

# HEALTH *is* wealth



The swimming pontoon at Mayrlife on Lake Altaussee, Austria. Below The clinic's penthouse suite

'The Mayr' is the legendary Austrian spa where everyone from Naomi Campbell to Michael Gove (yes, really) goes for a reboot. So can the recently revamped 'wellness centre' turn **Sophia Money-Coutts** into a new woman?

"You sound high," my best friend says, after I send her a voice note from the world's most revered medical spa.

I'm definitely not high because all I had for breakfast was a rice cake with a smear of avocado mousse, and then I spent an hour in the colonic irrigation room. No judgment if you get your kicks from having a rubber tube inserted into your bottom before warm and cold water is alternately pumped up there ("to shock the bowels", explains the nice nurse), but I don't. Presumably I'm just delirious from lack of sugar.

It's day two at Mayrlife, the spa formerly known as Vivamayr, which has recently changed its name and rebranded to differentiate itself from its sister spa further south in Austria. Most simply refer to it as "the Mayr clinic", while devotees talk reverentially of "the Mayr". The first clinic was opened in 1974 but the principles behind it are much older, stemming from the moustachioed

Austrian physician Dr Franz Xaver Mayr, who developed a theory in the early 1900s that people were poisoning themselves by eating the wrong things.

Mayr's idea was very advanced at the time: the gut was the root of many illnesses and the "cure" was to massage and cleanse it. The same principles apply at Mayrlife today, with a heavy emphasis on cleansing and massages ("just a bit of gas", the doctor says happily one morning, as she kneads underneath my belly button and it gurgles like a newborn). Except they've gone even harder at the new clinic, with eight different programmes, including a post-Covid plan that focuses on the immune system and offers treatments such as oxygen therapy to give your lungs a kick.

The official brochure dubs it a "wellness centre" — and it's world-revered, so if you book in you may get lucky and find yourself buttock to buttock in the sauna with a celeb taking a break. Fans include the unlikely trio of Karlie Kloss, Naomi Campbell and Michael Gove. Rebel Wilson credits it with kick-starting her fitness journey. Another actor who visits every year calls it "Starvation Disney" because you eat very little but you do it in luxury.

I don't clock any celebs on my visit, but I do spot guests who look like they would ordinarily be chairing important board meetings or running countries, drifting about in slippers, dressing gowns and earbuds, occasionally hurrying to a nearby loo thanks to the dreaded "salts" they have been prescribed. A week starts at about £5,000 and climbs pretty steeply when you add on the extras such as "underwater bicycling" or a moisturising "goat butter" wrap. Nobody here is worrying about the cost of energy unless they run a FTSE 100 business selling it.

Before arriving, whenever I mention that I'm off to the Mayr, all anyone wants to know is how much weight I'll lose. We're not supposed to want to be thin these days and yet we remain obsessed with it. Actually the clinic says it focuses on "health", not weight. "Health is our most valuable asset," says a welcome booklet in my bedroom, presumably phrased in that way so billionaires will understand. And yes, yes, I've got a dodgy back and a sore hip, plus a digestive system that seems increasingly furious after a night on the wines, and I could pretend that I'm here to sort all those problems out. But also, sorry, my younger sister's wedding is two weeks away, so how much weight will I lose?

Day one, for all inmates, is spent largely in the medical centre discussing your bodily woes with an allotted doctor. Mine is a beatific German lady called Doreen, who puts me through various tests — blood tests, metabolic tests, pee tests, food intolerance tests — before talking me through the results. It turns out I'm a bit stressed (too many free radicals in my bloodstream),





**Below** The Mayr programme includes abdominal massages. **Right** A “distracting” walk in the mountains. **Bottom** Sophia enjoying one of her meals



could shift some fat around my waist (fair enough), have a UTI (joy!) and a tomato intolerance (news to me). Doreen smiles serenely as she hands me my treatment programme and medication plan — a bewildering list of vitamins and supplements, which requires me to take 16 pills every day. Plus a bottle of thistle and linseed “mouth oil”, which I’m to gargle and spit each morning to aid the detox process, as well as the aforementioned salts that everyone drinks to purge their digestive system. And let’s say no more about bowels.

Later I sit in the dining room having swallowed the first round of pills, waiting for my dinner. If you shook me I’d sound like a baby’s rattle, but that’s inadvisable because it would probably set off another movement. Whoops, sorry, there I go again. But it’s very hard to ignore your colon in a place where you spend so long discussing it with unembarrassed, unblinking doctors.

The food is good but there isn’t much of it. Imagine an airplane tray being put down in front of you, but all that tray holds is a bowl of watery broth and a bread roll so fibrous it could be used as a murder weapon in Cluedo. That’s dinner. Breakfast is another bread roll (or rice cake), along with two tiny bits of protein, like an egg or a slice of chicken breast. Lunch is the same as breakfast. No sugar, no caffeine, certainly no booze. I’m on a few hundred calories a day, and a polite notice on each table asks that you chew each mouthful “40 to 60

times”, in silence, with no distractions such as a phone or a good book.

“I will have the lobster, followed by the sirloin,” jokes a nearby American, who looks like Mark Ruffalo (is it Mark Ruffalo?), one lunchtime. The waiter laughs as if he hasn’t heard this joke before, when he almost certainly has because everybody develops a gallows humour during their stay as their body detoxes and they stagger from massage to foot bath to blood-letting appointment (literally — they let 100-200ml of blood and replace it with an infusion). “Can I have some more potatoes?” a Russian lady pleads on another day, in the manner of *Oliver Twist*.

Day three is the worst. I’d been warned that this would be the worst, peak detox, when my liver is working overtime to clean itself, and I have the mood swings of a Greek god. To distract myself I watch TV and scroll through Instagram until I see a food influencer making a bowl of pasta with Boursin, which makes me want to fling my phone off my balcony. I try to read a book (impossible), go to the steam room, engage in a ribald *Sound of Music*-themed text message exchange with a man I’m flirting with in London where I play Maria and he’s Captain von Trapp, but I don’t even have the energy for that. Instead I trudge around the lake to kill time until my next bowl of broth.

## I crack on my final day when I discover a cake shop at the end of the clinic’s drive



The setting is the upside. The distracting walks around the Austrian mountains are very beautiful and one day I cry when I spot a nearby glacier (although by this point, according to my urine test, my body’s in fasting mode, so this might have something to do with the tears). I swim in the lake every evening. I become a big fan of cryotherapy, marching for three minutes in a chamber set at minus 110C wearing gloves and a mad hat in order to speed up my metabolism.

The downside is the monotony. I crack on my final day when I discover a cake shop at the end of the clinic’s drive. (Why is there a cake shop so close? Is the Mayr management in on this?) There I shovel in a cinnamon roll while confused Austrians look on, bemused by a woman made hysterical by a sweet pastry.

I was rarely hungry, to be fair. It’s a pretty spot for a recharge, and I do feel much perkier and less tired on the flight home. I can see why — if you’re rich enough — you’d go back time and time again for a week or two of good behaviour. And one thirty-something financier who checked in after me had come — quite literally — straight from Glastonbury for her third spell in the clinic because it’s such a “good reset”.

“You’re so glowy!” a friend tells me at a party the night after I get back, where I tox my poor liver right up again with too much rosé (can’t kick the wine, but I might kick the tomatoes). I also lost four kilos, which I’m pretending not to care about, and my digestive system really is much improved. Calmer, less urgent. And I promise that’s the final mention of it. ■

*mayrlife.com*