

CAN A SPA SOLVE YOUR *health problems?*

Who says spas are just about relaxation? With ever more sophisticated clinics, the best ones can now offer real, tangible health benefits...

BY EVIE LEATHAM

Ten years ago, no one had heard of health tourism. But health-focused holidays are now booming – with holistic health retreats coming in top. And with the rising interest in using complementary therapies in conjunction with orthodox medicine to treat all manner of ailments, spas which offer more than just bog-standard massage have a real part to play in our physical and psychological wellbeing. A week or two at a well-chosen retreat is particularly beneficial if you

suffer from difficult to treat conditions, such as skin complaints or a niggling sports injury. “They combine conventional treatments and complementary therapies not often available on the NHS,” says Michael Tammit Zabona from medi-spa Fortina. “The benefits of proper time-out to relax and recuperate shouldn’t be underestimated.” So, if you have tried everything the NHS has to offer without success, now might be a good time to check into one of these top retreats... →

THE PROBLEM: STRESS, ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

THE SOLUTION: Breathing techniques

HOW IT WORKS

During his Lanzarote-based retreats, breath guru Alan Dolan uses breathing techniques combined with acupressure to help clients access their entire respiratory system for improved health and mental balance. "Oxygen is beneficial at every level, but most of us only fill 20-30 per cent of our lungs with each breath, and in a stressed or anxious state, our breathing gets even shallower which damages our physical and emotional wellbeing," he explains. "I teach people how to take their breathing lower down to the abdomen, so lungs are completely filled."

His methods are backed up by

real science. We know that low oxygen levels rob organs and muscles of a proper blood flow and the nutrients they need, while a lack of CO₂ causes that 'spaced out' feeling and can lead to lethargy at best, panic attacks, insomnia and dizziness at worst. And scientists are currently researching the benefits of oxygen in treating illnesses as varied as cancer and autism.

IT WORKED FOR ME



Alex, 47, says:

"I'd found myself stuck in a rut; I was exhausted, apathetic, lacking

in motivation and I can see now that I was depressed. After the first day I felt like I'd been through a washing machine and spun out again. But in a good way – I'd shaken everything off and felt energised for the first time in months. The biggest difference is that in the past when I was anxious about something, I'd have thought the problem to death. Now I use the breath to ground myself rather than over-analysing."

Alan Dolan's Breathing Space Retreats in Lanzarote start from €495 per person for three nights' self-catering accommodation and includes airport transfers. Visit breathguru.com.

IF YOU DO THREE THINGS...

- 1** Take at least five minutes a day to get grounded; sit without any distractions, close your eyes and be still.
- 2** Start trying to consciously breathe from deeper down in the abdomen – for at-home video instructions, visit Alan's website.
- 3** When you're feeling stressed or anxious, it tends to be because your energy is head-focused. Get physical: a brisk walk channels and centres that energy.

TWO MORE TO TRY

► **NuBeginnings (nubeginnings.co.uk)** Focuses on exercise, diet and mind techniques, like neurolinguistic therapy and hypnosis, to treat everything from weight loss to anxiety, sleep disorders and phobias.

► **Sha Wellbeing Centre, Spain (shawellnessclinic.com)** Focuses on a macrobiotic diet as well as stress and anti-tobacco workshops. Sha's life-coach, nutritionist and psychologist are all on hand to tackle problems, backed up by two months' online coaching.



HEALTH TOURISM: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Depending on exchange rates, treatments abroad are often cheaper than in the UK. But the downside is that you're committed in advance and without a consultation beforehand. Should you get there and change your mind, there's often little recourse and language can be a barrier, especially when things don't go according to plan. Hidden costs can also crop up if you need after-care once you're home.

The onus is on you to assess the clinic's or spa's reputation, the medical team's qualifications, what sort of insurance,

after-care and follow-up is on offer, so be prepared to do some diligent research.

"Make sure your doctor, dentist or surgeon is board-certified at an accredited body in that country, and that they speak English," warns cosmetic surgery consultant Wendy Lewis. "If you're having anything that involves surgical procedures, ask yourself, is that country's emergency care adequate? Would you feel confident receiving a blood transfusion should it be necessary?" Long-distance travel will also impact on your recovery, so factor in recuperation time.



“The benefits of proper time out to relax and recuperate shouldn't be underestimated”



PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES; PLAIN PICTURE

THE PROBLEM: PHYSICAL INJURIES

THE SOLUTION: Physiotherapy and rehabilitation

HOW IT WORKS

The physiotherapy and rehabilitation facilities and experts at Fortina Spa, Malta, are unparalleled – Manchester United's Gary Neville was one of many pro sports stars to have recovered here before returning to the football pitch. The spa boasts pools filled with concentrated seawater which helps stop the progression of damage during one-to-one resistance sessions. “We're seeing more and more patients return to manual therapy, but we also have the latest hi-tech equipment,” says Fortina director Michael Zammit Tabona. “We use shockwave therapy, a non-invasive technique that eliminates chronic pain, to effectively treat tennis or golfer's elbow in as few as two treatments, as well as weightless running machines. The water provides resistance to build up strength while the buoyancy cushions recuperating joints.”



taping and hydrotherapy, and worked with me in the saltwater pool and aquaciser, which is basically an underwater treadmill. At the end of my week there, I felt so much better.”

Half-board for one week starts at £499 including flights. One hour physio sessions are €30. Visit fortinasparesort.com.

IT WORKED FOR ME



Mary, 32, says: “I sprained my ankle badly last year – I

had a partial rupture of the anterior talo fibular ligament and a peroneal nerve inflammation. Even after NHS treatment, it was still painful three months later. Fortina treated me with gentle massage, joint mobilisations, athletic

IF YOU DO THREE THINGS...

- 1** Take an extra five minutes to really focus on warming the muscles around an injury before you start exercising it in any way.
- 2** Never heat an injury unless you've been told to do so. Acute injuries, like sprains and strains, should be iced as soon as possible.
- 3** Keep compression socks or bandages in your gym kit – they may not seem sexy, but they work by giving the injured joint extra, much-needed support.

TWO MORE TO TRY

► **Rheinburg-Klinik, Switzerland (rheinburg.ch)**

A private rehabilitation centre focused on treating spine or joint diseases and rehabilitation after surgery,

accidents or a stroke.

► **Terme Selce, Croatia (terme-selce.com)** A centre of excellence for treating sports injuries, headed up by the official doctor to the Croatian Olympic ski team. →

THE PROBLEM: ECZEMA AND PSORIASIS

THE SOLUTION: Mineral salts and hydrogen sulphide

HOW IT WORKS

Slovakia's skin secret is an underground spring at Smrdaky Spa, containing super-high levels of mineral salts and Europe's highest levels of hydrogen sulphide.

"The water soothes the itching of eczema and has an anti-inflammatory effect," says Smrdaky's specialist dermatologist Dr Lidaj. "To treat psoriasis,

where cell turnover is four times quicker than normal, hydrogen sulphide helps slow overstimulated skin cells."

Following a consultation, a programme of baths, mud-packs and UV treatment is prescribed. "Skin is prepared using salicylic-based scrubs or light peels to remove 'scales' which can be a barrier to treatment," says Lidaj. Patients are then introduced to concentrated cold spring water. Specific areas like hands and feet are targeted with a quick blast under a UVB machine which also serves to slow skin cell turnover.

After a week people usually see a marked difference in their skin which is said to last a month. However, a four-week treatment produces more lasting results.

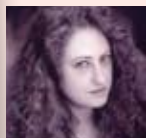


Wellbeing Escapes (call 0845 602 6202; wellbeingescapes.co.uk) offers a ten-night Intensive Skin Soother programme at Smrdaky Natural Health Spa, Slovakia, from £830 per person, based on flights, transfers and two people sharing.

IF YOU DO THREE THINGS...

- 1 Visit your doctor as soon as you're home so she can see any differences the treatment made and carry on managing your condition.
- 2 Look after yourself. Colds and flu can make psoriasis worse, so take immune-boosting supplements. We recommend 10 Day Get Well, Stay Well, £22.95, victoriahealth.com.
- 3 Keep a diet and symptoms diary – Dr Lidaj is convinced that certain foods (particularly fatty meat and smoked fish) can cause skin conditions to flare up.

IT WORKED FOR ME



Serena, 47, says, "After decades of psoriasis, I saw a 60 per cent improvement in my condition after a ten-day stay at Smrdaky – roughly the same achieved in five weeks' treatment at an NHS hospital – and I remained relatively unblemished throughout the following winter."

TWO MORE TO TRY

- **La Roche Posay, France** (larocheposay.com) Devoted to treating chronic skin disorders. The extensive skincare range, at Boots, is a good first stop for sensitive skin.
- **The Ark Skin Spa, London** (020 7938 1898) Offers skin analysis as well as targeted products and supplements for milder skin complaints such as redness and spots.

THE PROBLEM: TROUBLE CONCEIVING

THE SOLUTION: Lifestyle changes



HOW IT WORKS

Sadly, at least 25 per cent of couples will have trouble conceiving, but often lifestyle changes make all the difference. According to Dr Harald Stossier, founder of the Viva Mayr Clinic in Austria, imbalances in the metabolic system and digestive complaints can affect fertility. Stossier uses kinesiology (a diagnostic system using muscle-

testing procedures) in some cases to identify problem hotspots. Tailored treatment combines conventional medicine with alternative therapies: traditional Mayr cures, such as detoxification and an alkalisating diet, as well as herbal and homeopathic remedies to treat hormonal imbalances. Orthomolecular medicine which uses the vitamins, enzymes, amino acids, dietary fibre, antioxidants and fatty acids found in a healthy diet, also helps in prevention and ongoing treatment.

IT WORKED FOR ME

Beverley, 38, says, "My partner and I were about to embark on IVF treatment after four years of



trying for a baby, so I wanted to make sure I was in the best of health to start the treatment. I was put on the full Mayr diet: sheep's yoghurt for breakfast, a light lunch, and then soup or tea in the evening. I felt so much healthier that I stuck to my new regime when I returned home. I then went on to give birth to a healthy son through the IVF."

A visit to Viva Mayr costs from **€155 including diet-based treatment plan. Initial medical consultations starts from €150. Visit viva-mayr.com.** ■

IF YOU DO THREE THINGS...

- 1 Our bodies are naturally very acidic so encourage alkalinity by eating lots more vegetables.
- 2 Up your intake of cold-pressed vegetable oils which are rich in fatty acids.
- 3 Fertility problems are down to men just as much as women, so change your diet together.

TWO MORE TO TRY

- **Amanda Hamilton's LifeChanging Fertility** (amanda-hamilton.co.uk) A nutrition-centred programme based on detoxification, diet and lifestyle counselling.
- **Simply Healing Fertility Boost** (simplyhealingcentre.com) A five-day retreat of nutritional workshops and healing treatments.