa Miralago, is comfortable while maintaining a hint of spartan rigour. There is plenty of pampering, but the medical programme is the key to it all. You start the course with a full medical check-up, which measures every aspect of your body's condition, noting its deficiencies. This is then used to plan a customised course of treatment. The

### Essentials

Centro Benessere, Villa Miralago, Via Casa Mora, Cuasso al Lago 19, 21040, Cuasso al Monte, Italy (00 39 0332 920275). Fly either to Milan's Malpensa airport, which is 25 miles away from the centre, and hire a car; or take Crossair from London's City Airport to Lugano, only 7 miles away, from where the centre will arrange for you to be picked up.

There are two alternative courses of treatment: the eight-day Executive Break (from about £2,000, depending on exchange), and the 11-day Exclusive Stay (about £3,500). Prices are inclusive of all treatments.



Checkpoint Carla Powell is measured up at Lugano

aim is detoxification and restoration of the body's natural balance.

The remedies vary from exotic treatments to endless herb teas and dietetic menus. A particular feature is soaking the hands and feet in various herbal concoctions that apparently penetrate more easily and efficaciously through the extremities than elsewhere. You look like a Victorian maiden aunt recovering from a chill. But it works.

Each day is devoted to the "treatment", a route that ranges from hydromassage to electro-stimulation or "passive gym". The diet, which is carefully balanced and consists only of completely fresh products, is limited to 1,200 calories a day. It is supervised by Giuseppe, a cheerful but steely butler who is quick to intercept any attempt at cheating. For the naturally greedy like me, it was a struggle. So great were the hunger pangs between meals that I surreptitiously removed and munched my cauliflower-leaf compress during one treatment.

One afternoon I asked for a three-hour exeat to run a couple of errands, but it was only granted after an interrogation that would have done the KGB proud. It was intimated

that if I was not back on the dot, my suitcases would be packed and waiting for me on the stairs when I did return. For the first time in my life I was early.

Losing weight is not the main target of the treatment, though it is the natural — and in my case necessary — result. My friend managed to shed 11 lb while I came down 7 lb with an even more satisfying one and a half inches off my derrière and a sustained assault on my cellulite. The maximum number of patients being treated at any one time is 30, and one feature of the centre is the large number of clients who go back. You will find famous models and other well-known faces there, but complete discretion is the rule and I'm not about to name names. I certainly found it wonderfully restful and returned to London feeling altogether refreshed and in better physical and mental shape. You do have to steel yourself for the discipline, which is remorseless, but at least it guarantees the seriousness of the treatment.

"You look all right to me," said my husband when I got home. "You said that before I went," I objected. "Ah! But I mean it this time." Praise doesn't come higher than that.

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