

FORGET white-outs on the mountain summit, a blizzard lashing at your frozen cheeks, knees knocking with terror on near vertical slopes that are shrouded in fog.

Instead, imagine yourself languishing in a vast outdoor heated swimming pool while feathery snowflakes melt across your bare warm shoulders, enjoying mountain views from the comfort — and safety! — of a glass-walled panoramic Finnish sauna, followed by a refreshing dip in an ice pool.

A blissful non-ski afternoon of unashamed pampering also takes me inside a cave-like salt grotto, before stepping into the tepid hypersaline stress-busting waters of a flotation lake, ending with a relaxing phytotherapy preparation of selected herbs and plants to energise my kidneys and other organs.

Then it's time for another rest, lying flat-out in one of the sumptuous chillout areas, sipping a delicious herbal brew. Soothing mud therapy, tension-relieving massages and other invigorating apres-ski treatments beckon.

Emerging from the labyrinth of wellness zones, a middle-aged woman in skiwear remonstrates her bathrobe-attired male companion. 'I know why you've been hiding away in here the whole day instead of bombing down a ski run — this is so tempting,' she tells him.

Welcome to a new world of winter sport, one in which senses and soul are regenerated within a temple named Lefay Resort Spa Dolomiti (lefoyresorts.com) spread out above the northern Italian town of Pinzolo. This luxury hotel resort Shangri la covers a massive 53,820sq ft, surrounded by the majestic Brenta Dolomites, a Unesco World Heritage site, located within Trentino-Alto Adige's famous Madonna di Campiglio ski area.

A dizzying array of energy-therapeutic paths, encompassing wellness for body and mind, blending Eastern and Western methods of natural healing and energy together, are on offer. Apart from that wonderful Italian kaleidoscope of colour and design style — think bedrooms that are the last word in comfort with virtual wall fires and deep bathtubs — environmental wellness is also key to Lefay's philosophy, using local larch, chestnut in natural materials, blended into the surrounding countryside.

The resort — which opened in 2019, then closed again for a year at the height of the pandemic — is a leader in the use of renewable green energy and latest-generation technologies, designed to reduce energy and water consumption.

The sheer scale of the award-winning spa itself is pretty mind-blowing. I get lost amid the labyrinth of four seasonal zones that surround a large light-flooded whirlpool, enriched with magnesium salts. From this central point you choose some or all of the zones, each linked to different body organs, designed to help restore individual yin/yang balance and energy levels.

The bio-sauna Green Dragon zone represents spring with a focus on the liver and on relieving restlessness and anger while the Finnish sauna Red Phoenix embodies summer with the

Think being in the heart of the Dolomites is all about action? A five-star spa shows it can be a haven of relaxation too



Leave me STRESS-LE

BY ISABEL CONWAY

Luxury: (Main) Snowy sights at the winter outdoor pool, (top right) Isabel on the slopes and (below) a suite and the showcooking are at Lefay Resort Spa

heart as the target organ to help release the flow of energy from the chest to the surface.

Then there's the steam bath White Tiger, which represents autumn and puts the focus on the lungs and reducing inflammation and sadness. Finally bomb winter zone Black Tortoise aims to shift kidney blockages which can cause lower back pain and lead to feelings of inadequacy and fear.

New age? Maybe a little, but I am going with the flow anyhow on my personal 'energy-therapeutic path', whether floating in the Black Tortoise's salt-water lake or admiring spectacular scenery from the panoramic sauna. The idea is to follow a

bespoke programme that takes you from your chosen sauna to the 22-room treatment floor for either a signature massage tailored specifically to your energy requirements, a vigorous body scrub, wrap, or nourishing facial using the Lefay alpine skincare range.

As we're also here to ski, duty eventually calls, lured away from indulgent wellness to be kitted out with boots and skis at the in-house ski hire shop beside the lobby. What a relief not to have to lug heavy material along icy paths. That's what sets the five-star ski experience apart, aided by uniformed staff who shoulder equipment from the ski room lockers as we pile aboard the

resort's shuttle van bound for the nearby Pinzolo cable car station, from where we are spirited up into a magical Dolomites landscape.

The rocky summits of the Dolomites, which can reach heights of up to 3,000m, could have been plucked from a fantasy film, like the teeth of an enormous dragon snapping at the clouds. The first-time visitor is gobsmacked by their grandeur, once the clouds part to reveal towering surreal shapes.

The outline resembles a gigantic pink-tinged lizard's tail, one of my companions says, while us ant-sized humans gape up at them from the vantage point of Dos del Sabion. The peace is heavenly, the snow condi-

tions are perfect and it is hard to imagine the brute force of nature that created the Dolomites millions of years ago, transporting coral barriers out of the sea beds. Today evidence of that upheaval is seen in rock hard sea snails and the remains of sea dinosaurs.

Madonna di Campiglio's extensive snowmaking, long scenic red and blue intermediate slopes make it one of Italy's favourite winter sport destinations, especially for families and snowboarders — there are four snowboard parks — offering 150km of picture perfect terrain, covered by a single ski pass to explore wide trails winding down wooded valley sides and all brilliantly connected by gondolas and chair lifts.

Other winter activities organised by Lefay's concierge team include snow hiking, cross-country skiing, dog-sledding, paragliding and snowshoe excursions.

On my first day's skiing, with excellent snow conditions and knees that work as they should, thanks to the previous evening's pre-ski massage and workouts, my mojo stays in place, even on a trickier steep gradient.

South Tirol's Dolomites cuisine scene is nearly as famous as its awesome slopes. Crisp white tablecloths, a wine list spanning





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by multi-disciplined alpine guide Giovanni Ghezzi, we catch the cable lift to Patascoss and after huffing and puffing up a steep slope, our walk brings us deep inside Adamello Brenta Nature park.

Gio encourages his charges onwards into the unknown telling us to say 'goodbye to civilisation', helping us to put on our plastic snowshoes before entering a forested paradise. We end much higher up a couple of hours later at mountain hut Malga Ritorto, a former summer alpine farmhouse, where the cows used to be milked and bedded down at night. Today, it's one of several cosy lunch stop-offs, showing off character and local cuisine.

Affordable and incredibly simple to do, snowshoeing is a great alternative to enjoy being out and about in powdery snow, without careering down the slippery slopes on skis. Our guide Giovanni alerts us to the presence of the park's famous brown bears, introduced years ago but now enjoying their winter hibernation and also to wolves, who arrived without an invitation off the Slovenian mountains.

More than 400km of intertwined paths wind through the park, different levels of difficulty, there are specially designed itineraries on offer, such as guided meditation, barefoot walking, tree hugging, yoga and breathing activities along eight of the routes once the snows melt.

Gio also tells us that early 19th century Dublin-born geologist and politician John Ball, who gave up politics to devote himself to natural history as an alpinist, discovered innumerable climbs and journeys, enabling him and others to find and map out routes into once remote Dolomites terrain.

If you get the chance, take a stroll into Pinzolo to admire beautiful outdoor frescos on both churches and also to pick up local specialities at family-run Alimentari Caola delicatessen, a veritable Aladdin's cave of olive oils, mountain cheeses, dried meats, jams, honey, wines and grape spirits.

TRAVEL FACTS

Ryanair (ryanair.com) and Aer Lingus (aerlingus.com) fly to Milan from several Irish airports, from €40 return. Lefay Resort & Spa Dolomiti offers an Alpine Spa Break from €330 per person, including one night B&B, a massage and entrance to the Spa World. The Ski & Wellness package costs from €1,120 per person, including three nights' B&B, a 2-day ski pass, massages and more, see lefayresorts.com.

AT 12pm, the bells of St Nicholas burst into glorious peals. It's the noon Angelus, — and it's a moment of rapturous joy for those of us whose prayers have been answered. A foot of snow has fallen overnight.

Lech, the grand duchess of ski resorts, looks sumptuous in her new white coat.

I haven't been here for 30 years, but it's hardly changed a jot. It feels almost like a private village, discreetly managed by powerful local families such as the Kosts, Schneiders and the Moosbruggers.

And it's an all-year working village. Indeed, there are ferociously strict rules about buying property here. If you own it, you have to use it.

Actually, there is one thing that has changed. Lech is now connected not just to Zurs, Zug and Stuben but to St Christoph and St Anton, which means the Arlberg region is the largest connected ski area in Austria.

It is rightly regarded as the cradle of alpine skiing, where Hannes Schneider, born in Stuben in 1890, developed the 'Arlberg' technique, bending the knees and shifting 'zee' weight, as instructors still teach to this day.

Lech wears its glamour lightly, its grandeur even more so. There are no Louis Vuitton or Gucci stores; no soulless self-service mountain restaurants selling stodgy spag bol. And everyone we meet is courteous and friendly.

Royalty has long been drawn to Lech, not least Princess Diana, who brought her boys here after her marriage collapsed, staying at the Schneider family's Hotel Arlberg, where we call in for a snoop and a couple of elderflower schnapps.

Our hotel, Severins, is a mile or so out of town but operates a regular shuttle service. From the outside, it looks like a weathered old mountain hut — but turns out to be a luxury 21st-century cocoon that's perfect for the jaded and weary.

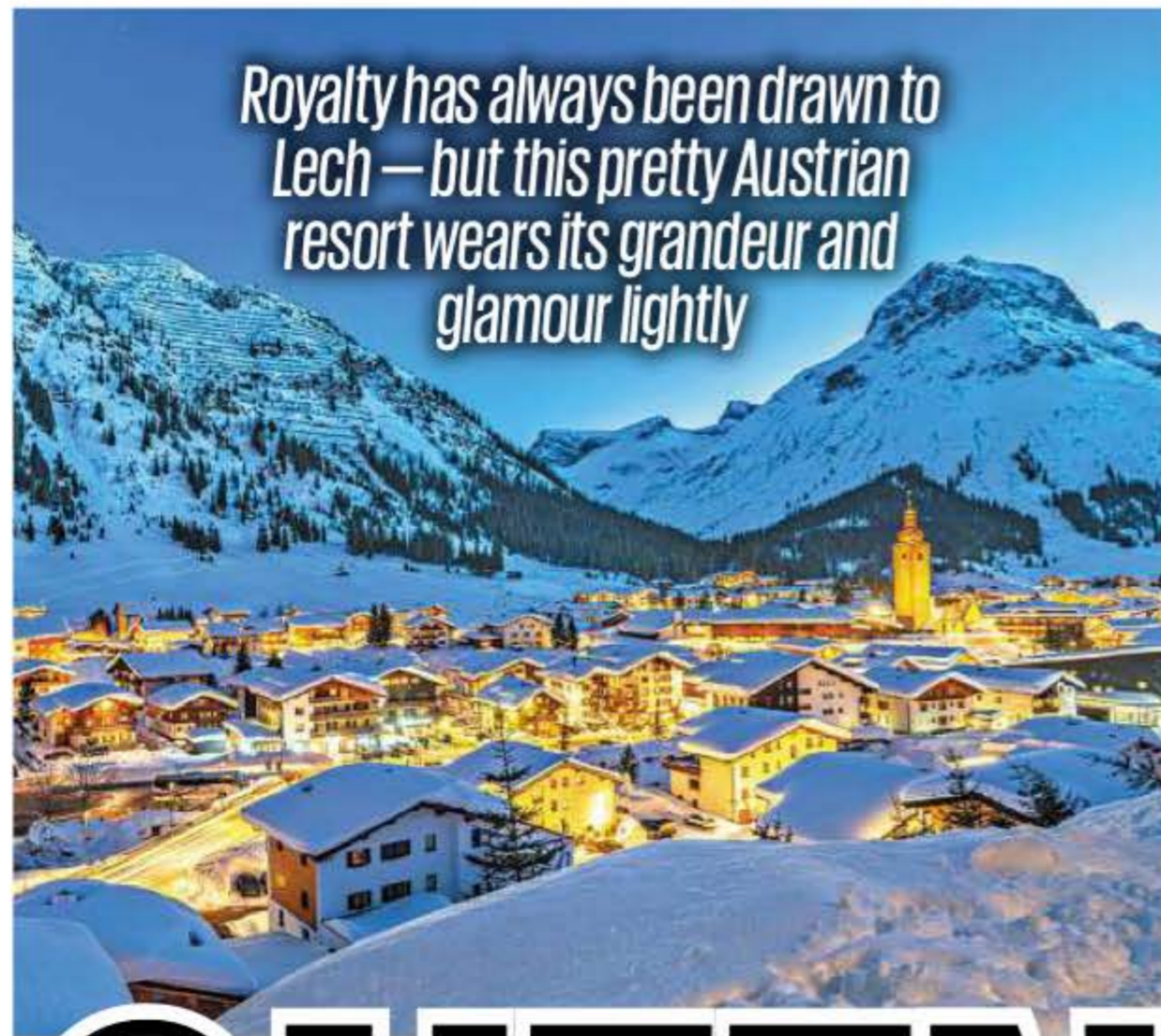
There are only nine rooms, all with deep tubs, Bluetooth speaker systems, Minotti furniture and even crackling log fires. There's also a four-bedroom chalet next door with its own grand piano and private cinema.

Our flight to Innsbruck left so early that by 2pm we're on the mountain — and among the last off it. After an operation on my knee, my skiing is somewhat apologetic, but what a tonic it is to be back on the slopes after the Covid recess.

That evening, one overly enthusiastic guest, noticing that the mixologist has gone missing, slips behind the bar and starts making his own White Lady cocktail. Yes, that's me.

On another occasion, a guest manages to incinerate and then detonate his gas fire lighter. Yes, that's me, too. But nothing seems to faze the charming staff, who carry an air of having seen it all before.

On day two, we meet up with Lukas, a young and dashing handsome guide, who introduces us to another of Lech's great selling points: the White Ring, a nearly 15-mile, signposted ski circuit from Zurs to Lech, with unforgettable views and relatively



Royalty has always been drawn to Lech — but this pretty Austrian resort wears its grandeur and glamour lightly

QUEEN OF THE ALPS

BY MARK PALMER



Chic: Lech ski resort, enjoyed by Princess Diana and her boys, right

easy runs for those with dodgy knees.

Afterwards, we stop for lunch at Kriegeralpe, which follows the Lech pattern of wrapping Alpine style in a modest demeanour — a cosy wooden chalet offering delicious goulash for less than a tenner and where you're treated like a guest in a five-star restaurant.

Speaking of five-star restaurants, if you're staying in Lech you absolutely must find your way to a small 17th-century farmhouse (original floors still intact) which is tucked away in Zug.

This is where we're greeted by a German/Chinese culinary couple, Jakob Zeller and Ethel Hoon, at the Klosterle.

They give us rowanberry negronis and tangy fermented gherkins and then show us their upstairs larder, which is bursting with locally made

pickles, jams and hanging meats. It's like a snapshot from Little House On The Prairie. Tables are made from local spruce, candles flicker. For us, it's not so much a shelter from the storm outside as a shelter from life itself. And the food is superb.

Thank goodness, there are still places in the world like Lech. Wonderful for skiers and just as wonderful for those who, simply, are drawn year after year to the majesty of the mountains.

TRAVEL FACTS

OXFORD Ski Company (oxfordski.com); offers seven nights' half board at Hotel Severins from £5,850 for two, including flights and private transfers. A six-day lift pass costs €358. See (lechzuers.com).