

TRUTH IN TRAVEL

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The Doctor Will Take Care of You Now ...

Destination spas are offering head-to-toe checkups alongside shiatsu massages, giving *special treatment* a whole new meaning. **By Alex Postman**

“HMM—THIS IS INTERESTING.” Holding the ultrasound wand to my right flank, Dr. Harry König—whose athletic build and silvering temples read more pilot than physician—used his other hand to click a cursor on the grainy image of my kidney.

The head of medical care at Brenners Park-Hotel & Spa in Baden-Baden, Germany, *Herr Doktor* had been pressing me on everything from my sleep habits to my family cancer history. Now he studied the screen. “See how the right kidney is about three centimeters longer than the left?” He clicked back to the previous image. “And one end of it is denser. It’s probably nothing,” he said, giving my arm a reassuring pat. “If you were staying longer, I’d send you for a CT scan. But you might want to get that examined when you get home.”

An ultrasound is a routine part of Brenners’ Medical Care Total program, which had begun with the doctor offering me a cup of tea and my reciprocating with four vials of blood, followed by an unusually thorough physical (from posture assessment to lung-function test). The high-ceilinged exam rooms are sleekly decorated in creams and grays; in the nearby dental suite, a long glass fireplace is set to a constant flicker. Except for the gleaming white medical equipment, you’d never guess you were in a doctor’s office. Which is exactly the point—you’re on vacation.

IT USED TO BE ENOUGH to go to a spa for a salt scrub and a few yoga classes and maybe to squeeze out a couple pounds in a sweat lodge. But for the growing cadre of self-optimizing, data-loving wellness-seekers who think nothing of dropping a few grand to decode their DNA so they can stave off disease and decrepitude, pampering alone doesn’t cut it anymore. “It takes a tremendous commitment for someone to give up days of their annual calendar to go to a luxury boot camp,” says Alex Glasscock, founder and CEO of the Ranch Malibu, which in January began offering a nine-hour Integrative Lifestyle Physical (\$4,000 gets you diagnostics, including a hormone screening, an EKG, and a 90-minute meeting with an M.D.). “But the knowledge that a guest will come away with after this experience can add years to their life.”

Medical tourism is nothing new, of course, and Baden-Baden itself was a nineteenth-century mecca for European aristos and cultural elites (from Turgenev to Twain) seeking the curative boost of its mineral hot springs. Brenners, whose

main building is a 102-year-old Belle Époque structure overlooking the flower-carpeted banks of the River Oos, also encompasses the recently renovated Villa Stéphanie residential spa annex, previously a rehabilitation clinic. Its new program offers referrals to seven on-site experts in fields including gynecology, ophthalmology, cardiology, physiotherapy, and aesthetic medicine. A medical-care consultant helps patients navigate appointments and can follow up with them—and their own doctors—once they're home.

One challenge in launching the program, admits Brenners' managing director Frank Marrenbach, was introducing a hospitality mind-set to medicine, not exactly known for service with a smile: Staff are trained in tone and first impressions. "We teach them that we have guests, not patients," he says—roughly a third of whom come from outside Europe, including many Russians looking to bypass their creaky health care system. Guests going the medical route often stay at least five days, but one Saudi royal checked in for six weeks. Which raises the issue of cost: A checkup at Brenners starts at about \$675 and can run around \$3,800 for the Medical Care Total program, which is not covered by many insurance providers. But Marrenbach argues the value proposition: "You always pay for your car to be inspected," he says. "Why not your health? It's the most important investment you can make."

To swipe the metaphor, I was ready for my tune-up. On an intake form, I copped to chronic lower-back pain and seasonal low energy, and was curious to see what else the medical team would turn up. First, spa manager Hans-Peter Veit administered a bioelectrical impedance test, using a space-age scale to calculate body fat and muscle mass. (I was off the hook for a weight-loss program, but for most guests, Veit designs a workout and diet plan, which he dispatches to the chef of Brenners' Michelin two-star restaurant.) For my back, a physiotherapist gave me the "sling treatment," clipping me into a medieval-looking harness suspended from a platform by ropes and gently manipulating my legs and spine. (The pain source? Likely muscular.) But it was Dr. König who probed deepest under my hood.

"YOU DIDN'T THINK we were going to get so close, eh?" Dr. König asked. I was supine on an exam table, my knees folded to one side, with the



The pool at Brenners Park-Hotel.

Ready for Your Checkup?

Other medi-spas around the world perfect for the ...

CORPORATE ATHLETE

Known for its intensive boot camps, the **Ranch Malibu** tapped the California Health & Longevity Institute to create a one-day Integrative Lifestyle Physical. Do it alone or as part of the four-day R4.0 program, based at the Four Seasons Westlake Village. *\$4,000 for the day.*

WEIGHT-LOSS HOPEFUL

Medical titan Mayo Clinic steps off its home turf to pilot a Five-Day Healthy Living Program at the **Mandarin Oriental** in Bodrum, Turkey. Guests at this Aegean resort get a preliminary assessment, then can work with a coach to reach goals from weight loss to heart health. *From \$1,057.*

PERENNIAL DETOXER

Based on the disease-prevention therapies of early-twentieth-century detox pioneer Dr. F. X. Mayr, the Lans Med Basic at the **Lanserhof Tegernsee**—opened in 2014 in Marienstein, Germany—is a weeklong program, bookended by medical exams, in a sleek new monastic setting. *From \$1,640.*

HOLISTIC SEEKER

Six Senses Douro Valley in Lamego, Portugal, just rolled out a three-day Integrated Wellness program. Developed with a team of medical experts including Dr. Oz, it offers an initial health screening and counseling in digestion, sleep, and stamina. *From \$572.*

doctor lying on top of me. When he exerted his full force, my vertebrae cracked like buttons flying off a shirt. (An osteopathic treatment to realign my pelvis, he explained.) He examined everything from my tongue (for signs of stress) to my C-section scar (which can affect lower-back pain); we discussed how long winters put me on edge and my tendency to ruminate; he waved off my nightly glass of wine with a European leniency: "It's relaxing." Finally, a nurse took a Kirlian photograph of my fingers and toes, a 1930s technique that allegedly reveals your "energy emissions" (mine were pronounced perfect).

Yes, some of his methods were unorthodox, though holistic medicine is pretty mainstream in Europe. And arguably, as a fit fortysomething woman, I might not have *needed* an ultrasound to confirm that my carotid artery is (thankfully) clean as a whistle—Dr. Wanda Filer, president of the American Academy of Family Physicians, cautions that a vacation-style checkup "can involve unnecessary testing and anxiety." Yet, consider that in our profit-driven, treatment-focused health care system, the average doctor's visit lasts 20 minutes, often resulting in little more than a prescription. The attention I received to the nagging (if mundane) complaints of my aging body—the feeling that I'd been completely seen and heard—was itself surprisingly therapeutic. And to be given a glimpse into my future health felt like a priceless luxury.

"Everything looks good," Dr. König told me as we shook hands, "but you're a little hard on yourself. Have that kidney checked when you get home. Then follow up with me, okay?" ♦