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LA VITA E BELLA

Deborah Cleland-Harris visits stunning Lake Garda to experience what one of the world's top spa resorts has to offer.

As the car drives up the six-kilometre hill to 'Lefay Resort & SPA Lago di Garda', we take in the stunning natural beauty all around – Alto Garda National Park, the high peaks of Monte Baldo and Lake Garda. Our contemplative silence is only broken when my husband Laurie proclaims, "this is quite spectacular" with a smile on his face. Then this eco-friendly resort, inspired by the lemon houses typical of the area, suddenly comes into view.

We're escorted to our suite, with a balcony and fantastic views to the lake. The acres of land are abundant with olive groves and plants native to the Mediterranean. These natural resources have been used in the floors and furnishings in the wonderful suite and the rest of the hotel, creating an earthy, luxurious look.

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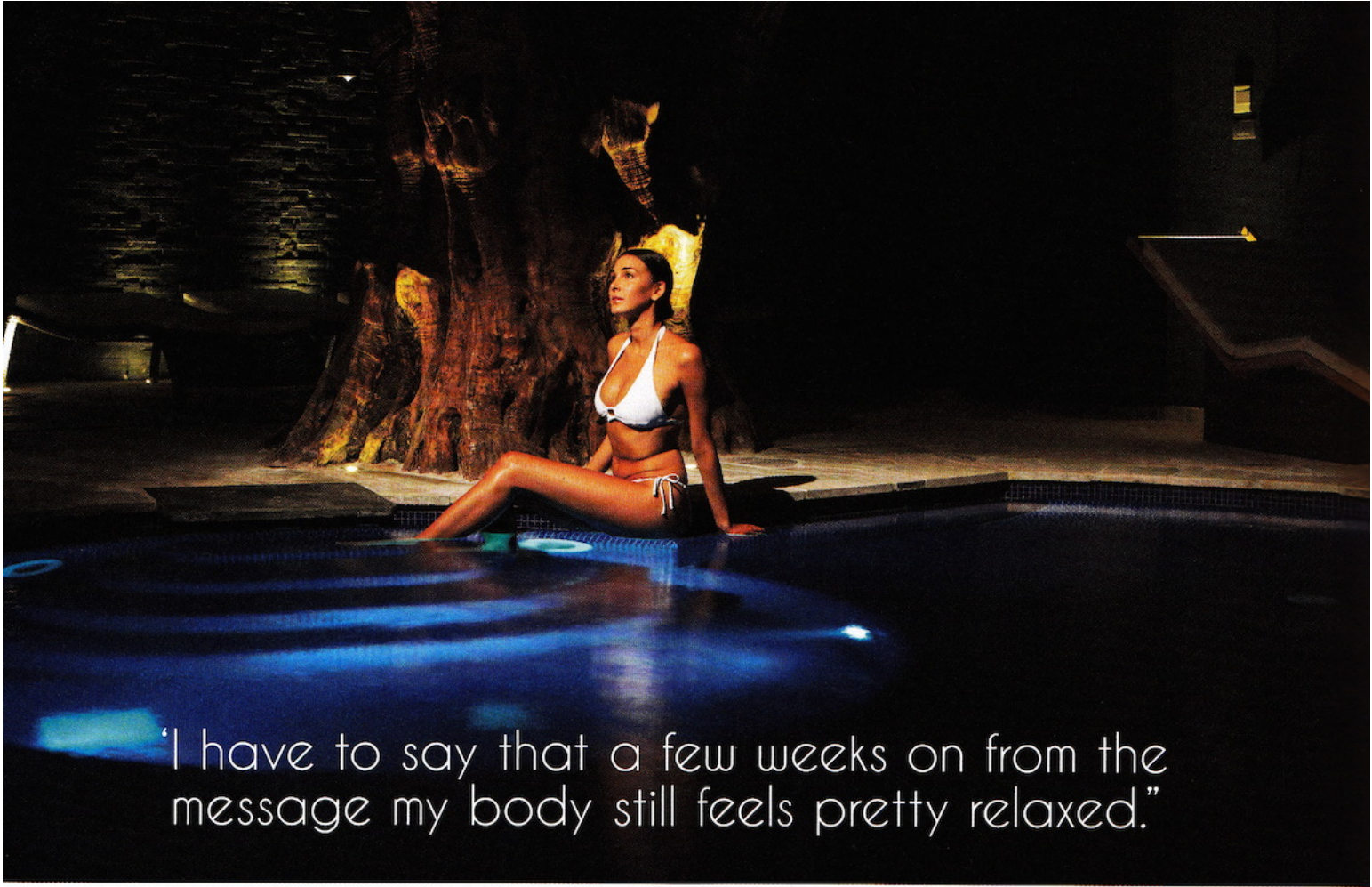
The resort has been designed with the SPA and activity area at the centre, which helps with the holistic approach. A selection of Lefay SPA Method programmes last from two to five days, seeking to reactivate the energy (Qi) system and achieve equilibrium of the mind and body. This is done by uniquely combining Classical Chinese Medicine and modern Western techniques, a concept that has won the resort many awards.

The owners of the resort, the Leali family, dreamed of creating a modern, stylish and eco-friendly place where guests can enjoy shorter, yet more fulfilling wellness experiences. Massage treatments, yoga and Tai Chi, and outdoor activities in the "energy and therapeutic garden" and beyond, are also facets of this experience. I'm booked in for a "two-day Discovery Method" programme, and I'm about to find out why they are leaders in their field.

There's no time to waste, and after spending a few moments enjoying the wonderful views from our balcony, we head to one of the in-house restaurant's 'Trattoria La Vigna', for lunch. Offering a slice of Italy, it looks like a traditional trattoria with brass pans adorning the part-bricked walls, rustic wooden tables covered with white linen table clothes, and twee crockery.

The la carte menu and buffet includes some of Italy's finest offerings: pizza, freshly sliced Parma ham, and local lavaret fish thinly sliced into a fresh Italian salad. Small potted desserts include tiramisu, Neapolitan rum cake and lemon cake (made from the lemons grown in this region). We enjoy our meal with a bottle of Lefay Pervoi house wine and get swathed up in the Italian ballads gently sweeping the room.





‘I have to say that a few weeks on from the message my body still feels pretty relaxed.’

Some free time after lunch allows us the opportunity to visit Limonaia La Malora (Lemon Houses), to see the inspiration behind Lefay’s design. This family run business lies at the bottom of the hill in picturesque Gargnano village, where DH Lawrence once lived. Fabrizio invites us into his family home to taste their Limoncello, before being guided around the terraced areas where tall lemon trees flourish.

Along the cliff sides, among medieval villages, old harbours and castles of the region, sit many Limonaia, which resemble temple ruins with high pillars and stonewalls. Some have been left to crumble, while a few such as Limonaia La Malora are thriving. The lemon industry’s heyday was in the 18th and 19th centuries, when lemons and other citrus fruits were exported to northern Europe.

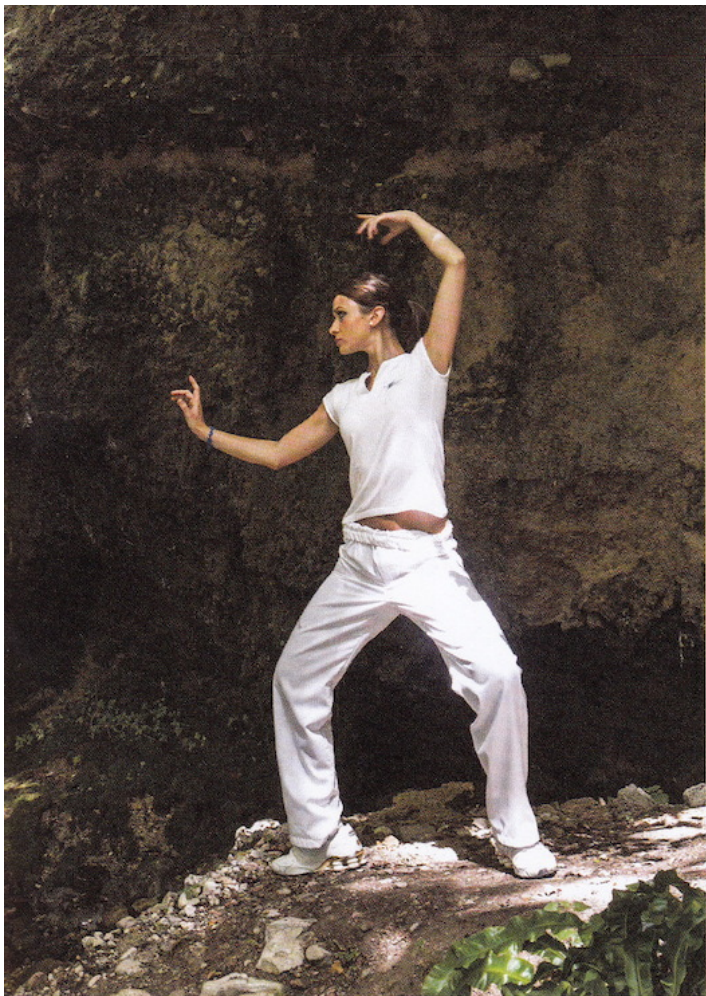
Strangely, Laurie comes away with a stray orange (also grown in the region), which became a scented Christmas ornament adorning the colours of the Italian flag. Back at the resort I’m in the right headspace for my first class: one-on-one yoga. My teacher Maurizio is trained in the Hatha tradition, and he easily adapts to my preferable type of yoga, Iyengar with its unique technique, sequence and timing. We started working on our breathing/

pranayama, before comfortably moving into some sitting poses followed by a sequence of standing asanas. Group classes based on the Hatha method are also available.

That evening, we relax in all three of the heated outdoor swimming pools. Illuminated in pink green and blue, each has their own appeal – but the most romantic element of this experience is seeing the shimmering villages across the lake light up the night’s sky.

The next morning I begin a full day of spa treatments and classes. This starts with a doctor’s consultation. I meet Dr Gavazzi, who is a trained Western and Chinese doctor – and also a psychotherapist, all my favourite things in one person. She assesses my needs and tailors the massage in my Discovery Method programme to suit me, with an accompanying Chinese herbal tea.

I begin with a Meridian Stretching class (based on ancient Chinese philosophy). I am taught simple stretches aimed at improving health and vitality. This is done through clearing and detoxing the meridians located in the muscle tissue of the body. Each meridian is linked to an internal part of your body, i.e. your inner thigh to your heart, and



lungs to your breath, so as in yoga, your breath is pivotal. Veronica tells me to "Breathe out your bad thoughts, breath in happy thoughts." It's about being in the now, not being concerned by yesterday or by tomorrow, and the constant smile on her face indicated it was working well for her.

Elsewhere, my husband was getting a 90-minute stone therapy massage. He also had the option of visiting one of the mixed (naked) saunas, but English prudishness got the better of him. PR Director Piero Zecchini smiles and says: "Something you have in common with Italians, then." I did, however try the women's only sauna ornately decorated to resemble a Turkish hammam.

In Chinese Medicine, there are four seasons in nature and in "man" and they all relate to a flow of energy. The kidneys are considered the centre of yin and yang, and this was my problem area, according to my doctor. So, she put me down for the winter "black tortoise" massage, used to promote the healthy function of tissues and organs deep down. I have to say that a few weeks on from the message my body still feels pretty relaxed. That day I also had an Energy Facial Massage and we enjoyed a private, romantic, session in the Salt Lake.

The next morning I meet with Dr Barbier for a follow-up. He reiterated Dr Gavazzi's opinions, while also discussing diet. He reassuringly said that eating fresh, preferably organic home cooked food is better than going on a diet." So, that night when we enjoy dinner at Lefay's fine dining restaurant Limonia, I heed Dr Barbier's advice. I opt for carrot and celeriac soup from the light menu – which tastes divine. But I don't shy away from the carbs, also ordering gnocchi and pumpkin with spice bread from a separate a la carte menu.

On our final evening we're presented with a whole sea bass that's been cooked in a crust of thick salt, something we ordered because we'd seen it on a cookery programme. And our waiter was right: "The salt brings out the flavour of the fish." Simple but perfect, which you could say about this whole experience.

The Discovery Method two-night programme starts from 720 Euros per person based on two people sharing a Prestige Junior Suite, including full board and use of all spa facilities. Other programmes include the three-night Essence, and five-night Integral. For more information, visit Lefayresorts.com