

**Travel: Less is more**

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By bJacqueline Meredith

TALK ABOUT JUST desserts. Or even no desserts. The thought that crosses my mind as I contemplate the stale spelt-bread roll and teacup-sized serving of watery spinach soup that have been placed on the table in front of me is that – finally, inevitably – it's payback time. Not very many years ago, I worked for a spell as a travel editor. The day-to-day job was typical of any deskbound section editor on a national newspaper, but oh my Judith Chalmers, the perks! Suffice to say there were more than a few first-class trips to luxurious spa resorts and five-star hotels, where guests were primped, polished and utterly spoilt to a ridiculous degree.

This latest travel assignment is a very different thimble of broth: now, with nothing but the metallic tang of anxiety in my mouth and the god of schadenfreude laughing over my shoulder, I'm facing six days of culinary deprivation and tough love. Will it be bearable?

On the short air-hop from Munich to Klagenfurt, in a tiny plane buffeted by the mountain winds, the stewardess had offered each of the dozen or so passengers a small bar of Lindt chocolate with their coffee. It was savoured during the 50-minute flight: I knew there would be no such lavishness where I was bound.

Viva Mayr is a cutting-edge detox retreat, a unique mix of medical clinic, hotel and high-spec spa on the Alpine shore of Lake Worthersee, southern Austria's scenic and balmy riviera region. Imagine a spotlessly clean and modern Bupa hospital furnished from Ikea and you'll get the aesthetic. Behind the clinic, beautiful pine-forested hills rise up sharply, with iced-gingerbread cottages straight from the pages of Heidi perched on their verdant slopes, down which streams and waterfalls trickle and tumble to join the vast, glass-smooth lake.

The "Mayr cure" was simply but meticulously devised, just over a century ago, to do wonderful things for the human body by addressing and then "mending" its invariably neglected or overburdened digestive system. Numerous ailments, ranging from stress burnout and eczema to obesity and chronic bowel problems, are treated here, though most of its regular guests come to give mind and body a complete break once a year and restore the sparkle to their eyes, the spring to their step.

Looking around, I can see that it works. Whippet-thin women and men aged from mid-twenties to sixties (though the great majority are 40-plus and female), with flat tummies, poker-straight spines and glowing complexions are testament to the effects of the Mayr detox. But adapting to this way of eating, even for a few days, is hard.

The idea is to give your digestive system a holiday, even if to begin with it does seem like a holiday in a prison camp, thanks to the Spartan nature of the regime. On rising each day, you drink half a pint of warm water in which cleansing Epsom salts have been dissolved overnight – it's the equivalent of pouring Cillit Bang down your kitchen sink, in that it serves to give the pipes a good clean. You then administer (in your own en-suite bathroom) a session of dry skin-brushing and a special ten-minute detoxing mouthwash, followed by a hot and a cold shower, all of which helps to boost the blood circulation and lymphatic system and,

supposedly, to eliminate toxins from the whole body.

Within the hour, breakfast is eaten in the lakeside restaurant. This always involves the dry spelt roll, whose staleness has a specific purpose: it teaches you to chew each mouthful 50 times, no less, which properly stimulates saliva to aid digestion, slows down your eating and lets the body, rather than your busy mind or kitchen clock, tell you when you've finished. Other elements on the menu are sheep's milk yoghurt (cow's milk is harder to digest thanks to its lactose content), a soft-boiled egg, herbal tea with honey, or rice cakes with a soft spread of sheep's milk cheese laced with fresh herbs. Guests dine here three times daily, within set hours. At lunch there is beautifully prepared meat, fish and poultry in tiny amounts, served with steamed vegetables, dressed with cold-pressed oils such as pumpkin, olive and flaxseed, and mainly non-wheat grains. Everything is organic, seasonal, fresh and delicious. Surprisingly, salad and fruit are off the menu: raw foods apparently work the digestive system hard, so are not ideal when attempting to detoxify. Dinner, over by 7:30pm, is the lightest meal of the day. Gentleness is all – vigorous exercise is discouraged during detox (I am delighted to hear).

On the first night, the bed in my room feels worryingly hard and my stomach unfamiliarly empty, but I sleep like a pine log. Day two is the proper start of my detox and involves a mix of vigorous and relaxing treatments in the spa. These include a blissful rose-scented body scrub, a facial and a reflexology session, then a breathtakingly energetic Shiatsu massage from a burly blond boy called Gerfried who's as tall and broad as a barn door, and whose shovel-sized hands find knotted muscles in places I didn't even know I had. All the staff here are cheerful, serene and touchingly devoted to your wellbeing – and it's refreshing to note that gleamingly healthy though they all are, they're not all supermodel thin; some you might even describe as chubby.

I mention that only because what's very different about addressing your health concerns at Viva Mayr is that there is a complete absence of judgmental attitude or body fascism. Yes, the doctor who gives you your impressively thorough health assessment may announce (as in my case), "There is too much fat", but it's not as if I didn't already know that and the point is to help me change that situation for the better, not admonish me for it, or induce feelings of failure or inadequacy at not being a size ten. At first I feel slightly gloomy about my prognosis (what foods my body reacts badly to, why my thyroid gland and metabolism are both sluggish, what to do about the excess histamine in my system, and more besides), but everything is treatable and here I am surrounded by people whose job it is to positively support and advise me. It's an eye-opening realisation, admitting just how low down your list of daily priorities is the act of properly caring for your own body on a holistic level. We eat too much, eat too much rubbish, and eat it too fast at the wrong times of day or night. We work hard, but don't rest accordingly or for long enough.

Here, rest is important, be it dozing in your bedroom, walking in the nearby pine woods or chilling out in the spa. There is a chlorine-free infinity pool to swim in, steam rooms, a warm light-therapy cabin, a saline-mist room, a lakeside outdoor sauna with daybeds that overlook the calming blue water.

What there isn't at Viva Mayr is a sense of urgency, excessive chatter, background noise or the intrusion of news or telephone calls from the outside world. Although I experience a very unpleasant "low" on day three – vivid dreams, dragging tiredness, a thumping headache and waves of mild nausea, all normal symptoms of an extreme detox – this is the most relaxing and therefore most luxurious break I think I have ever taken.

By the end of the stay I am several pounds lighter, glowing from every pore and feeling as bouncy as Tigger on a trampoline. Three months on, my eating habits are vastly better and I've lost another 20 pounds. My skin is clearer and brighter and I no longer retain water around my joints. I have the same physical energy I had in my early twenties and, having almost completely given up eating sugar, am far less irritable and prone to mood swings. All this is quite humbling and astonishing to someone who had almost given up hope of being able to shed excess weight and adopt a life-changingly healthy diet that feels not like deprivation but like giving myself the best present I've ever had.

I'm saving up madly and planning to go back in a year's time. And what's most telling, if you need any further convincing about the Mayr cure's effects, in spite of all its harshness, is that my mother and at least eight of my friends are all desperate to come with me.

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