



The Austrian Alps...



medical-grade de-stressing...



low-cal haute cuisine...



how will Lisa Armstrong survive?

The serious business of relaxation

That's weird, I thought, as Dr Peter Gartner, medical director of Park Igls, pressed his hands against my intestines. Not the intestine pressing – which is standard practice at Mayr-type institutions. Mayr-trained doctors get fantastically excited about distended, swollen and otherwise abused intestines, mainly because they know it's from this, not weight loss, that the big ta-da moment will come at the end of a patient's stay.

Getting on the scales was once the ta-da moment. But spas don't like to place too much emphasis on actual weight loss any more, presumably in case someone takes it into their head to sue them for lack thereof. Instead they preach all-round health, and patients nod

everyone is Russian with Harrods-beauty-counter hair. Spas where you live off raw food ('Delicious mashed potato,' you tell yourself as you contemplate a coin-sized portion of grated celeriac that's been 'cooked' at 79 degrees). I've seen wealthy clients who spa every year and sneak out at night for cocktails and chips. And I've seen others who've saved up or won a competition, and got a huge amount out of it.

My favourite spas are undoubtedly the Mayrs. OK, they're obsessed with chewing. Each morsel. Thirty times minimum. But I can do that. Nothing much else to do. And yes, they like you to eat what they laughably call your 'evening meal' (vegetable 'tea') early – around 6pm. But I can do that too (gives me more time

far away (no jet lag) and offering a basic package that can be combined with various therapeutic models focusing on everything from the musculoskeletal system to the heart (which means price-wise, you know where you are).

It's serious, in other words. So serious, I'd never heard of it. No one I knew had been or was planning to go. Ever. Hooray. I could slob out without fear of running into the creative director of a major fashion house. I would not waste valuable R&R time making 'lifelong' friends. I would do a Garbo, shove in my earphones and catch up on 40 back episodes of *In Our Time*.

The thing about unfashionable spas is that they tend to have unfashionable decor. Park Igls is utterly

trainers have enough gadgets and techniques up their sleeves to keep boredom at bay, including a sort of indoor terrace composed of squishy 'Kybun' mats that are apparently amazing for your core and balance.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, because you're not encouraged to over-exercise at Park Igls. There are gentle walks. And gentle swims. It's all gentle. You're not getting a lot of food. There are eight levels of menu, ranging from the most severe – a 'spiritual' fast – to a 1,400-calorie comparative feast, and you'll be prescribed one, based on your initial consultation with your assigned doctor. Dr Gartner put me on level four. I was smug. Level four sounded sumptuous. No self-flagellation for me. Excellent, because if I've learnt

I always lose 3lbs and I'm always thrilled, even though I know 'it's not about the scales'

before waddling off in clusters to discuss how much weight they have/haven't lost and how hungry they're feeling/not feeling.

Dr Gartner and his peers are right to go gooey over the gut. For one thing, Alzheimer's and dementia are thought partly to have their genesis there. That area below the breast, stretching across the abdomen – they call it the Golden Triangle – should be an unpuffy pyramid of serenity. Most people arrive with their puff-to-serenity ratio woefully out of whack, but six days of pure living and herbal teas works wonders. Happy intestines = flatter stomachs = client satisfaction.

Yet as we discussed bloat, insomnia, stress, the perils of sugar, the ideal colour and consistency of poo, Feldenkrais (a serious-sounding movement technique that can enhance sporting performance and relaxation, available at the Park), and the jazz band Dr Gartner plays in part-time, my mind kept straying back to the truly weird element in all this: where had I seen him before?

The Original FX Mayr, perhaps? Or the Vivamayr at Altaussee? I've been to both. I know, I'm a spoilt brat, although it was in the name of 'work'. I've been to other spas too, if you must know. Spas that called themselves boot camps (and boot camps that called themselves retreats). Spas where you never get out of your white robe and develop an old-man shuffle by day two. Spas where you dress for dinner and

to attend the lectures – or slink off to watch Netflix). They don't like you drinking water with food. Think I can manage that. And they give you bitter waters three times a day to make you poo all the time (once a day is not enough, apparently). Like toddlers they seem to derive an unfeasible amount of joy from inspecting and analysing poo. Mind you, by the end of a week, you will too. They're also obsessed with herbal teas. Well, so am I.

It all reminds me, oddly, of my grandparents (not the poo or the eating light bit – nothing that came out of my grandmother's kitchen was ever light). It was at the Mayrs that I learnt to refer to my gut rather than my tummy; became familiar with Epsom salts, aka bitter salts (the ones that make you poo: my advice, approach with caution); kept fierce guard against assailants on my intestinal flora; took up trampolining and tapping (a manual form of therapy that involves gently using your fingers to tap your chest, head and parts of your face while you recite various mantras to combat anxieties); discovered heated liver packs (warm parcels of muslin or towelling wrapped around herbal compresses, which you place on your abdomen while you lie down, relax and pretend you're a character in *Heidi*); and made 'lifelong' friends with whom I lost contact after about six weeks.

So I was intrigued by Park Igls, which follows Mayr principles. It also fits my criteria of being not too

without pretensions, but also without a lake, a sea or a desert, which are major selling points on the spa circuit. The communal bits are what, to be kind, we could call '80s revivalist. The corridors institutional. The rooms... clean, comfortable, but school of Ikea. Very inviting beds though. And mountains, what with it being near Innsbruck. It also has the most fabulously well-appointed gym of any spa I've been to, with wrap-around windows and panoramic views of the aforementioned mountains (and, all right, partly of Igls village's suburbs) as well as a bunion-management class. You haven't lived until you've been to one of these, held in German. The gym's

one thing from my spa odyssey, it's that microscopic amounts of food are all well and good in a controlled environment but can set you up for failure once you get back to real life.

That's why I have slightly mixed feelings about the other lovely things you get at a spa: the daily massages, the peace and quiet, the friendly staff who would happily chain themselves to the kitchen doors to stop you sabotaging your stay by sneaking in for another pot of fish pâté. But I was on assignment. On a package including cranial osteopathy, medical yoga and sleep coaching. All for the reader.

If I'd been a rookie or one of those already skeletal Notting Hill mummies I might have insisted on being

From left Park Igls' lounge area; a Kneipping bath



put on level one (about 700 calories a day). But if there's another thing I've learnt at spas, it's that going to bed hungry is a sure-fire way to a hopeless night's sleep, and sleep was what I was here to master.

We discussed all this, Dr Gartner and I. Then he sent me on my way with my schedule for the week.

That's it? I thought, heading for the 90th time in 12 hours to the tea urn (never has hot water seemed so filling) and scanning the timetable he'd given me. And I meant that in a good way. Another thing I've witnessed on Planet Spa is the heavy selling that passes for medical advice at these initial consultations: 'Book in for the drip/the fat-burning/the underwater cranial therapy - it will really enhance the package you've already paid for.' Before you know it your schedule is a stress bomb of appointments for things you do not need at prices you can't afford. At one glamorous spa, I was recommended a series of laser sessions (this for a couple of persistent spots) that, as well as removing several layers of skin, would extract €1,000 from my account. In the end

involves submerging as much of your body as you can stand in hot, then cold, then hot, then freezing water before you scream, 'What the —?' Park Igls, being a laid-back, easy-does-it kind of place, only makes you subject your lower legs to this, but even that's amazingly invigorating). I did spy one enema smuggled on to my schedule but remained calm because the fourth thing I've learnt is not to pass out when they try to stick a tube up your rectum. Enemas are a sacred rite at Mayrs. Given that I never did truly get the hang of self-administering them when I followed a guided home spa once, I was actually quite grateful to see a professional one on the horizon.

I kept my extracurricular activities to a minimum - listening to Melvyn Bragg, mainly. The medical yoga was slow but thorough. The sleep counselling, to be honest, didn't tell me anything I didn't already know from listening to podcasts: avoid blue light for two hours before bedtime; no liquids within two hours of lights out; if sleep really is elusive, stop fretting and get up and do something relaxing.

My sleep at Park Igls was terrible



Medical director Dr Peter Gartner

espresso with my evening meal, in the hope it would keep my blood pressure on a more even keel. It may well have done, but I still woke at three. Loved those coffees though.

For three days I felt diabolical. Wiped out and what is technically known as bleuggggh. This is normal, but I decided I was lonely and the Garbo strategy wasn't working. I stopped listening to Melvyn and started talking to the other guests, who were the usual mix of delightful, interesting and borderline insane. That's how I discovered the secret cracker cache in the dresser

with the down-to-earth-meets-high-tech medical science of Park Igls.

Five months on, what residual benefits do I have? The chewing comes and goes. So do those 3lbs. But I'm working out differently - more gently, more enjoyably. I ordered one of those Kybun mats from Switzerland to stand on every day for an hour or so while I work at my desk, and can feel it in my core and legs. I have discovered that I am not a complete Garbo; I love the company of others, within reason. I'm even more taken with yoga than I was before: calmer - although I think that's finally the cumulative effects of my spa visits rather than all down to Park Igls. I take time out to count my breath every day. I blast myself with cold water for 30 seconds or more after every shower - it really improves circulation. Thanks to this minor act of bravery, I'm convinced I'm less of a wuss about cold weather.

And I also returned to the UK with Dr Gartner, at least in a manner of speaking. The place where I'd seen his face before was on the packets of tea for sale in the lounge area. Yes, Dr Gartner has his very own herbal tea with his very own

I never did get the hang of self-administering enemas, so I was grateful to see a professional one on the horizon

I bought a €10 bottle of antibiotic lotion that did the trick beautifully.

Yes, that's it, said Dr Gartner. Don't overload your schedule. I was by now fully in love with this man. Because yet another thing I've learnt is that the space between the treatments is just as important as the treatments themselves. Your mind and body need time to process the massages, the infusions and the Kneipping (a Teutonic ritual that

throughout. Was it the mountains? The minimal calories (it turned out level four wasn't exactly cup-run-neth-over quantities, although it was delicious)? The fact that I can't ever seem to turn off? Even Dr Gartner couldn't say. What he did know, after giving me a sleep tracker to wear one night, was that my blood pressure dips so low around 3am that my body probably thinks I'm dead, so goes into hyper-action. He prescribed one

in the dining room. It still didn't help my sleep. I went for long hikes (strolls, really) across the valley, lost 3lbs (I always lose 3lbs and I'm always thrilled, even though I know 'it's not about the scales'), watched as my Golden Triangle subsided into that perfect puff-to-serenity ratio (even Dr Gartner was impressed), and generally felt lighter, mentally and physically. I missed the lake at Altaussee terribly, but fell in love

picture on it. I bought three packets. *Lisa Armstrong underwent the Park Igls Mayr De-Stress programme, from €2,923 (£2,560) per person, including the Basic Programme plus two craniosacral-therapy sessions, two talk-therapy/coaching sessions, three combination heat packs, four partial body massages and one metabolic detox bath; the price excludes accommodation (park-igls.com, 00 43 512 377 305)*

LISA ARMSTRONG'S DOS AND DON'TS OF SPA-GOING

DON'T ask for the most extreme fast on the menu, unless you're happy to be pacing the corridors at 3am. Going to bed hungry is a great way to secure an awful night's sleep.

DO resign yourself to the fact that most spas are obsessed with you pooing lots.

DON'T waste valuable R&R time making 'lifelong friends' as they most likely won't be 'lifelong friends' after about six weeks.

DO beware of the initial consultation and medical advice, which can sometimes veer into heavy selling. That underwater cranial therapy may sound like the be all and end all to cure the ills you've just been told you've got, but remember it will add £££££ to the package you've already shelled out for.

DON'T pack too much in - the space between the treatments is as important as the treatments themselves. Your mind and body need time to process them.

DO attempt not to pass out when they try to stick a tube up your rectum, because it's highly likely they will try.