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Wowed by the waters at Lake Garda

A luxury spa with lakeside views provides plenty of healing opportunities for a 'tired and frazzled' **Christina Patterson**

Jesus walking on water was a nice idea that went a bit far. You can, however, see why you might want to. There's something about a vast expanse of water, particularly when it's as smooth and still as glass, and particularly when the sun is sparkling on it, or the moon is hovering over it, or mist is rising up out of it, that feels as if it's drawing you in. You can see why you might feel that you too can be part of that beauty and calm. And that there's a special magic in the water, and if you can only touch it, you too will have magical powers. But if Jesus was feeling a bit tired and frazzled, and a bit prone to melodramatic gestures that might make him feel silly afterwards, he should have done as I did, after a fraught week and an embarrassing stand-up row at work, and taken a long weekend at Lake Garda.

If Jesus had had a couple of nice G&Ts on the flight to Verona, even though it was rather early in the day, and gazed down at the Alps – which look, from the air, like the sugary peaks of a massive lemon meringue pie – and if he had bought a delicious prosciutto panino at Verona airport, while thinking about Romeo and Juliet, and then sat in the car and gazed at funny-looking Italian retail parks, then pretty houses, then crenellated medieval castles, then mountains, and then, from various points around it, the giant lake, I'm sure, like me, he'd have felt the stress of the week float away.

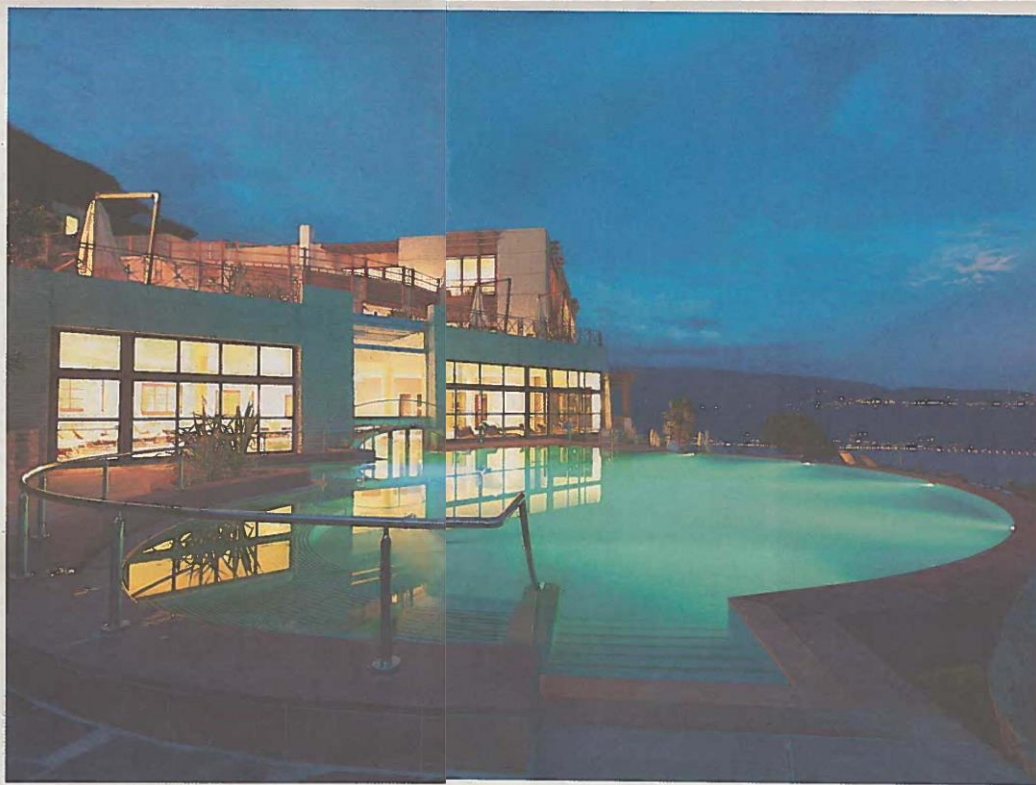
I'm not sure what Jesus thought of spas. I'm not absolutely sure that I think of them, either. I'm not sure, for example, that it makes much sense to talk of "eco-sustainability" and "environmental wellness" in connection with a place where you pass your days in much greater luxury than you do at home, and use way more hot water, linen and towels. I'm not at all sure that you can call a place that has a big outdoor pool that's as hot as a bath, and whirlpools, and Jacuzzis, and mini lakes to float in, "eco-" anything, though it obviously helps if the energy that runs them is, as the hotel says, "renewable". But I'm sure that Jesus would have been impressed by the setting. The Lefay Resort and Spa is built into the hills that rise up behind

the village of Gargnano, on the north-west coast of Lake Garda. When you sit on the balcony, and sip a nice "welcome drink", or in the restaurant, or in your room, or on the terrace of your room, or almost anywhere in the resort that has a window, or in its grounds, you see a vast vista of water, fringed by mountains.

I think if you spent a long weekend gazing out at that view, noticing how the colour of the lake changes with the changing light, and how the snow on the mountains sometimes seems to sparkle, and sometimes doesn't, and if you took in the cypress trees, and olive trees, and lemon trees, and the terracotta roofs of the village below, you would probably feel a kind of healing, even if you didn't do anything else. And you *can* do plenty of that at Lefay. You can do it over breakfast. You can do it while wandering round the very pretty grounds, or while lolling in your bathrobe on a lounge and you can do it while floating in its spectacular outdoor whirlpool. But there are plenty of other things you can do, too.

You can, for a start, collapse in your very comfortable bedroom, which, like the rest of the resort, uses things like Italian walnut, and olive wood, and marble. In a way that feels both smart and chic. (Elsewhere, the decor sometimes tends towards the fussy, in the way that some Italian clothes do. Italian design, even very expensive Italian design, is very rarely minimal.) You can, thanks to a clever wall of window in the bathroom that can be covered with a blind by the modest, have a bath and still gaze out at the lake and the mountains. You can hit the spa, or the bar, or the gym, or the running track, or the "energy and therapeutic garden", or do a yoga class, or a "postural gymnastics" class, or a "water Pilates" class, or you can, as I did, collapse in front of the giant, flat-screen telly. And then, of course, you can hit the restaurant.

Some people take the view that if you're in a spa, you should probably try not to eat too much. I take the view that if someone else is happy to cook something for me, I'm going to eat as much of it as I can. In the Grande Limonata (which lives up to its name with lots of real lemon trees) offers the opportunity for serious overeating, with seriously good food. There are low-calorie options available at each course, which are perfectly pleasant, though



'Pretty much all the food that comes out of the kitchen is delicious'

I can't help thinking there's nearly always a correlation between calories and taste. There are also traditional Italian, and regional, options. And, fatally, there's a buffet. The buffet, which offers "garden colours and flavours", is meant to be an alternative to a starter, but it's very hard not to pile up your plate. In addition to cold meats, seafood, and cheeses and the freshest mozzarella I've ever tasted, there's a fabulous array of salads and vegetables, but by the end of the weekend I actually found myself looking forward to a plate of stuff that was largely green. On its own, that would be fine. I followed, each night, with excellent home-made pasta, a main course (which, strangely, wasn't as good as the other courses) and a stupendous pudding.

Guilt was slightly assuaged in the morning, with a pre-breakfast run which turned into a shrieking, panting walk. I suppose you can't expect a running track on a mountain to be flat. It was, however, enough to work up the ghost of an appetite for a top-notch breakfast. Here, as with all the meals at Lefay, you could stick to the principle of "la leggerezza nell'essere" which, I think, has something to do with the "lightness of being", or maybe

the unbearable lightness of being, with fruits and yoghurt and nuts and seeds. Or you can hit the hearty breads and wonderfully fresh patisserie. Lefay prides itself on its fresh, seasonal ingredients, and pretty much everything that comes out of its kitchen is delicious.

After grappling with the Internet (which, for irritating eco-ish reasons, isn't Wi-Fi, but involves cables, broadband and changing settings on your laptop which, when I got home, I couldn't undo), I was ready for the lake. Or at least for a genteel amble along a tiny bit of it.

The hotel has a shuttle bus that takes you down to Gargnano. It's fantastically pretty, and seems to be based around a charming marina, and some lakeside terraces dotted with those old-fashioned wrought-iron lampposts and orange trees. The houses, which are built in the Venetian style you find in great swathes of Italy, are painted in pale greens, light terracottas and pastel pinks. There are little Juliet-style balconies, little bridges and lovely little beaches. I ended my walk on the outdoor terrace at the Albergo Gargnano, where DH Lawrence stayed with Frieda in 1912. I ate a light lunch, and sipped a spritz (the traditional aperitif of northern Italy) while gazing out over the lake.

Once back at Lefay, it was time to hit the spa. There are, in addition to the indoor and outdoor pools, five different saunas, all decorated in their own distinctive way. There's an "aromatic" sauna, which is meant to help your breathing, a "bio" sauna, lined with olive wood, which is meant to help your circulation, a traditional Finnish sauna, which is meant to help with skin problems, and a steam room, which is meant to help with that old spa standby: stress and "detox". There's also a "lady sauna". Having discovered that you're not allowed to wear swimsuits in any of the saunas, and that the "ladies" are a lot more scrupulous with their towels than the men, I can see why you might want to use it. But they're all jolly relaxing, and the smells, in all of them, are delicious. Best of all, however, is the outdoor saltwater pool. If not exactly the Lake of Galilee, it's probably as near as you get to on a hillside by Lake Garda. It's deliciously warm and the views are spectacular.

I was booked for a session in a "saltwater lake", which turned out to be yet another little pool, down some steps and under a massive lampshade which looks like a giant moon. I think you're just meant to float in it and then relax on one of the loungers around the edge. It was certainly relaxing – even

Travel essentials

Getting there
Christina Patterson travelled with Kuoni (01306 747008; kuoni.co.uk), which has three nights at Lefay Resort & Spa for £797pp, including accommodation in a prestige junior suite with breakfast, and BA flights from Gatwick with private transfers.

The nearest airport is Verona, served by British Airways (0844 493 0787; ba.com) and easyJet (0843 104 5000; easyJet.com) from Gatwick; Ryanair (0871 246 0000; ryanair.com) from Stansted and Edinburgh; and Monarch (08719 40 50 40; flymonarch.co.uk) from Manchester.

Staying there
Lefay Resort & Spa Lago di Garda, Via Feltrinelli 118, Gargnano, Brescia, Lombardy, Italy (00 39 0365 241 800; lefayresorts.com).

More information
Italian State Tourist Board: 020-7408 1254; ItalianTouristBoard.co.uk



Lap of luxury: (clockwise from main) one of the pools at Lefay Resort; a bedroom at the hotel; lakeside elegance; Lake Garda at sunset APPYGETTY



if the decor did make me feel a bit as though I was in a Santa's grotto hijacked by the Filmstones – but I was beginning to think there's only so long that you can spend in different types of water. Much more fun was my session with the "Chinese doctor". He, it turned out, was Italian. Chinese medicine was, he said, all about the *emozioni*. So what, he asked, was going on with mine? I gazed into his soulful eyes and launched, in Italian, into a massive soliloquy which seemed to take in every calamity that had ever beset me. He nodded kindly, took my pulses and prescribed a massage called "scambio nel vento". Which you could roughly translate as "a change in wind".

I don't know if it was the *scambio nel vento* massage I had the following morning, which was one of the most delicate and soothing I've ever had, or if it was the "face energy massage" I had in the evening, or if it was the afternoon that I spent lying on a lounge, in brilliant sunshine, pretending to read but actually gazing out over the lake, or if it was the excellent food, or the very good wine, or if it was the session with the Italian Chinese doctor, or if it was just the break from work, but by the end of my long weekend at Lake Garda, I felt much, much, much, much better. If he ever does come again, Jesus should try it.