

ELLE TRAVEL

THE BODY HOLIDAY

There are pampering spas and there are spas that make a difference. So if you're going to spend your hard-earned cash on self-improvement, it's vital you pick the right place



Above: A Park Igls bedroom, Innsbruck, Austria

THE MEDICAL SPA

**PARK IGLS
INNSBRUCK, AUSTRIA**

In an ideal world, we would all have a health MOT every year instead of just fire-fighting when we get sick. So imagine a spa where you get fit through working out, but also have doctors administering diagnostic tests, which should put paid to any Google-induced hypochondria and let you know the exact state of play with your body.

Park Igls – a seriously good medical spa 6km south of Innsbruck, in the heart of the beautiful Tyrolean Alps – is just the place for this kind of overhaul. The spa's concept is based on the principles devised in the Twenties by an Austrian doctor, Franz Xaver Mayr – he of the famous FX Mayr Cure. He believed the key to good health was what and how you eat, and that, combined with exercise and preventative medicine, is the secret to a long, healthy life. Dr Mayr died in 1965, at the impressive age of 89, so I'd say he knew what he was talking about.

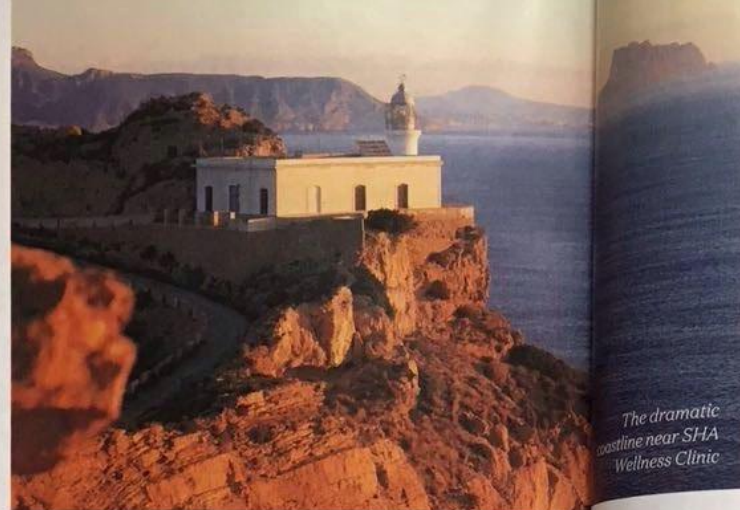
The Austrian FX Mayr Health Centre itself sounds a bit hardcore (too much fasting and abstinence), but Park Igls has worked a modern version of the Mayr Cure into a bespoke programme

of treatments, lifestyle coaching, medical tests (ultrasound scans, blood and lung-function tests), exercise and diet.

Whatever the motivation – illness (or fear of it), lack of fitness, rejuvenation – people of all ages and backgrounds come to Park Igls, so there are no regular holidaymakers putting you off your game, as you find in many destination spas.

The core programme includes a health check, daily abdominal massages (to aid digestion), Kneipp water treatments (circulation exercises) and, depending on your goals, you can add as many as you like of all the extras: the medical tests, extra massages, facials, counselling, fitness classes and personal training.

What you eat depends on your goals. Diet categories are graded from zero (liquids only) to seven (three nutritionally balanced, substantial meals for those who aren't looking to lose weight). The detox is aided with *bitter wasser* (bitter water, or Epsom salts), which everyone drinks half an hour before breakfast (cue the worryingly unpredictable dashes to the loo), and no liquids are allowed with meals (it hinders digestion). You're meant to chew every mouthful at least 30 times, while savouring it, so the food is broken down before it hits the stomach. This means the nutrients are better absorbed; eating slowly gives you time to register fullness before overindulging. Eating mindfully like this takes a bit of getting used to and it makes me realise how often I bolt my food, but it's quite pleasurable.



The dramatic coastline near SHA Wellness Clinic



Above and right: Park Igls, Innsbruck, Austria

BEST FOR TOTAL OVERHAUL



AUSTRIA

I'm reasonably fit (I cycle everywhere and run occasionally) and healthy (I think), but I must admit I'm a bit head-in-the-sand about my alcohol consumption and I have an uneasy sense that, having got away with a lot over the years, it may be payback time. How great would it be to find out that (against the odds) everything is in good working order after all?

After a consultation and weigh-in with one of the doctors, my personal programme is devised: I'm to have a full blood test, ultrasound of my internal organs, facials, and daily massage and exercise classes. I'm also put on Diet Plan Four, the halfway point, so I can lose a bit of weight (my target is two to three kilos) without being too drastic. You choose from a menu of proteins, carbs, pulses and vegetables for breakfast, and small but beautifully presented, delicious organic dishes (vegetable broths, saffron-poached trout, spinach with basil, nutmeg and pine nuts, homemade spelt bread) for lunch and dinner. Any hunger pangs between meals can be slightly eased with an array of herbal teas, each labelled with their ingredients and purpose (insomnia, bloating, anxiety), kept hot in huge metal urns near the dining room.

Refined sugar, caffeine and alcohol are all no-nos, so calorie intake is significantly reduced, but I was too busy with all the massages, consultations and exercise classes to notice any real hunger. And, as I really wanted results, I didn't even think of nipping out for some non-regulation snacks (or a sneaky glass of wine) just a few hundred metres away in the village.

The beauty of this spa is that it is small enough to feel cosy (only 51 bedrooms), but spacious enough not to be too thrown together with the other guests, so you can be as chatty (group Nordic walking and mountain hikes) or as solitary as you like. The dining room, billiard room, library and lounges (with log fires), plus sleek medical department, form the heart of the place. Upstairs, the rooms, all with mountain views and balconies, are light and modern, ranging from fairly small to mini apartments, with large bathrooms and infrared cabins (mini saunas). The beautiful top-floor gym is equally scenic, and the indoor pool opens on to quiet gardens where you can doze on a sun lounger in warm weather.

Days start and finish early; mine were filled with pre-breakfast swims and saunas, the morning tailor-made massage (different every day), medical tests, personal training and pilates and yoga classes. The highlight was the

ultrasound, where I was very surprised to discover that everything (including my liver) was in pretty good nick. I appear to be great at metabolising alcohol – a useful life skill, if ever there was one.

Most people come for two weeks, but in half that time I lost three kilos, learned to eat slowly, discovered new workout techniques and really toned up. I felt invigorated and de-stressed by the mountain air, the views and the inventive meals, I read two whole books and I left knowing that everything (apart from possibly my brain – there's no MRI scan here) is in order, so there's no need to Google weird symptoms any more. Well, for the time being at least.

Words: Susan Ward Davies

THE SLEEP DOCTORS

**SHA WELLNESS CLINIC
ALICANTE, SPAIN**

3am. That's the time most people find problematic when they're having trouble sleeping. For me, it was 3.28am (I can picture those digits etched on to my clock). I've always been a straight-out-of-the-closet kind of sleeper, but, last summer, after turbulent six months ending a relationship and changing jobs, my mind would race. I'd lie awake for hours, reading on my phone, before falling asleep 20 minutes before my 7am alarm. The next day was a struggle, and after months I was getting by on zombie-like levels of energy. I had to break the pattern, but I was too tired to discipline myself. I needed help.

Getting enough sleep is the latest jewel in the clean-living crown: according to Gwyneth Paltrow, clean sleeping is more important than a good diet. It's why Alicante's SHA Wellness Clinic – a place where people who have everything apart from time – has curated the seven-day SHA Recovery Programme. A world away from the neighbouring Benidorm, SHA is set on the mountainside in encouragingly scenic L'Albir. The white minimalist decor is pristine and the soporific water features were instantly calming.

