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Salt spray. But it's nowhere near the ocean

An Italian hotel specialising in salt, honey and truffles

By Jenni Frazer, August 19, 2010

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Tea on the terrace of the Relais San Maurizio, the former monastery

Pay attention: this is a story of salt and honey, of wine and chocolate and truffles. Oh, and donkeys. In the 17th century, high up in the mountains of Italy's Piedmont region, above the village of Santo Stefano Belbo, lived a community of monks. Their monastery clung to the hills of the Ligurian Appenines, surrounded by the vines and truffles of the valleys. They had migrated from Provence and built the monastery in 1619, bringing with them their knowledge of wine-making.

By the mid 1860s there was a dissolution of the country's monasteries and the monks left, to be succeeded by an aristocratic family who turned the monastery into a stately home. During the Second World War, the village became a base for the Italian Resistance and, by degrees, the monastery fell into disrepair.

But the mayor of Santo Stefano Belbo was keen to revive the property in some way. Enter retired banker Pier Domenico Gallo, village born but a longtime resident of Milan. The mayor wooed Mr Gallo, who was both a foodie and an admirer of Cesare Pavese, also born in Santo Stefano Belbo and one of Italy's most venerated writers. In 1998 Mr Gallo bought San Maurizio and has spent most of the time since turning the one-time monks' HQ into a five-star boutique hotel, with a Michelin-starred restaurant, Da Guido, attached.

Not content, however, with becoming a member of Relais & Chateaux, Mr Gallo has opened a spa. And this, as the M&S adverts have it, is not just any spa. This is a deeply, thoroughly luxurious spa, dedicated to health and well-being, through water, salt and honey.

You will see almost no sign of the spa as you finally make it up the hairpin bends of the mountain, and glide through its crested iron gates. Mr Gallo decided long ago to put everything modern below ground level. The effect is rather like going into a lavishly preserved country house, comfortable in a shabby chic kind of fashion, as though you were entering the home of a very rich, old friend. Perched high up in the grounds is a beautiful outdoor pool, with views of grandly crumbling castles, vineyards and fruit orchards.

Getting there

Relais San Maurizio (www.relaisanmaurizio.com; 0039 0141 841900), closes Dec to March. Packages include 3-night Midweek Summer Escape, with breakfast, one lunch one dinner and a half-day at the spa with one treatment, a wine-tasting and airport transfers from 1400¤ per person, based on two sharing. Other programmes include Successful Ageing, the Truffle Experience and dedicated spa programmes

But set into the mountain is the most contemporary of spa suites. The spa is called La Via del Sale, or the Salt Path, and is thought to be almost unique in Italy. For its signature massage treatments, the spa uses seawater, sand and seaweed, deliciously combined with honey. There are 11 treatment rooms, a couples' suite with a Jacuzzi, a gym, an indoor pool with massage jets, a Turkish steam room, a sundeck and, at the heart of the spa, the Salt Cave, with two saline pools each with a higher concentration of salt than the Dead Sea.

Acting entirely on your behalf, I took a honey and salt massage. First, one is scrubbed with salt, and then drizzled with fragrant honey. It is, I can report, a sensational treatment, even if you do develop a distressing tendency to lick your elbows later.

So much for one's outer wellbeing. It was time to cosset the inner woman, and this is an ideal location from which to do it.

The three key products of the region are chocolate, truffles, and wine. Nearby Turin is the chocolate capital of Italy, holding a glorious cocoabean festival every autumn. But more familiar chocolate products - Ferrero Rocher and Nutella - turn out to be local specialities.

Nearby Alba, the regional capital, is pretty much Truffle Central. Everything that can possibly be done with this fungal delicacy, which I am happy to note is kosher, is done in and around Alba.

Every year the town holds a White Truffle Fair, and this year's the 80th, runs from October 9 to November 14, enabling visitors to stroll the pedestrianised streets of the centre while sampling every sort of "truffle with..." combination. There will be chefs and a truffle auction. Economy note: the prized white truffles sell for around £1,600 a kilo. (And no, that is not a misprint.) But even if you don't go for the truffles themselves, do try the region's truffle oil which can transform a boring salad into something really special.

The town, by the way, is awash with gourmet shops, selling wonderful packages of high-grade pastas, oils, vinegars and, of course, wine.

The entire region is a mass of vineyards, whose best-known products include the Barolo, Barbaresco and Muscato wines. One of the newest wineries - the award-winning La Spinetta - has an instantly recognisable rhinoceros logo. It has a tight list of 14 wines and is a frequent destination for wine-tasting drop-ins arranged by the hotel. Nearby Asti, just north of Alba, is, of course, the home of Italy's best-known sparkling wine, Asti Spumante. But these days, there is a marked preference for more upmarket fizz such as a good prosecco, or local wines made by the Champagne method.

And one should not forget the donkeys. They are due to make their annual appearance this year on October 3, in Alba's comic version of the internationally famous horse race in Siena, the Palio. Alba's version, the Donkey Palio, sees locals dress up either as elegant 13th-century noblemen or scruffy commoners, each declaring his allegiance for the donkey running (or should that be more like standing still in the street, yawning loudly and refusing to move) for their district.

Whichever you choose, chocolate and honey, truffles, wine or salt, there is something to relish in Piedmont. Make your move soon.