

TRAVEL

Niamh Walsh and Nadia Forde indulge in a spa

The affable driver who met us at Verona airport made up for the lack of sunshine with his warm disposition. Armed with water, in-car snacks and oodles of charm, we sat back as our charioteer guided us up mountains, manoeuvred along the narrow roads of Riviera dei Limoni and finally drove us through the gilded gates of the extraordinary LeFay Resort and Spa that sits atop a hill overlooking glistening Lake Garda – a five-star jewel that must rank as a modern wonder.

At the time, model and actress Nadia Forde was getting ready to settle for the coming year in Japan with her partner – Welsh rugby player Dominic Day – so this spa break was a chance for us to catch up and chat, eat good food, relax and enjoy the promise of some incredible beauty treatments.

Upon entering the hotel lobby we were greeted with a drink and a seat in the pool bar where the tables, arranged across an enormous terrace beside an infinity pool, offered breathtaking views of the lake below and the mountains beyond. A smell of lemons and the fresh outdoors lingered in the air and we immediately felt lighter and relaxed.

The resort is set within the 27-acre Alto Garda National Park which is abundant with lemon groves, olive trees and unspoilt woodlands, and close to Gargnano, one of the most picturesque villages on the lake.

Eco-elegance is how I would describe it. The hotel nestles unobtrusively into a south-facing hillside, to ensure savings on energy and heating. Its high-tech heating and cooling systems run on clean, renewable energy sources.

Yet there is luxury in abundance with walnut and olive wood flooring and beams a central feature throughout the private and public rooms. The plush



BREATHTAKING: The infinity pool offers spectacular views of the lake and mountains

furnishings and excellent staff all add to the five-star experience.

As we had arrived late, we quickly changed and went down to the salt water grotto to unwind before dinner. The smell of sea salt in the dimly lit grotto whetted our appetites so we were soon eager to sample some fine Italian fare.

Nadia is half-Italian so I was quietly confident she would handle the ordering. My hopes were dashed by her slightly limited grasp of the language but we had no need to fret as the staff were happy to make recommendations.

The first night we dined in the Grande Limonaia restaurant, a wonderful dining area set amidst lemon trees growing under a vaulted glass ceiling. There was a choice of fresh fish and Italian meats. We both

went for the fish which was, as expected, *delizioso*. Washed down with a glass of red we were ready for bed as our spa treatments were starting early next morning.

The hotel has 90 spacious bedrooms with the walnut floor throughout lending a naturally luxurious feel. The room had a garden terrace with sunloungers and although the sun failed to appear,

it was still wonderful to sit out and watch the light fade over the lake. But after the fine food and wine sleep came as soon as our heads hit the pillows.

Over a healthy breakfast of fruit and an omelette with views of the lake below, we took the opportunity to survey the dining room. Like the multiple options offered at the breakfast buffet the guests were mixed and varied. There were businessmen dining alone reading the local papers, a group of American women who seemed to be on a very refined hen weekend, several couples and some families.

However, we weren't here to min-

Set in a national park abundant with lemon groves, olive trees and unspoilt woodland

May the fun be with you... on a Disney cruise



FEELING THE FORCE: Jedi training

AHOLIDAY is a fantasy – the chance to be someone else, somewhere else for a blink of time. A Disney cruise is a double fantasy, a true land of make-believe, where children can hug Snow White and grown-ups can talk to turtles.

After spending time exploring the attractions of Magic Kingdom in Florida, each guest is given a red-carpet welcome by the crew on Disney Dream, a classic liner voted best in the large-ship category among Cruise Critic readers.

Once on board, you are immediately part of a masterfully produced piece of floating theatre, as the ship, Donald, Mickey and 4,000 passengers sail away from Florida's Port Canaveral for a four-day cruise, docking in Nassau, Bahamas and Disney's private island to the north, Castaway Cay.

By **Sarah Lucas**

The Disney Dream is polished to within an inch of its life. On board, 1,000 children from toddlers to 17-year-olds are swept up in a swirl of fabulous activities.

Youngsters learn light-saber moves in a Jedi masterclass and then face off against Darth Vader; they can whoosh through the ship's water-coaster, the Aquaduck; be kitted out as princesses in the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique; shut parents out of the Vibe Splash zone; and mingle with

pirates in the Caribbean while fabulous fireworks explode overhead.

In the evening, energetic shows are a high-octane mix of hits from Disney movies.

Admiral Donald, Commodore Tom and Captain Mickey bring Disney Dream into Nassau, capital of the Bahamas.

The city combines the old-world charms of this sunny colonial island with a superb range of 21st-century amenities.

■ Disneyholidays.ie allows you choose your own accommodation and park experience with a 14-night hotel and cruise deal starting from about €2,100pp. Freephone 1800 812 676.

FUN AHOY: Captain Mickey meets a young guest

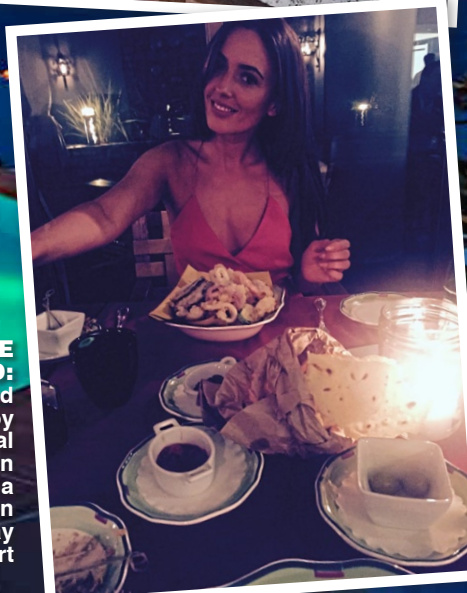


stay in a luxury Italian hillside idyll – and leave wholly energised

We swam with Lake Garda glistening far below



DIVINE FOOD: Niamh and Nadia enjoy traditional Italian fare in the Trattoria La Vigna in the Lefay resort



gle but to try out the much-feted spa. So dressed in our fluffy gowns we headed off for our treatments. I had booked the Spa Essence package. While this is primarily a spa hotel I really liked the fact that guests didn't permanently abandon normal attire. I've found it slightly unsettling at other spa hotels I've visited that people spend the entire weekend in white towelling robes.

I had a consultation with the resident medic who went through my health history and my general wellbeing. She explained the spa's principles which are derived from a mix of classic Chinese medicine combined with western scientific research. The treatments focus not only on physical health but also on mental wellbeing. By

means of health treatments and programmes, they aim to restore balance, rejuvenate the body, soul and spirit and allow you to rediscover a more healthy and discerning lifestyle.

Like most people nowadays we both have busy schedules, workloads and general life stresses. I can attest to the fact that to take a few days away, if you can, from the hustle and bustle of life – whether it be in Lake Garda or the Lakes of Killarney – is a valuable investment in yourself.

My first treatment was an aroma-hydrotherapy massage with essential oils. Referring to my talk and health check with the consultant, the massage therapist matched date oils with my needs. I was suitably relaxed after a 30-

GETTING THERE

Aerlingus.com offers flights to Verona four days a week from about €64 one-way in low season.

Ryanair.com has daily flights to Milan Bergamo from about €65 return.

The hotel can provide a car service if booked before arrival.

A suite at **Lefay Resort & Spa Lago di Garda** costs from €290 per night including breakfast.

The Lefay Spa Method Discovery programme costs from €550 per person including all meals and treatments (excluding accommodation). The programme includes a medical consultation, facial massage, body massage, hydro-aromatherapy session, one rebalancing class and breakfast, lunch and dinner from the Lefay Spa menu – lefoyresorts.com

minute hydro bath when I pitched up for my tiu na massage.

In my post-massage bliss I managed to make my way to the terrace where the sun, finally, was putting in an appearance. Sitting on the veranda with a glass of red – an

espresso martini for Nadia – with the lake in the distance, you would have to say Lefay really has it right.

While I was quite content to stay in the hotel, Nadia insisted we visit the local town. So we hopped on the shuttle bus and back down

the winding roads and 20 minutes later were in the picturesque village of Gargnano.

Regarded as the sailing capital of Lake Garda the port was packed with boats and cruisers preparing for the busy summer season. Wandered through the port and around the sleepy village was like stepping back in time. However, for the adventurous there are sailing excursions, scuba diving and bike rides available. But in a place like Gargnano it's enough to stop and watch the world go by.

Back at the hotel we had booked dinner at Trattoria La Vigna. In low season it's essential to book as seating is limited. In the summer season the terrace opens up so space is not a problem. And it is NOT to be missed.

The Trattoria has a traditional Italian homely feel and while the menu was extensive and difficult to choose from I fancied spaghetti bolognese. While not on the menu, the chef happily cooked me up the best bolognese I have ever tasted.

On our final morning we burned off some of the previous nights' carbs with a circuits class and a swim in the pool. Once again the sun obliged and we were able to swim from the indoor to outdoor pool. Again the spectacular views from this vantage point took our breath away.

Then with bags packed it was time to bid arrivederci to Lefay Resort, though we were sorry to go we left more energised and refreshed than on arrival.

I, for one, was impressed when upon arriving home friends remarked on my glowing skin and eyes. And that was just after three short days.

And we hadn't said goodbye to Lefay, it was a farewell as this place certainly has to be experienced more than once.



YOUNG AT HEART

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