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**bespoke**

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# FROM HERE TO SERENITY

The ultimate relaxation break, Italian style

*Timothy Barber*



**I**F YOU'RE in search of serenity and soul nourishment, may I heartily recommend heading up one of the mountains that fringe Lake Garda in Northern Italy, arriving at the top in time to catch a slow, ruby sunset over the lake. On a cloudless, crystalline autumn evening – and there isn't any other kind around there – it's a showstopper.

To add heavenly, slack-limbed indulgence to the mix, take in the same, blazing view from a mountain-top infinity pool with water so warm you blow can holes in the steam as it fogs around you. As night falls and the air temperature drops, lie horizontally on the pool's jacuzzi "bed" and watch the stars shimmer out. Then paddle back inside – naturally, an automatic gate opens to an indoor pool without you having to leave the water – before zoning out in a herb-infused steam room.

The place to bask in such boundless requiescence goes by the name of Lefay Resort and Spa, an unobtrusive complex in an eagle's nest above Lake Garda's endless western shoreline. It was founded six years ago by a local industrialist family who one likes to imagine were first planning a villain's lair before having a change

of heart; such is Lefay's sleek architecture and inaccessible location.

Every inch of the resort is built to maximise the mind-blowing scenery and to minimise the idea that life should involve anything other than hovering in a bubble of fluffy-dressing-gowned snugness (and smugness, frankly). You'll feel yourself wafting around its airy expanses like a cloud, settling every now and then to recline in sunlight, be kneaded on a treatment table, sweat it out in the warren of saunas and steam rooms, or float into a state of tranquil emptiness.

The private terrace of each room faces east across the water towards ragged mountains that loom from the far shore; to the south, hillside lemon groves tumble away to the water's edge hundreds of feet below. You feel you can practically inhale these vistas, such is the shimmering, silvery freshness of the atmosphere – just being here is therapy in itself. But Lefay has more in its cupboard of therapeutic possibilities: it's essentially a modern take on the old-school alpine health retreat, with treatments galore and medical analysis on tap. And it's up to you how far you open that tap.

You have to open it a bit, and that means seeing a man

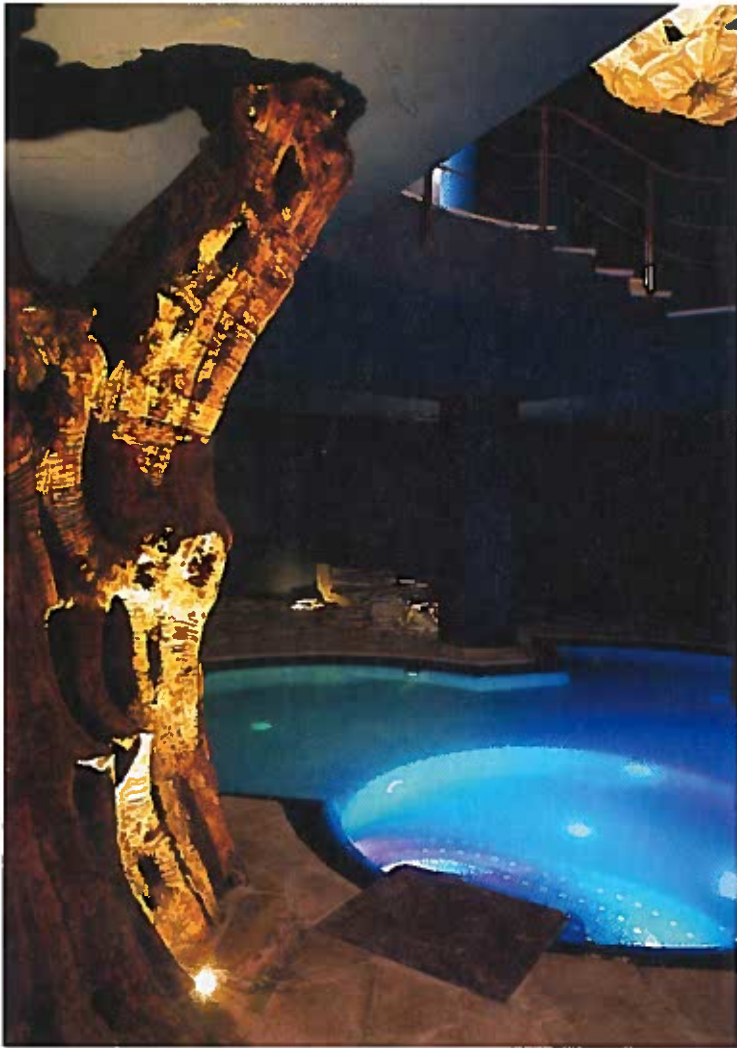


in a white coat. This is Professor Maurizio Corradin, a frowning, bullet-bald, bushy-eyebrowed chap who's just the sort you can imagine dishing out ascetic cures and strenuous treatments in the health spas of old. In fact his expertise lies in Chinese medicine and acupuncture, and after a few questions (via a translator – even though I got the impression Il Dottorre spoke better English than his assistant doing the translating) and an inspection of your tongue and hands, he'll prescribe a programme of treatments aimed at sorting whatever he decides is ailing you. In my case, a slightly crook back and general work stress (yes, I know – diddums). As a kind of therapeutic bolt-on, he'll also recommend an appropriate herbal infusion that you're encouraged to take thrice daily during your stay. Tea and sympathy, basically, is the Lefay way, with the sympathy coming in all manner of mollycoddling massages and tranquilizing remedies.

Now one person's Ayurvedic healer may be another man's raving quack, but the nice thing about Lefay is that the Eastern/new age stuff isn't overplayed. While Prof Corradin's background in old Chinese theories apparently guides the treatment philosophy, you could easily not notice. The menu of treatments – massages,

facials, vibrational therapy, cosmetics, algae and seaweed wraps, baths, oxygen therapy, hammam rituals and various combinations thereof – is in fact pretty international, well-explained and beguiling, with a few esoteric quirks. Frankly, going a la carte could be as rewarding as following a prescribed menu, and you're welcome to do just that. Essentially, there is no end of ways to bliss out.

It's worth being a bit adventurous though, to satisfy either your curiosity or Prof Corradin's. I went in for a spot of "moxibustion" – something to do with applying heat to acupuncture pressure points, to very tingly effect. I was doused in seaweed and wrapped up; given a stress-busting massage that left me like putty. Another massage seemed to occur in frenetic fast-forward. Whatever it was, it was magnificent – but I confess I wasn't paying attention. My mind had switched firmly into "neutral", and stayed there. This is the point. I'd practically forgotten my name by the time I lolloped out into the real world, not to depart but to force myself out of the Lefay bubble for a morning to investigate the surrounds. The area is sensationally lovely but be careful to follow the hotel's directions: I first got enjoyably lost, and eventually had to turn back as the mountainside path I was following >>



➤ became more than a little treacherous.

Walking back, I found myself looking down on Lefay. It's more or less built into the hillside, with grass and vegetation spreading over its roofs. Next to the curve of the heated pool, there's a larger, unheated rectangular pool that sweeps out at sharp angles from the hotel itself. The architecture is sensible though, and not overwrought - that goes for the rooms too, which are light, calming, modernist and minimalist, each one with its own terrace.

Wanna diet? You can take a weight-loss programme here, but I wouldn't recommend it, because the food is as extensive as it is devilishly good. There are only 90 rooms at Lefay, and in the down season only a fraction of these are likely to be full (which is all the more reason to go now) but the place still has two restaurants and a bar, complete with cigar room; indulgence first, health second - a perfectly agreeable path to "wellness" in my book. The food is local and fresh and zinging with flavour, and will put any thoughts of diets well out of mind.

There's a gym too, but I didn't see anyone using it. If you don't go for a walk as I did, the most exercise you'll get is sauntering 20 feet from your room to the spa, or to fall asleep beneath the underground moon. That's right. A deep chamber below the spa has a shallow pool, above which a huge papier-mâché moon glows. Why? It's relaxing. And at Lefay, that's all the justification anything needs. ①

*Wellbeing Escapes offers various programmes and stays at Lefay Resort & Spa. A three night stay on the Wellbeing Booster programme includes breakfast, a personal consultation, three spa treatments and a private guided activity (yoga, pilates or qi gong), complimentary access to all spa facilities and group classes, accommodation in a junior suite and return flights, starting from £1,029 per person for two people sharing (based on travel in Oct 13) [wellbeingescapes.com](http://wellbeingescapes.com), 0207 644 6111*

*Above: A suite at Lefay resort  
Below: The underground chamber beneath the spa, in which hangs a papier mache moon*

