

Daily exercise



Lots of massages



Swimming in the lake



Vivamayr, Maria Wörth, Austria



(A few) carbs on the menu



I went on a midlife reset retreat... Here's what I learnt

It's the detox clinic that says yes to potatoes, no to phones, and is adored by the A-list. Now Vivamayr in Austria wants to help you get through the menopause unscathed. Leah Hardy checks in

Photography
FRANZ GERDL

THINK ABOUT VIRTUALLY any high-profile, preternaturally perky midlife woman – Elizabeth Hurley and Claudia Winkleman, not to mention Naomi Campbell and Kate Moss – and they have one thing in common: they're all devotees of the world's most-revered health clinics, the Vivamayr retreats in Austria.

Each of them signs up regularly for 'the cure' – a one- to three-week programme of strict food deprivation, no booze, daily laxatives (of which more later – I *know*), gentle exercise, early nights and fresh mountain air.

So when I read that Vivamayr was now offering hormone and mind-body treatments

for a complete midlife reset, it seemed exactly what I needed. Family responsibilities, illness and hormonal issues had taken their toll. In May, a cancer scare (a terrifying false alarm) was followed by surgery that meant I couldn't go to the gym for weeks. A doctor then suggested I come off HRT. All my menopausal symptoms – sweats, flushes, insomnia – roared back, this time also with overwhelming anxiety. A hormone specialist put me on body-identical HRT, but I couldn't shake the gloom. I felt feeble, fat, tired and creaky. My skin had dried to a red, itchy crisp. At 56, it was as if I was on an inexorable downward slope. Could one retreat really turn it around?



Above Dr Fischer assesses Leah Hardy at Vivamayr's Maria Wörth centre. **Below** A dinner of soup and stale bread is served early



Getting started

I wave goodbye to my husband, children and the dog, and swap a busy family home for Vivamayr's clinic in the village of Maria Wörth, southern Austria. It's the cleanest place I've ever been, with the vibe of a private hospital. Although it's just 6.30 pm, it's dinner time, and I'm ushered on to a terrace overlooking a mesmerising turquoise lake and purple mountains. Vivamayr is inspired by Dr FX Mayr, an Austrian physician who believed that the gut was the seat of our ailments. He began offering fasting treatments in 1901, long before 'fasting' and 'the gut microbiome' became buzzwords that we're all familiar with.

At meals, guests are banned from reading, scrolling through their phone or doing anything that distracts you from chewing. Each

Dr Fischer – slender as a teenager, clear-skinned and bright-eyed – prods my tummy. 'Gassy,' she pronounces

bite must be chewed 40 times so saliva can start the digestive process. Mayr doctors believe that fermented foods and raw foods such as fruit and salad are hard to digest in the evening, hence their mantra 'no raw after four'. The menu is brief, and Vivamayr is teetotal. My supper consists of courgette soup and a day-old spelt roll (the doctors believe the staler the bread, the more you chew it, and therefore the better it is for you). I also choose two tiny extra dishes – a bowl of

VIVAMAYR LIFE RULES

- How you eat matters as much as what you eat. Chew food into a mush.
- Don't snack. Leave five hours between meals.
- Eat plenty of veg, but none raw after 4pm.
- Have protein at breakfast and lunch. Dinner is your lightest meal. Eat simple soups.
- Drink at least two litres of water and herbal tea a day, but not before or with meals.
- Eat 2 tbsp of cold-pressed plant oils a day. Linseed, hempseed and walnut are best.
- Exercise every day, but don't exhaust yourself.
- Carbs are fine. Eat potatoes or spelt, rye or brown bread every day.
- Wake, sleep and eat at the same time each day.
- Avoid all processed food.

hummus and some sheep's cheese mixed with turmeric and herbs. It's all delicious.

I head to my room clutching a mug of laxative Epsom salts, which I'm instructed to drink in the morning.

Each guest has a personal doctor. Mine is Dr Eva-Maria Fischer, a 39-year-old former GP and mother of two. She's as slender as a teenager, clear-skinned and bright-eyed. Vivamayr offers hormone and vitamin testing, but I've had mine done in London to speed things up. She says my hormones are now fine, but I'm deficient in vitamin D. She prods my tummy. 'Gassy,' she pronounces. She also says my liver is 'stiff'.

Dr Fischer asks about my lifestyle. 'Stress?' Loads. 'Alcohol?' Ditt o. 'Coffee?' Too much.

I'm initially prescribed starvation rations. 'Fasting is very good for you. But you will hate me.' Mayr doctors use a method called applied kinesiology, or functional myodiagnostics (muscle-strength testing), to diagnose problems. She sprinkles fragments of dried lactose on my tongue and asks me to hold glass vials before pushing against my leg. If they aren't good for me, my muscles will weaken, she explains. I'm sceptical. Dr Fischer tells me I'm lactose-intolerant (I hate milk, though I love cheese) and have too much histamine in my system, which can cause rashes.

I'm emotional when she asks about my surgery, and how I've found life overwhelming. She nods, and prescribes supplements and a bespoke programme of daily exercise, massages and detox treatments.

Detox diaries

For a week, I move between pricey treatments, a white-robed zombie, my mind blissfully blank. I love the massages – from energetic pummelling to soothing reflexology. But the exercise is life-changing. I'm terrified I'll hurt myself after my surgery, so personal trainer Gabriel takes me through a personalised bone- and muscle-building routine of light weights, sit-ups and squats, performed on a vibrating platform.

I also have transformative private yoga lessons in the garden studio that opens on to the lake. My instructor Mauricio spends most of the first session teaching me how to breathe. I realise I haven't taken a proper deep breath in months. Yoga is very important for menopausal women, explains Dr Fischer, as it strengthens and stretches muscles and lifts your mood. Research shows it can even reduce the number and frequency of hot flushes.

I have water-based treatments including a 'detox footbath'. It's pleasant, but I don't believe that toxins are really pouring out of my feet into the murky water. Next, hyperthermia, which Dr Fischer says is the toughest detox treatment Vivamayr offers. I lie on a plastic hammock over an electric heater, and am covered in a foil blanket and left to pour with sweat. I emerge an hour later, wobbly and exhausted. Detoxing is also supposed to happen via the daily laxative drink. But I dislike the, erm, explosive and

WHAT IT ALL COSTS

A single room at Vivamayr Maria Worth costs close to £200 a night. Shared rooms begin at around £165.

Two medical consultations, applied kinesiology diagnostics and three abdominal massages are compulsory. These cost just over £700.

Additional treatments are agreed between you and your Mayr doctor.

Massages cost £85, and the footbath is £45. An hour of one-to-one yoga is £125.

It's easy to spend £500 a day on treatments, and many guests spend more. The cost of my prescribed treatments, supplements and tests came to £2,581.46 on top of my room and flights, though all food is included and there's no bar bill.

Alternatively, book a package through healingholidays.co.uk. For a week's stay, sharing starts from £1,960 per person, with singles from £2,325. This includes transfers and the compulsory medical treatments.

unpredictable results and tip most of mine down the sink after the first couple of days.

Many of my favourite things – yoga-style exercises on the deck over the lake, swimming, reading, afternoon Pilates or Nordic walking in the pine-scented mountains – are simple, joyful and free, or included in the price. There's also an indoor pool, sauna and steam-room complex, a gym and an infrared cabin to aid muscle healing, plus bikes and paddleboards to use in summer, and snowshoes for winter.

After one morning of treatments, I plonk myself on a sunlounger and chat to other guests. Many are midlife women who are here because they feel similarly overwhelmed. A glamorous business consultant in her 40s tells me she's come because she 'couldn't stop crying and didn't know why'. Kate is an elegant 60-year-old property developer from Surrey. She's divorced, with three children. It's her third visit and, she says, she feels better after each one. 'When you're the person who looks after everyone, it's so lovely to be looked after,' she sighs. I'm warned that new guests invariably hit a wall part way through their stay. 'You'll hate everything and everyone, then love everyone,' says a seasoned visitor. Other guests include a handsome Italian actor, a world-famous British artist and an A-list make-up artist. I've just missed Naomi, though she's reported to have been 'charming'.

The hunger games

The lavish meal of my arrival day is soon a distant memory. Supper is a thin, tea-like broth and dried vegetable sticks. I struggle to sleep and wake at 3am. After three nights of this I tell Dr Fischer I'm too hungry and she swaps my evening broth for a potato-based soup. Small but perfectly formed lunches involving fish, potatoes and vegetables start to appear.

Even so, on day five, I suddenly feel cross and homesick. From my bed – early nights are part of the Vivamayr cure – I can hear laughter and the chink of glasses at the hotel next door. I ring my husband and denounce the idea of spending money on starvation and silly treatments.

Weeks later, I remain emotionally, physically and mentally stronger. I feel as if my stay put colour back in my life

Then something unexpected happens. On the morning of my sixth full day, I ping awake after seven hours' sleep feeling euphoric. I bounce down to morning exercise unable to stop grinning. 'You look well,' says Kate. 'I feel marvellous!' I tell her. I do. I feel happier than I've been in months and months. I realise, to my amazement, that I feel optimistic.

I have a last private yoga lesson with Mauricio. As we perform sun salutations, he suggests I envisage marking a circle of light



Above Leah drinks up at the retreat's herbal tea bar.

Below Enjoying the fresh mountain air and Lake Wörthersee

around myself and drawing it into my heart. A week ago, I would have sneered, but today I find it uplifting.

At my final check-up with Dr Fischer, she pronounces my liver 'softer'. I've lost 3lb – 'a start', as she says – and I'm far less bloated. My skin is clear and bright. My blood pressure has fallen from my usual 120/80 to 100/70, a level it hasn't at been for years.

Staying in a beautiful place and being cared for by smiling people will make anyone feel better, but weeks later, I remain emotionally, physically and mentally stronger. I'm more patient. I cope easily with things that made me hyperventilate with stress before. I'm far fitter and more supple. I feel as if my stay put the colour back in my life.

I don't stick to all the Vivamayr rules, but, most vitally, I exercise most days and love it. I'm addicted to yoga and Pilates, and feel my mood drop if I miss a couple of classes. I eat better, even enjoying salmon and spelt bread for breakfast. I still drink coffee and wine, but I also drink more water and try to fast for at least 12 hours overnight.

I've learnt that while HRT is essential for me, it can never be the whole answer to midlife woes. For the sake of my mind as well as my body I need to prioritise eating well, exercising and taking time for myself, even if that's just a walk with my dog. It may sound like common sense – it is – but when you're in a fog of family demands and ill health, it can be hard to know where to start.

Before I went away, I explained to my 14-year-old daughter that I was going to a strict detox clinic for work. She asked, suspiciously, if I was 'going to be brain-washed'. I guess the answer is 'yes'. ▀

