

24-HOUR ROOM SERVICE

Palace Merano Alto Adige, Italy

On my arrival at the Palace Hotel, I passed Jacques Chirac departing with a trolley-load of Louis Vuitton luggage and a poodle under his arm. The foyer of this yellow and white belle époque building is vast, with huge chandeliers and expensive carpets. The air of opulent luxury is slightly undermined by the fact that most of the guests wander around in white fluffy bathrobes, wearing matching rubber flip-flops.

Within the hotel, the Espace Henri Chenot is a serious spa where staff wear white overalls and plenty of medics are in attendance. Not suitable if all you are interested in is a spot of bikini waxing and a few facials. It is frequented by Russians, Germans, Italians and French – definitely the place to go if you're looking for a wealthy bloke, if you can cope with being chatted up by someone seminaked who might need to shed a few kilos.

The hotel is in the shadow of the impressive peaks of the South Tyrol, on the outskirts of the charming small town of Merano, which has been a chic spa resort since the early 20th century. The climate here is particularly mild and, although the town is a ski resort, semi-tropical plants grow in the gardens of the hotel and its surrounds.

The hotel is well-placed for walking in the foothills of the Dolomites – if you've got any strength left after being pummelled and steamed all day long. Another of the hotel's attractions is that the food is utterly delicious. I have never eaten such interesting meals at a place dedicated to weight loss; each of the three courses at lunch and dinner were presented with all the panache of a Michelin-starred establishment. The food is mostly vegetarian, with no wheat and a small amount of fish. A beautifully photographed book of the recipes, written by M. Chenot's wife, Dominique, is on sale. Soya and rice flour are used to make pasta, there are exquisitely presented salads, a whole range of vegetable soups and risotto made with barley and spelt. It's highly inventive and gave me loads of ideas to try when I got home.

My fellow internees included businessmen, a top French professional footballer and his girlfriend, and a noted British actress.

Most people come for a week, and each day falls into a pattern after your initial assessment by a doctor. There are mineral baths,



mud wraps, powerful massages and a treatment involving electrical waves to improve your energy levels. Your stress level is monitored and you receive dietary advice with the option of attending talks on Henri Chenot's theories in the every evening, if you aren't already prostrate with exhaustion.

I managed to lose 2.5kg in five days. I arranged my regime to leave afternoons free for walks along the well-signposted routes surrounding Merano (the best time for this is

in spring or autumn), and to visit attractions, including the gardens of Trattmansdorff castle, which stretch over 12 hectares and were voted Italy's most beautiful garden in 2005.

LOCATION

Espace Henri Chenot, Palace Merano, Via Cavour 2/4, Merano, Alto Adige, Italy (00 39 04 73 271 000; www.palace.it for the hotel, www.henrichenot.com for the spa). You can easily walk from the hotel into the centre, and

an excellent cycle and walking track along the River Passer goes right by the hotel. There are plenty of small shops selling walking and skiing clothing, a pretty theatre and a medieval quarter. If you exhaust the hotel's extensive spa facilities, the town's ultra-modern thermal baths (www.termemerano.it), with its 25 pools, is within easy reach.

Time from international airport: The hotel is an hour and a half's drive from Verona's Valerio Catullo airport, and can arrange transfers for €50 (£38) return per person in the hotel bus or €260 (£200) for a private limousine. Otherwise, a train runs from Villafranca di Verona, close to the airport, with a change at Bolzano, and takes just over two hours.

COMFORTABLE?

The rooms are luxurious, with well-appointed bathrooms and linen-covered duvets. The decor in my room, overlooking the garden, was a bit tired, but rooms are in the final stages of being redecorated with a new floor of suites that will feature panoramic mountain views. There is an extensive gym, an indoor and outdoor swimming pool and a large terrace for alfresco dining in spring and summer. The downside is that the bar doesn't serve alcohol – nor, indeed, does the rest of the hotel – but instead has a selection of designer teas. There is a swanky restaurant serving non-weight loss food, if you cannot face another day of no bread or stodge.

Freebies: Own-brand toiletries and a very good hessian bag with strong shoulder straps supplied by the spa to carry your kit around in, plus the flip-flops.

Keeping in touch: Pay-for broadband connection in all guestrooms, satellite TVs, direct-dial phones.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Double rooms start at €340 (£262), including breakfast. A seven-night "programme A" wellness package costs from €3,052 (£2,348) per person, full-board and including all treatments and consultations.

I'm not paying that: In the centre of Merano, the Park Hotel Mignon & Spa (00 39 0473 230353; www.hotelmignon.com) is set in landscaped parkland and offers doubles from €234 (£180), full-board.

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