

Fit for a princess: relax on a heated water bed

PRINCESS FOR A WEEK

Alpine medical resorts conjure up images of consumptives taking the air. As Patricia Carswell discovers, this was not the case with a luxury spa hotel in the Austrian Alps

By the middle of winter, I'm in need of a rest cure. The drudge of micromanaging everyday family life has left me frazzled, and it would take a small miracle to restore me to full health and vigour. I'm prepared to risk a bit of Teutonic briskness to get my mojo back.

A break in the AlpenMedHotel Lamm, in the Austrian Tyrol, could be the answer to my prayers. Part spa hotel and part medical centre, it is tucked away in the corner of a pretty square in Seefeld, next to a church that, promisingly, was the site of a religious miracle in the Middle Ages.

From the start I am treated like a princess – literally. The proprietor, Hannes, mistakes me for a member of the Dutch royal family who is staying at the hotel. I Google her later to find out how pretty she is – and that she is younger than me!

Royalty aside, the rest of the guests seem hale, hearty and jovial, treating the medical part of the hotel as a rather jolly add-on. Mealtimes are a convivial affair. Hannes officiates at dinner, dispensing wine and jokes with equal relish, and there is plenty of chitchat between the tables. A rotund Luxembourgian, stoically munching on salad, tells me he's really there for a poker tournament, but is getting his back fixed while he's at it. On the adjoining table, a couple of German doctors appear to be there principally for the food; they don't ski and they haven't visited the spa, but spend most of their day glued to their laptops. In the corner, some Dutch skiers shout with laughter as Hannes drops a glass.

The secret to the merriment may be the AlpenMed's signature treatment, cryotherapy. Beloved of jockeys and rugby players for its success in restoring injured

muscles, it involves doing physical jerks in a chamber kept at a parky -110°C . It is reputed to alleviate conditions such as fatigue, menstrual pain and rheumatism, and to deliver radiant, youthful skin.

Disappointingly, I'm denied a chance to immerse myself in the deep freeze; a circulatory disorder diagnosed just before my visit means that the treatment is *verboten*. But a session with the resident doctor is scheduled nonetheless.

A far cry from the stern sadist patrolling my fevered imagination, Dr Eva Dirnberger, an orthopaedic specialist, turns out to be softly spoken and smiling – and radiating goodness. She confirms that my 'unprincessy' lifestyle has left me hunched and stiff, with knots

of tension strung all along my back. To my delight, she prescribes a course of massage and sessions with a personal trainer.

Before the fun can begin, though, Dr Dirnberger introduces me to the Spineliner, a machine with a blunt instrument wired up to a computer. My alarm levels rise but I needn't worry; I don't even have to undress, as the implement is applied with a pleasant pulsing to my back and shoulders. Even my inner sceptic can't deny that it feels good as the knots begin to untangle.

Equilibrium restored, the next few days pass in a blur of dreamy massages and daily workouts in the airy hotel gym, interspersed with hikes along walking trails that snake out from the village. I start to unfold, unwind and fatten up.

The only stress in my daily routine is the sauna. Primly clad in a swimsuit on my first visit, I peer through the window and spy a man strolling about in the altogether. As embarrassed by my British modesty as by his Germanic lack of it, I scuttle out before our eyes can meet. It's another few days before I pluck up the courage to return.

Towards the end of my stay, I stumble on a long, glass-ceilinged room housing a row of identical beds, each covered with a folded blanket. I imagine I've finally found the traditional sickroom of old. Closer examination reveals no line of sickly patients but rather a collection of heated water beds for guests to relax on, as soft and warm as anything a princess could wish for.

I sink into its depths and drift off into a doze. At last I've found my miracle cure. ♦

♦ AlpenMedHotel Lamm, Seefeld, Austria: +43(0)5212 2464, www.alpenmedhotel.com



The church in Seefeld, site of a miracle in the Middle Ages