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COVER STORY

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A stressed-out midlifer in a hipster's paradise? Bring it on

Fiona McIntosh signs up for foraging, feeling the squelch of mud between her toes and a spot of tree-hugging – Italian style

Now raise your arms and reach up high," says Marco, softly. I do as I am told, despite the ominous rustling of my paper "spa bikini".



Sit back and log off from the world: Lefay Resort & Spa Dolomiti is a temple of wellness

"Now drop your hands to the floor..."

Here we go. More rustling as I bend over – grateful, for young Marco's sake, that as I stress-test my paper bikini we are in almost total darkness.

At this moment, during my Hot Stretching session in a 70-degree sauna, it would have been easy to get the giggles. But Marco is so sweet and earnest, I simply close

my eyes and surrender. Even when he asks me to walk from the sauna into a heart-stopping ice bath and again when he leads me outside to lie on the grass and tune into the Alpine silence, I do exactly as I am told. Straight face, no giggles, all in my paper bikini.

Twenty months ago, I'd have found this kind of spa ritual absurd. But now, as I lie on the grass with my eyes closed, listening to the faint chime of cowbells, I feel more like crying than laughing. But crying in a good way – the overcome-with-relief kind of crying.

Earlier that day I had been on a three-hour hike through wooded wilderness in the Italian Dolomites. I had skied there in winter, but I had never seen it in autumn when the landscape looks like an impressionist painting, daubed with shades of ochre, rust and crimson. The beauty of it all made me well up.

Again? What's wrong with me?

The sensations of touching and feeling and smelling the natural world again (beyond the patch of trodden grass outside my London home) were unexpectedly overwhelming. Those big skies and jagged mountains that glowed pink in the afternoon light and the smell of pine and larch and wood smoke awakened senses that had clearly still been in lockdown.

This reconnection with nature is at the heart of the new Lefay Resort & Spa Dolomiti, a sustainably-built temple of wellness powered by renewable green energy. It sits in all its stone and wooden glory above the village of Pinzolo, in the Trentino region of the Dolomites, which is well known to Italians but almost unheard of in the UK.

Unlike many other swanky Alpine spas, it is not a white coat, starvation diet and enema kind of place. It offers an altogether kinder approach to wellness, more like a warm hug than a sharp slap. Besides, after the flipping circus we've all just lived through, isn't a bit of earthy sensuality exactly what we need?



'Reconnection with nature is at the heart of the Lefay Resort & Spa Dolomiti'



'As this is Italy, it's a given that the food is sensational':
go ahead and fill your boots

Take one of the Natural Wellness excursions you can book, which leads you deep into the forest for a meditation session to “cultivate our energy and our inner fire”. The therapy requires removing your boots and socks and trampling through fallen leaves and mineral ponds, feeling the squelch of nature between your toes. If you'd told me about this therapy pre-pandemic, I'd have dismissed it as hipster nonsense. Like oat milk. Or bamboo toothbrushes. Yet now, as I sip my morning oat milk latte with that

gnarly toothbrush sitting by my bathroom sink, I say to all the tree-huggers out there: bring it on. Another day we started early for a foraging expedition in the Adamello-Brenta Geopark. We walked along deserted mountain trails lit with explosive autumn colours. Our guide Regina stopped to pluck baby beech leaves, wild berries, purple clover and mint as we talked about this Unesco-protected paradise which is still home to around 100 brown bears.

Hold on a minute – bears?

“It's OK, they are very small,” Regina reassures me. “They are Italian bears, so they are kind of shy. Not like those angry American brown bears.”

While in winter the nearby Madonna di Campiglio and its 93 miles of ski runs attracts the Milanese Gucci set, off-season in autumn and spring, the area has become a honey pot for walkers, cyclists and e-bikers.

Of course all of this heartiness is even sweeter when you know you can return, ruddy and muddy, to the spa to be sprayed down and pummelled back to life. And what a spa. This place is like a massive waterpark for grown-ups.

The network of 18,000 sq ft of pools, saunas, steam rooms and relaxation areas is designed around the principles of Chinese medicine. Each of the five areas has a path you can follow to help unblock energy flows and find your balance. For example, the Green Dragon area helps heal “restlessness, impetuosity and anger”. OK, so I might have made a beeline for this one.

One of my favourite areas was the Black Tortoise path which helps to “heal lower back pain, fear, panic and feelings of inadequacy”. I mean, what’s not to like about that?

Floating in a warm salt pool with a curtain of Swarovski crystals dangling above me, backlit with a red glow – rather like a sexy 1980s nightclub – I lost all sense of time. It wasn’t long before I stopped wondering if I’d left the bins out at home and began tackling existential questions about everything. Get me!

Then in a sort of meditative daze, I finished the treatment in a darkened sauna where I realised, quite quickly, that this being northern Europe, there is a rather relaxed approach to mixed-gender nudity. If anyone is spotted hiding behind a modesty towel you can be 98.5 per cent sure that person is British.

The spa’s showstopper is the indoor/outdoor infinity pool with underwater glass doors, which magically open to release you from the spa pool into the wild. Gliding through warm water with your breath fogging in the crisp, autumn air, fire pits blazing around you and the Alps silhouetted on the horizon, you feel that (by now) familiar prickle behind the eyes.

The natural world is also woven into the spa treatments – a salt scrub incorporating chestnut flour and Alpine butter leaves you looking and feeling like a glazed strudel. The cocktail of choice at the bar is a Dolomites Bramble, awash with sloe gin and wild berry syrup, garnished with mint and a cluster of wild mountain berries.

Of course, as this is Italy, it’s a given that the food is sensational. You could opt for the light menu of salad-y stuff to help you lose that lockdown lard, but what a criminal waste that would be. Far better to fill your boots with chunks of slow-roasted venison, Arctic char plucked from the mountain rivers and unctuous pastas accompanied by local teroldego and a sparkling Ferrari Trentodoc.

For a total cultural immersion, chef Matteo Maenza has created a 12-course tasting menu of local produce at restaurant Grual, taking you on a culinary journey from the valley floor to the mountain top. No hiking boots required for this one.

Lefay Resort and Spa Dolomiti (00 39 0465 768800; dolomiti.lefayresorts.com/en) offers double rooms from £297 per night including breakfast. For a full review and to book see telegraph.co.uk/tt-lefaydolomites