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The peak of good health: Luxury detoxing in Italy's South Tyrol

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As a spa veteran, I have endured stern diets, outlandish treatments (I was once wrapped in cabbage and became so hungry I ate it) and intriguing guests.

At one spa Signor Berlusconi took over a whole floor to ensure complete privacy. And now we know why - the scoundrel.

After a difficult year plagued by aches and pains, I needed a body overhaul. And where better than the ultimate retreat - the Espace Henri Chenot in the Palace Merano Hotel, Tyrol.



Heavenly: The South Tyrol area is a true escape for exhausted detoxers

It's one of Europe's leading spa and treatment centres and has a reputation for banishing tiredness and stress, slowing ageing, and releasing fresh, fit and feisty clients. I was a challenge.

They question every aspect of your health and lifestyle, interrogating your sins more thoroughly than any Roman Catholic priest. This is followed by a body composition assessment and bioenergetic check to measure the energy flow through the body - based on Chinese medical tradition.

Whatever the outcome, you will be detoxed and purified to perfection, with a diet of fresh vegetables, no salt or saturated fats and one day of total starvation. The aim is to get the liver in fine fettle - and mine certainly needed it.

You are alerted to any allergies. In my case it was eggs, which is a pity, because I have 14 beautiful white hens and my culinary *piece de resistance* is zabaglione (an Italian custard dessert made with egg yolks, sugar and a sweet wine).

A bewildering array of treatments is on offer, from acupuncture through such exotic disciplines as chelation therapy (bet you never heard of that one: it counteracts metal intoxication in the body).

Some of them sound frankly cod-scientific. I opted for old-fashioned acupuncture for my back plus hydro-aromatherapy to rejuvenate my circulatory system.



Sparkling treat: A range of therapies can be enjoyed at the Palace Merano Hotel

Better already. Now for the cellulite. The treatment is described in the brochure as 'inoculation following medical protocols for lipolytic substances to obtain remodelling of localised adipose areas'. Crikey.

But I can testify: it worked. I can now parade in a swimsuit with confidence.

All sorts of other skin treatments are offered to halt the ageing process. But my body could take only so much high-tech treatment so I opted for 'dietic biontology', which is actually a cookery course that teaches you how to prepare healthy food.

As my husband wearily remarked: 'Typical of you to go somewhere to lose weight and end up learning how to cook.'

Aside from the treatments, what's really special about Espace Henri Chenot is the setting. Merano is in the Tyrol. It was formerly part of the Austrian Empire, much beloved of the Empress Elizabeth in the late 19th century. It was her patronage that built its reputation as a resort. After World War I, it became Italian.

Despite being roundly defeated in battle with Austro-Hungary, the Italians managed to drive everyone mad at the subsequent Paris Peace Conference until they were granted their wish to absorb the Tyrol.

The town itself boasts a glorious botanical garden and is the home of the Merano Rose. With its own micro-climate, it has palm trees and snow-capped peaks within a few kilometres of each other.

The latter offer well-signposted Alpine walks, which Espace Henri Chenot recommend as part of the wellbeing experience.

The Palace Merano Hotel itself is grand luxe, which is just as well given the severity of the spa's regime. The hotel staff are discreet and sympathetic. It's a place where you can truly relax and escape.



Austro-Italian charm: Merano itself is a beautiful town

It retains that essence of Empire - courts, balls and imperial splendour. The clientele range from heads of state and government to top athletes, designers, Europe's beautiful people and those like me.

The Alpine surroundings are stupendous, the hotel luxurious beyond belief, and the spa regime a reflection on Merano's Germanic past with its rigour and severity.

I am the inconvenient sort of person who always looks for something wrong. But in the case of the Palace Merano and the Espace Henri Chenot I had to admit defeat.

Everything was disarmingly perfect.

Everyone from Henri Chenot to his wife is available with friendly advice, while those who deliver the treatments are enthusiastic about making them work for you.

You leave this special haven clutching the equivalent of a school report, which details where you have gone astray - as if I didn't know - and how you should proceed: what to eat, how to exercise, how to banish stress. The problem is sticking to it.

I leave every spa full of good intention. But I just can't resist pasta, parmesan, panettone.

In other words, I am the ultimate repeat offender, moving seamlessly from detox to retox.

But for now, I have a bottom to be proud of. Can I keep it up? It won't be Henri Chenot's fault if I don't.

Travel Facts

A week-long stay at the Palace Merano, including full-board accommodation and treatments, costs from £3,484 (00 39 047 327 1000, palace.it). Austrian Airlines fly from London Heathrow to Innsbruck return from £186.50 (08701 24 26 25, www.austrian.com).

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