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ESCAPE

Edited by LUCY HALFHEAD

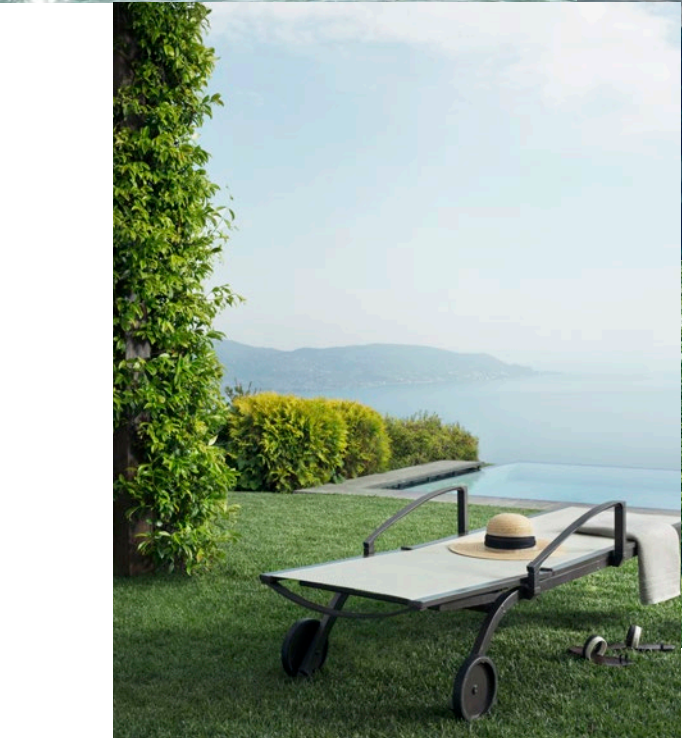
PERFECT SERENITY

Unwind by the calming shores of
Lake Garda; relax at our favourite European spas;
and discover Mexico's hidden treasures

*Lake Garda
seen from the
Lefay Resort*



Above and below: Lake Garda



This page and opposite, far right: the Lefay Resort

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My trip to Lefay got off to a decidedly unrelaxing start when I found myself alone and empty-handed at Verona airport's baggage carousel as it ground to a screeching halt. After giving up hope of ever seeing my beautiful Away suitcase again, and enduring an endlessly winding drive up a mountain, I was not in a holiday mood. But all my irritation melted away when the magnificent panorama across Lake Garda came into view. Broad beams of sunlight streamed through the low-hanging clouds and in the distance, the snow-capped peaks of Monte Baldo glittered in the haze. Who cared if I had no clothes, no contact lenses, no make-up...?

Lefay Resort & Spa Lago di Garda is a family-owned eco-destination set in 27 acres of woodland in Italy's Alto Garda National Park. It is an undeniably magical setting wherein to begin a healthier existence, and a favourite of glamorous Italians, seeking to escape their hectic lifestyles and busy work schedules by clustering around the infinity pool in Dolce & Gabbana sunglasses. In addition to this Olympic-size lido, which seems to hang suspended from the sky above the lake, there are 21 treatment-rooms, a saltwater chamber for flotation therapies, six differently scented saunas and a state-of-the-art gym.

The spacious all-suite rooms have a sleek, modern feel with Italian marble and walnut and olive furniture. Mine had floor-to-ceiling windows leading out onto a generous balcony overlooking the lake, a giant egg-shaped bath and a walk-in wardrobe of a size to satisfy Victoria Beckham. I hung up my three worldly possessions, changed into the Lefay own-brand bikini kindly donated by the hotel boutique and got ready to spend the next 72 hours swaddled in a fluffy white robe.

By marrying traditional Eastern wisdom with Western techniques and modern science, Lefay has developed its own innovative spa method. I had signed up to the three-day Discovery programme, which is tailor-made to address each guest's concerns, and begins with the 'song of the 10 questions', an analysis of sleep, digestion and mood patterns. I was weighed, my pulse taken, and the doctor asked me to balance on one leg; the latter exercise is part of the Romberg test, which policemen use to catch drink-drivers, but is essentially an indicator of balance and co-ordination. (Mine, apparently, could do with improvement.) I was then prescribed a cycle of spa treatments and given a personalised herbal tea to drink three times a day; a strangely delicious mix of astragalus, mandarin, rosemary, holy thistle, true cinnamon, white turmeric and liquorice to strengthen the spleen and stomach and protect the liver.

Over the next 48 hours I experienced countless treatments, including hydro-aromatherapy – a 20-minute Jacuzzi infused with lemon oil in which the water massages the body's meridians to

improve circulation – an illuminating facial massage, and a Chinese therapy called moxibustion (meaning 'burning herb'), during which a small, spongy herb called mugwort is warmed and placed on various acupuncture points around the body to give energy levels a boost. It may sound like something from *Harry Potter*, but it certainly did the trick. I even had a go at t'ai chi, the ancient practice whose gentle and fluid movements are said to regulate energy flow, strengthen the body and soothe the mind. Last but not least was a visit to the indoor saltwater pool La Luna nel Lago, which is heated to 37 degrees Celsius and located in a darkened underground room carved out of natural rock. I spent a heavenly half-hour floating on my back in the mineral-rich water staring up at a bright moon-like installation, while my mind drifted away from the outside world.

As well as instantly alleviating stress and tension, the Lefay Method helps lay the groundwork for continued wellbeing with light and tasty Mediterranean-style dishes made using locally sourced ingredients, cooked briefly in just a little extra-virgin oil and with no added salt. You won't find any clear broth or rice cakes at this detox spa – the main restaurant, La Grande Limonaia, serves fresh turbot with celeriac and snow peas, homemade ravioli, and even champagne, best enjoyed after a therapeutic walk in the pretty gardens, amid olive groves and lemon-trees.

After three days without the trappings of everyday life I was almost disappointed to be reunited with my suitcase at the airport where it had miraculously appeared having taken a later flight from the UK. Next year, Lefay will be opening a second outpost in the Dolomites, including a 54,000-square-foot wellbeing area, which is set to be one of the largest in the region. You will find me there, getting ready to meet the challenges of the year ahead. Only this time, I won't bother to pack a thing. □

Lefay Resort & Spa (www.lefayresorts.com), from £254 a room a night. The Healthy Holiday Company (020 8968 0501) offers a three-night Spa Discovery Programme at Lefay, from £1,065 a person based on two sharing a Prestige Junior Suite on a full-board basis including activities, return flights from London and private airport transfers.



Monte Pizzocolo



PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

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