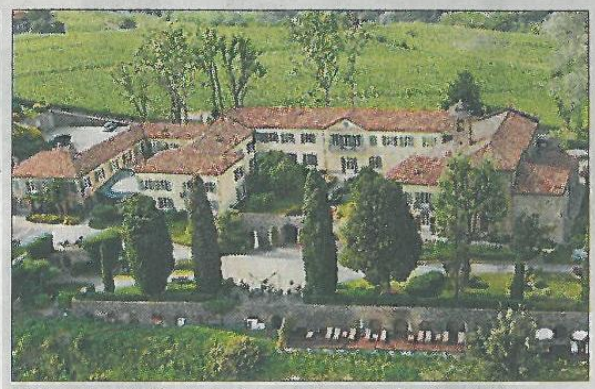
The Daily Telegraph
23 August 2010
C: 678,391

Spa spy

Our health sleuth investigates the curative claims of wellbeing retreats worldwide

RELAIS SAN MAURIZIO, PIEDMONT, ITALY



Blissed out: the spa has salt pools in the cellars

The spa In the vine-covered hills of northern Italy sits a converted 17th-century monastery, now a 31-room hotel overlooking the pretty medieval village of Santo Stefano Belbo. Dug out of the original cellars, its contemporary medical spa, La Via del Sale, is named after the ancient salt route on which the hotel is set. Fittingly, its 11 treatment rooms are based around a salt grotto with two pools, each with a higher concentration of salt than the Dead Sea.

The symptoms A recurring trapped nerve in Spy's neck has left the shoulder area tight and tender. Spy's skin is looking dull and stressed.

The prescription An hour and a half spent relaxing in the two high-saline baths (free to guests), followed by the signature salt and honey massage (£100 for an hour).

The procedure Spy spent 45 minutes floating in the magnesium-enriched first bath which, as well as relaxing muscles, helps reduce water retention. After a wobbly start – you have to completely relax, not splash around in a panic – it felt nicely therapeutic. After 30 minutes in the second bath – which overlooks the hills from an arched window – filled with a sodium solution for skin renewal, Spy was blissed out. This was followed by a body scrub with salt to exfoliate. The therapist rehydrated Spy's body with an all-over massage using a honey oil.

The verdict An all-round, much-deserved pick-me-up. Spy's painful neck was released from its aches and pains for the first time in a long while. Meanwhile, Spy's skin was left unbelievably soft and smooth.

The medical opinion "Seawater, as used in thalassotherapy, creates an anti-inflammatory effect evident in the stimulation of the immune system," says Professor Umberto Solimene of the University of Milan medical school. "Salt baths are good for the muscles and spinal cord. In the water they are relieved from the pressure of gravity."

The feelgood factor Just an hour and a half from Milan, and with its panoramic views over vineyards and medieval villages, this is the perfect location for a relaxing weekend away. Not only does the hotel have a Michelin-starred restaurant, but this area of Piedmont is known for its truffles and wines such as barolo, barbaresco and muscato. You'll be hard-pressed not to discover a trattoria or winery with tasting sessions.

The details Doubles at the Relais San Maurizio (0039 0141 841900, www.relaissanmaurizio.it), from £230 per night. Packages, inc food and wine tours, also available. EasyJet (0905 821 0905, www.easyjet.com) has return flights next month to Milan Malpensa from Gatwick, Bristol, Edinburgh and Luton, from £38.

Telegraph subscribers can book a spa day or stay at a Champneys resort and choose an additional treatment free. For details, visit www.telegraph.co.uk/subscriber or call 0843 316 22 22

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