

A high-angle photograph of a person with dark hair lying on their side on a black and white checkered blanket. They are wearing a dark, sleeveless top. In the upper left corner, there is a red smartphone in a tan leather case with black glasses resting on it. A pair of dark sunglasses lies on the blanket to the left of the person. The background shows a patterned blanket and some dry grass at the bottom.

The travel issue

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how to
spend it

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An aerial photograph of a tropical resort. The water is a vibrant turquoise color, with darker patches of coral or rocks visible beneath the surface. In the foreground, a curved wooden walkway leads to several circular buildings with conical, thatched roofs. The buildings are arranged in a line, and the walkway connects them. The overall scene is serene and idyllic, suggesting a luxurious and relaxing vacation spot.

Spas *for the* SOUL

Laughter therapy? Shamanic healing? Singing bowl rituals? Find your flow at the new wave of holistically upgraded hotels.
By Charlotte Sinclair



A Pugliese elegant Borgo Egnazia hotel, a table has been set on the rooftop of a building of pale tuff stone as white as a sugar cube. Beneath, an outdoor restaurant draped in bright fabrics resembles a Moroccan bazaar. Beyond, an olive grove containing 2,000-year-old trees, their ancient trunks warped into strange contortions, ends abruptly at a thick tranche of blue: the Adriatic Sea. On the table, serious business: wines of the region, a Pinot Noir-ish Susumaniello red and a rosé, both from local vineyard Masseria Li Veli. The hotel's wine manager Giuseppe Cupertino, perched on the rooftop's edge, and gesturing with a casualness that is as inimitably Italian as it is anxiety-inducing, extols the undiscovered potential of the area's viticulture as he pours generously into my glass.

While encapsulating the reliable appeal of an Italian summer (wine, sunshine, attractive panoramas, genial conversation), the aim of this experience is more profound. "Wine at Five" is not merely a generally received good idea, but a facet of Borgo Egnazia's five-day *Blue Zones* Retreat, a longevity-focused programme that glean instruction from the food and habits of the world's longest-living people, who dwell in so-called "blue zones" from Sardinia to Costa Rica to Japan. The retreat is structured around the "Power 9": nine commonalities in the lives of the longest-living people, as discovered by journalist and *National Geographic* fellow Dan Buettner. These include daily, non-strenuous physical movement, time to relax, a sense of life purpose, a plant-based diet, eating only until 80 per cent full, drinking wine (though we're talking a glass a day, not the whole bottle), spending time with family, practising a belief and the importance of a (non-digital) social network.

At Borgo Egnazia, these concepts are adapted into a visit to the hotel's organic farm, where we walk barefoot down rows of vegetables, picking sweet, sun-warmed tomatoes to

make a local dish of frisée: tomatoes, salt, oregano and olive oil, the tomatoes pressed into hard bread. It is delicious. At dinner there's pasta and an enormous plate of crudité, dipped into a lemony vinaigrette. Days begin with stretching or iyengar yoga, move on to pizza making and end with movie screenings; there's the occasional gym session or fast walk, but all facets of the programme feel natural, rather than forced or, worse, imposed. There would be little pleasure in feeling sullen and deprived while watching one's fellow hotel guests feasting on truffle pasta.

For those familiar with the traditional deprivations of a wellness retreat (the caloric restriction, punishing bootcamps, enemas, weigh-ins, white towelling robes as dinner attire and interminable masticating) this retreat – with its daily schedule of enjoyment, eating, and the aforementioned tino – feels somewhat radical.

The programme is one of an increasing number that mark a shift in travel as the spas of conventional hotels and resorts edge into territory more commonly occupied by medical spas, ashrams and holistic retreats. Where hotels once stuck to manicures and massages, the industry is moving – convincingly – towards offering laughter therapy, vitamin IVs, traditional Chinese medicine and DNA testing, with visiting experts – Buddhist monks, micronutritionists, Qi Gong masters – as the new standard. The departure expresses a new emphasis on personalised, transformative experiences, and tallies with a growing interest in wellbeing and the achievement of a holistic state of being (documented slavishly, if somewhat antithetically, on social media). Perhaps more crucially, it is also a response to a burgeoning market. Wellness,

according to a report released last year by the Global Wellness Institute, is worth a staggering \$4.2tn. Of that sum, wellness tourism accounts for \$639.4bn. Last year the global medspa industry was valued at \$12bn.

Hence, nearly every major hotel group, and some minor players, are getting in on the act. Last year Anantara introduced a medical spa at Kihavah, its resort in the Maldives, where vampire facials and colon hydrotherapy are offered alongside less invasive Ayurvedic treatments. An island hop away at Niyama, IV formulations are prescribed in collaboration with Beverly Hills IV Therapy, while a further skip to the Intercontinental's debut Maldives Maamunagu Resort finds a traditional Chinese medicine practitioner installed at the spa. Meanwhile, Belmond has launched Good Living experiences designed to enrich the mind and body and "stir the soul". One of these features the authors of *Self Care for the Real World*, yoga teacher Nadia Narain and her sister Katia Narain Phillips, who will be billeted at Belmond Cap Juluca next year. For Six Senses, a brand with wellness at its core, its first North American property, due to open imminently in Bjarke Ingels' XI buildings in Manhattan, will take a holistic approach to the unique pressures of urban life, principally loneliness: Six Senses Place will be an area in the hotel for guests to cultivate a sense of community.

Newcomers to the scene include Etnesa brand Equinox, which recently opened the Equinox Hotel Hudson Yards in Manhattan, presenting – alongside spin classes and circuit training (and soundproof suites for peak sleep conditioning) – full-body cryotherapy and quantum harmonics (sound therapy) for "high-powered cognitive revitalisation". Meanwhile, at boutique properties such as Marrakech's Royal Mansour, guests might choose one of the "ancestral therapeutic treatments" in the 27,000sq ft spa, including a Chi Nei Tsang abdominal massage that "releases negative energies", or a session with the visiting micronutritionist



Valérie Espinasse, a former pharmacist who uses tailor-made nutritional testing as "predictive medicine" in the hope of staving off future health problems.

In some hotels, the programmes seem to achieve a special harmony of place and process. At the delightful Hacienda de San Rafael in Andalucía, the hotel's garden setting, its birdsong and soft air, surely aid the calming effects of Tibetan Healing Yoga retreats under the guidance of Lu Jong master Dominique Caubel. Aman – a brand long distinguished by its engagement with the spiritual aspects of mental and physical prosperity – has embraced shamanic experiences at Anantara in Bali and meditation in the mountains at Amangani, Wyoming, not to mention its seductive-sounding year-round wellness immersions, comprising tailored retreats at its outposts in India, Thailand, Vietnam and Japan.

While the basement of a London hotel would not appear to offer much in the way of transporting experiences, the handsome wood-paneled spa of The Lanesborough is home to Bodhimaya retreats, a wellness programme under the guidance of eastern philosophy teacher Cornelius O'Shaughnessy. Day retreats incorporate a session with a nutritionist of almost terrifying elegance called Olga Hamilton, who uses medical testing to investigate her clients' metabolic reactions to what they eat. There is also one with O'Shaughnessy, who speaks with charm and honesty about his own route to enlightenment via a nervous breakdown, before instructing me in the ways that negative thinking can preclude true happiness. To end the session, he leads me into a deeply relaxing meditation – which is recorded and emailed to me.

I first experienced a holistic, upgraded hotel spa on a trip last autumn to the Marbella Club in southern Spain. Low-rise whitewashed buildings, set in a pretty, rambling garden of bougainvillea and mature trees, housed suites of muted hues, rattan and florals. In the light, bright wellness spaces there were treatment rooms and a studio for yoga or, in my case, a Tibetan singing bowl ritual (a weightless, rather spectacular experience). Here, Paloma Ruiz, the hotel's nutritionist and wellness coach, weighed me, asked a series of insightful questions and tested my

"bioenergetics" to identify my body's sensitivities and intolerances via the pressure of my hand on a brass plate – which was exactly as odd as that reads.



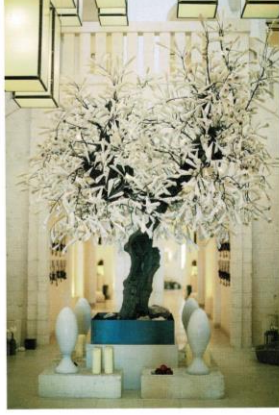
"Wellness is what we do – our goal is to make people happy"

The resulting advice prescribed herbal medicine drops, breathing exercises, visualisation and meditations, but also Pilates and green smoothies and, helpfully, was followed up with menu plans and recipes on my return to London, including one for Thai green vegetable curry.

Next year, the hotel will host a retreat with a transformational breath coach, Rebecca Dennis, who uses breathwork to target "the emotional, physical and nutritional imbalances associated with key body systems that are the underlying cause of many health and emotional conditions", says Ruiz. "All the foods we consume and thoughts that we create affect our function in a positive or negative way."

For some hotels, the focus on wellbeing is part of a wholesale guiding ethos. "Wellness is what we do," says Borgo Egnazia's owner Aldo Melipignano. "Not just in the spa. Our goal is to make people happy." Egnazia's architecture and design do much of the heavy lifting: attractive traditional Puglian townhouses leading off a central piazza evoke a village, while almond trees, jasmine and even cacti (demanded of every spike) lend softness to the landscaping. And if the poolside scene – where a singularly well-dressed international crowd in Eres swimwear and excellent sunhats tote Goyard bags full of sun lotion and Kindles – is anything to go by, Melipignano is succeeding in personal satisfaction. And not only with his guests. "Our wellness programmes start with the people who deliver them," he says. "We have physical and mental wellbeing classes for our staff and a very healthy approach to our staff food."

Melipignano gently nudges guests towards feeling good. And in everything a particularly Italian idea of wellbeing is prioritised. "We wanted to incorporate wellness into everything we do," he says. "We guide people to eat well in our restaurants, not just what's fresh, but in how we combine ingredients to respect healthy nutrition. We guide people to be active by providing bikes to ride to the beach, and there's a social component in our fiestas in the piazza." These fiestas are characteristic evenings of live music (including an uproarious Puglian gypsy band), food stands serving wood oven pizza, and candlelit, shared tables. When I visited with my husband, the fiesta was in



celebration of the tomato harvest. "All these components – eating well, moving, enjoying time with the people you love – contribute to the concept of the Blue Zones too."

"It's about sustainable change," says Blue Zones Retreats' chief design officer Jake Glover. "Binge exercise or dieting is not sustainable. Everyone in hospitality wants to be wellness-focused, but Borgo Egnazia was already looking at how we correlate the mind-body experience. The aesthetic is earthy rather than glossy. It's not just about eating plants; the decorations are plants. You're not overwhelmed by a 72in TV in your room. You're outside, in the natural spaces, finding out who you are. The culture in Puglia – growing and cooking your own vegetables, the focus on family, on relationships – all reiterate the Blue Zones principles."

"The pace of the world is faster and faster," says Melipignano. "People are looking for ways to step back. I'm doing a management programme at Harvard Business School and we have classes about mental wellness and meditation. It used to be that you did a retreat in the Himalayas to learn about these things. Now it's taught at Harvard. We're witnessing a shift from the information age to the health age." Which means that soon it won't seem the least eccentric to find yourself lying on a massage table in a room of the Como Metropolitan hotel as Qi Gong healer Per van Spall vigorously cleanses your chi. "Don't worry," says van Spall, with a twinkling smile. "It might seem odd, but you are going to feel amazing." A personal reassurance, but also an effective expression of this brave new world of hotels and holistic wellbeing: a little out there but, at times like these, maybe just what we need. ★

SOUL SEEKERS

Charlotte Sinclair travelled as a guest of **Elegant Resorts** (elegantresorts.co.uk). Five nights at **Borgo Egnazia** (borgegnazia.com) on the Blue Zones Longevity Retreat, November 18-23, including full-board accommodation, flights and private transfers, from £4,950 per person. **Aman Hotels & Resorts**, aman.com. **Anantara Kihava and Niyama**, anantara.com. **Belmond**, belmond.com. **Bodhimaya at The Lanesborough**, oetkercollection.com. **Equinox Hotel Hudson Yards**, equinox-hotels.com. **Hacienda de San Rafael**, hacienda.desanrafael.com; the next Lu Jong Retreat in Seville takes place March 15-19, 2020, and can be booked at malabar-retreats.com. **Intercontinental Maldives Maamunagu Resort**, ihg.com. **Marbella Club Hotel**, marbellacub.com; the next Transformational Breath Retreat with Rebecca Dennis takes place January 29-February 2, 2020. **Per van Spall** holds regular residences at Como Metropolitan Hotel, comohotels.com. **Royal Mansour Marrakech**, theroyalmansour.com. **Six Senses New York**, sixsenses.com.

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From top left: **Anantara's Niyama resort in the Maldives. The Hacienda de San Rafael in Andalucía. The Borgo Egnazia hotel in Italy**

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