

# CALMING THE STORM

**THE INDIVIDUAL** Despite her ostensibly perfect life, a woman who feels a failure after suffering post-natal depression and completely changing from the person she once was

**THE REMEDY** Gentle nurturing at Europe's best-value Ayurveda resort Sonnhof

They called it 'the cure' at the spa. I craved it, but that also made me think of the Bob Dylan lyrics about staying up for days in the Chelsea Hotel. People flock to Sonnhof for its intensive detoxification and rejuvenation programmes, but I was here to banish the anxiety that arrived in my life like an unwanted house guest three years ago, when I was knocked sideways by post-natal depression not once, but twice. It terrified me, rising up like a macabre jack-in-the-box. That vicious internal voice mocked me relentlessly, telling me I was a failure and fraud, a pathetic excuse for a woman beside my dazzling elder sisters. Grief added an extra shot of misery as my mother died after an agonisingly long illness when I was pregnant with my youngest.

A combination of cognitive behavioural therapy and time had slammed the lid on the darkest depression, but the anxiety still jogged along beside me. Even during the lulls, when I walked a tightrope of happiness, I was wary of the moment it would pop up. Sleep, of course, was part of it. With two children under three – to say nothing of a teenager facing GCSEs and a pre-pubescent 12-year-old – sleep was a rare commodity. I'd wake at 4.30am with a stack of worries pressing on my chest. This was topped off with guilt, as from the outside I had everything: four sweet children; a publishing deal I'd worked a decade to earn; the full country-house fantasy of ponies, chickens and rolling gardens, and a husband who I truly believe is the best in the world. Admitting I felt like an utter failure made everything much, much worse.

My husband was patient, but since he lived with a weeping bag of nerves rather than the feisty party girl he'd married, he wanted me to be happy, and so sent me to Austria. Sonnhof specialises in European Ayurveda. I associated this holistic Sanskrit term with the Buddhist temples of India. Instead, I arrived at a hotel that looked like a ski lodge in the Tyrolean Alps with three inches of snow blanketing the frozen ground.

It is a curious mixture of calm Germanic order combined with copious bells and smells, including daily yoga and meditation sessions, a spa specialising in sophisticated Ayurvedic massages and a kitchen that majors largely in vegetarian food with the odd treat of Alpine cheese or salmon steak. Heat is central to Ayurvedic practices, so there are numerous saunas and steam rooms. Specialist Gaurav Sharma gave me a pulse

diagnosis and confirmed my constitution was pitta: prone to anger but courageous, with an aversion to heat. On the first day I was prescribed a full-body massage called Abhyanga, a herbal-clay sauna and late-afternoon Padabhyanga foot massage, followed by bedtime meditation – I was slathered in oil and sat there feeling self-conscious, surrounded by flagrant nudity. For the first 24 hours I was impatient. I fretted and frowned, pacing down corridors past Buddhas and joss sticks, feeling about as relaxed as a turkey preparing to be basted and roasted before Christmas. I pecked at the Ayurvedic salads, experimenting with cashew pastes and quinoa mash, and Skyped my kids, who complained they'd run out of Nutella. That night I fidgeted around my boiling-hot room before resentfully curling up like a Labrador in disgrace. This was never going to work.

Then something remarkable happened: I closed my eyes and slept. Ten hours of solid-gold sleep. By the second day I'd have renounced my family to move to an ashram if they'd told

me to. I worked through the full treatment menu, basking in heavenly Mukha Abhyanga, a massage targeting insomnia and anxiety, followed by time in the bio-sauna before letting my mind drift away in the Swasthya peace room.

During my nutritional analysis, the wonderful Malini

Häusleier, who is also a psychotherapist, told me I must include more beans and pulses in my diet and a daily tonic of saffron threads mixed with honey and warm milk. 'It will be the mother's milk you're lacking, but that you pour every day, year after year, into your children,' she said. Later, as hot oil was drizzled over my forehead for 30 minutes during Shiroabhyanga, I silently cried. Hot, fat tears ran down my face as I felt a thread that had been tangled up inside me suddenly pull tight, then release. For the first time in 15 years, I felt the same compassion for myself that I usually save for my children.

In just five days, Sonnhof gave me that precious gift of calm perspective. Sleep is easier. Anxiety is part of my character, but it's no longer the panther that stalked me, more like a domestic cat I can tame into submission. On the final day I walked in the hills, through whispering pines and fresh snow into the shrill, brilliant Alpine air. Being alone felt electric. I saw myself from a distance, not a failure now, but the heroine of my own personal snow globe.

## MY HUSBAND WAS PATIENT BUT HE WAS LIVING WITH A WEEPING BAG OF NERVES RATHER THAN THE FEISTY PARTY GIRL HE'D MARRIED

**BOOK IT** Healing Holidays (+44 20 7843 3592; [healingholidays.co.uk/condenast](http://healingholidays.co.uk/condenast)) offers a three-night Ayurveda Taster programme from £799 per person full board, including flights, transfers, yoga, meditation and two treatments as per the programme. Healing Holidays is the sole booking operator for Ayurveda Resort Sonnhof