

travel



Scare the kids silly in Venice » Page 5



The Italian job
Food, wine and fun
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Scents and sensibility

On a spa break by Lake Garda, Catherine Nelson is delighted to find stylish decor and good food, rather than soup and self-denial. Cigar, anyone?

W here else but in Italy would a doctor look to accessorise his white coat with a rather fancy pair of hand-stitched, white leather trainers?

"Give me your hands," instructs the sartorially impeccable Dr Corradin. Behind him a picture window affords sweeping views of Lake Garda and mountains. He examines my palms and my tongue, and takes my pulse. Based on the redness of the first two and the quickness of the third, he tells me sternly that I am suffering from guilt.

He's right. I have left my children, aged six and 10, and come away to Lefay Spa for three whole nights, just to relax. It's enough to nudge any mum's guilt-o-meter towards red. The doctor prescribes passion fruit tea, to be drunk three times daily.

The spa is near Gargnano, on Lake Garda. I had feared bland corporate sterility but Italian style rules, with architecture based on the traditional *limonaia* - a partially enclosed glasshouse for cultivating lemon trees



Infinity and beyond ... Lefay Spa on the shores of Lake Garda

- as well as local marble, and olive and walnut wood.

Eco-credentials are taken as seriously as style. Roofs are covered with vegetation to blend into the hillside and an on-site biomass plant keeps carbon emissions low. I, however, only have eyes for the infinity pool: I glide across it, breathing in the eucalyptus-scented mountain air as I gaze out over the lake. And then I get out and sun myself, sipping a glass of sparkling Ca' del Bosco. Bliss.

I'm with Ellie, my sister-in-law, who, with two children younger than

mine, is equally focused on rest and relaxation. Lounging on the comfy beds, we pore over the brochure of treatments. Chinese medicine features strongly. The theory here is that healing on the outside is vital for healing on the inside. Assorted pools, a saltwater lake, five types of sauna, a running track and an "energy and therapeutic garden" with five meditation areas, are designed to aid this.

Treatments range from the familiar - detoxifying massages, moisturising facials - to the slightly odd. How about a "Flight of the Angel" visualisation

massage, in which "a narrating voice relates the journey of an angel between the sky, the earth and the sea: the symbols of a journey within man?"

Giggling, we head for dinner to the main restaurant, La Grande Limonaia. Lemon trees curl around pergolas set over the tables, and vast windows frame yet more decadent views as we feast on local produce - smoked ricotta ravioli, delicately flavoured pike-perch with Lake Garda lemons and capers, and crisp white Lugana wine. We could opt for the "Lightness in Being" menu - this is a spa, after all

- but we're too busy cooling over spiced figs and pistachio gelato.

The next morning, the spa's interior is all calming blue mosaics and clean lines, and it smells good enough to eat, the air heavy with sea salt, rosemary and lemons. I'm handed a card by a white-suited therapist for the massage part of my treatment programme. It says, *il volo dell'angelo*.

Basic though my Italian is, I'm sure of what's coming. And yes, as I position myself on the table, heavenly harp music strikes up and a voice begins to intone the angel's story. I close my eyes and try to channel my inner celestial being. I am surprised to find I don't have to try very hard to suspend my disbelief. It's all incredibly relaxing.

Later, in the bar, we stumble upon another decidedly Italian feature of this wonderful spa: the "cigar lounge" - a den lined with bottles of spirits, boxes of cigars and gambling chips. "This is definitely spa-lite," says Ellie.

On the final morning, we do yoga in the garden, in a glade reached down a path through fig and olive trees, jasmine and honeysuckle. Re-entry into normal life from this haven of Italian hospitality could be a daunting prospect, but I'm aware of a shift in perspective, blown in on a eucalyptus-scented breeze, which could make it all seem a little easier.

● The trip was provided by Kuoni (01306 747008, kuoni.co.uk) which has three nights' B&B in a junior suite at Lefay Resort and Spa, including BA flights from Gatwick and transfers from £740pp, based on two sharing