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Lefay Resort & Spa,
Lake Garda, lefayresorts.com

Italian ESCAPISM

In the not-so-old days, the word “spa” conjured up something strict and clinical, involving foul-smelling “waters” and punitive “cures”, particularly if the place in question was on the Continent. While health meccas have evolved, precious few European spots have completely shed their sulphurous Nurse Ratchedy outlooks and embraced pampering as part of the therapeutic promise. Even the best spas in France, like Caudalie and Eugénie-les-Bains, tend to make guests feel more like bad children who’ve overindulged and been sent to the naughty step. Too often, they’re all white coats, big hoses and regimens.

Not-so the luxurious eco-spa Lefay, which is perched high above Lake Garda. The panoramic Dolomite and lake views are therapy in themselves ... but that’s just the beginning. Yes, there are white coats aplenty, but each and every one seems utterly intent on making guests feel like their personal wellbeing is the main event. Using a combination of Chinese and conventional medical diagnostics and treatments, under the direction of Dr Maurizio Corradin, the team devises individual programmes that suggest rather than prescribe. In the end, it’s up to you to look after yourself.

First comes an energy analysis, which covers how you sleep (and dream) and cope with stress. It’s largely intuitive rather than scientific, but nonetheless, the doctor’s observations felt bang on the money. Maybe that’s partly because there is such palpable worth in the exercise of talking about yourself and if you talk enough, it’s easy for others to deduce where you think your problems lie. Or maybe it’s because the docs have seen it all before and know their stuff. Either way, being told you need to be kinder to yourself never gets tired.

Next was a postural consultation inspired by an increasingly twingey hip-knee situation. A spot of spontaneous acupuncture took the edge off immediately and a transcendent reflexology session followed. It was truly the most exquisite conversation between feet and hands. It seemed a crime to put any weight back on the soles, but when

LAURA GEORGE heads to an eco-spa in Lake Garda for some prescribed rejuvenation.

I was ready, the therapist literally taught me how to walk. I’m still practising because the stakes are massive. Apparently, my ordinary gait encourages rapid ankle growth. The ball of the foot should be a well-functioning pump for the circulatory system. Fallen arches, rushing constantly, and wearing antagonistic footwear (chief offenders being flip flops and high heels) compromise not only the well-turned ankle, but posture and overall health too. So now it’s all barefoot, mindful tippytoe action.

Meridian stretching, saunas, floats in an almost amniotic salt pool, Tui Na massage (a gentle Chinese method which stimulates energy flow) and a session of moxibustion (a treatment that uses heated mugwort sticks on pressure points) make the days pass quickly. So too do regular, bespoke tisanes of herbal remedies (phytotherapy), stints at the infinity pool which merges into lake and sky, and the odd skitter into the carefully-conceived gardens, where it’s hard not

to break into a spontaneous half moon just because you can.

Evenings are about food and more food; it’s not that one’s tempted to gorge, just that there’s so much to choose from – truffles, viscous balsamic, creamy burrata, translucent bresaola, *al dente* pastas and grilled river fishes. There’s pizza, focaccia and tiramisu worth gyming for, too, and perhaps surprisingly, a cocktail bar. As the owner explains: real life doesn’t stop because you are on a diet, so everything is on offer – part of wellbeing is mastering control of your choices, but also embracing things that give you happiness.

On top of it all, Lefay is Italy’s first luxury hotel with an eco conscience and accompanying agenda. Built from scratch, its wings spread out from the spa core and merge discreetly with olive terraced hillsides, making heat conservation and cooling equally efficient. Design-wise, it’s a bit reminiscent of Monart on steroids, and that’s no bad thing. Solar panels in the main restaurant are an integral architectural feature. Unlike many eco-resorts, Lefay doesn’t shout about its sustainability – many guests probably come and go without realising how progressive the ethos behind the place is. Regardless, anyone would be hard pressed to leave without a glow in the cheeks and the holy grail: a renewed sense of possibility.

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