

The experts... health



Is this the best medical spa in the world?

Daisy Finer's constant quest for the perfect health fix has led her back to a Spanish retreat that seems to offer it all



SHA Wellness Clinic, Alicante, Spain

ALTHOUGH IT OPENED six years ago, SHA remains the first spa of its kind in the world. Nowhere else offers such a showcase for the principles of macrobiotics, the cleansing and healing eating system beloved of Richard Gere, Madonna and Sting. And certainly in Spain, better known for its smattering of yoga retreats, there is no destination spa to match it.

Sleek, space-age even, the hotel's design is revolutionary in that it lends a chic edge to a medicinal core: a cool rooftop infinity pool; an aqua lab (pools filled with body-pummelling turbo jets); an organic hair salon; a tea lounge with an oxygen bar; a lecture room; macrobiotic cookery classes; and a library filled with health books. It's a far cry from the rather tired surroundings of Europe's other medi centres such as

Mayr & More, with its hilariously outdated interiors. But what makes SHA really stand out is that its principles aren't just rooted in the Japanese/Mediterranean fusion diet – which advocates eating wholegrains, vegetables, soya protein, seafood and seaweeds and avoiding meat and dairy products – but in an approach that merges cutting-edge Western science with ancient Oriental therapies.

You can try everything here, from genetic testing to discover what the future might hold (it costs about £3,300 and it takes a month to receive the results, although the real question is, do you really want to know?) to a sleep-recovery programme that combines diet, acupuncture and phytotherapy (the use of plants for medicinal purposes) to

deal with insomnia. There's a stop-smoking programme (very few places offer this, despite the need) and a range of anti-stress treatments, as well as the predictable though highly effective intensive-weight-loss weeks that include fasting days and colonics (during which nervous patients are instantly put at ease by the reassuring Rosie).

On the beauty front, all the pesky issues can be tackled: varicose veins, discoloured teeth, sagging necks, frownlines, sun spots. And, unusually, the massive range of scientific know-how on offer is balanced by some of the best holistic therapies anywhere: shiatsu opens the lid on your emotional landscape; yoga gently uncurls your body and mind (especially in conjunction with meditation workshops). There's



From far left: the rooftop infinity pool; the calm space of the reception area; the living room of the Royal Suite

also reiki, incredible reflexology and lymphatic drainage massage.

A stellar cast of visiting masters includes Karen Himlok, who used to run the holistic health programme at Chiva Som in Thailand, which really says something for SHA's pulling power. Chiva is perhaps the only other spa in the world where medi meets mindful with such a vast choice of therapies – but it takes a lot less time to get to Spain.

A treatment with Himlok is like no other. I'd travel to Beijing, where

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she lives, to see her again. Her methods combine cranial sacral therapy and qigong (a Chinese healing practice) with acupoint therapy, tui na Chinese manipulation and neuromuscular release. She is one of those incredibly special people with a gift for healing, who reads your body as if she can read your whole life. Even as she begins, and before she has even touched you, you can feel an energy in your veins – almost as if

Champagne was bubbling through them. The sense of calm she transmits makes you feel as though you are being bathed in love. Then, as she applies her elbow with thoughtful purpose on your solar plexus, your emotional storehouse, deep-seated memories are released that you didn't even know you were harbouring. It's not unusual for some of her clients to find themselves weeping. Others are simply relieved at finding the sore back they walked in with being wonderfully soothed.

Whatever your immediate need is, it shall be attended to, for this is the SHA ethos. It is a spa that aims to be completely bespoke. Your designated

doctor will discuss your wellbeing, take blood tests, and allocate you a schedule coordinator to ensure you are receiving the right therapies at the right times.

Guests arrive from all stages of life, with wildly varying needs. One woman is visiting following the death of her husband. Another has brought her daughter who, at the age of 16, has developed an autoimmune disease.

And yes, there are also stressed-out bankers who admit they have piled on the pounds and need to reassess their coping mechanisms. Some guests want to wear heels to dinner; others want to walk about barefoot.

Sadly, it is this very desire to help such a complicated and diverse range of clients that is SHA's undoing. Despite being open at weekends – rare in medi spas, with most becoming deserted on Saturdays and Sundays – its staff can't keep up all the balls they are attempting to juggle.

There are, for example, three completely different food menus with no dishes in common: no wonder it might take an hour for your lunch to arrive. You might be on the bio-light menu (the most palatable), but also off gluten or dairy. Some guests want more yoga, others would like the holistic therapies to be given more time (most massages are only 50 minutes long).

There is disappointment with the views of Benidorm, the hot, itchy-looking staff uniforms, and the fake grass on the terraces (isn't naturalness the very essence of macrobiotics?). And it is a sad truth that the guest relations manager is extremely busy. There are noise issues. There are problems with room service. Sometimes language is a barrier.

And yet if SHA was to get its game together, rally more staff in the restaurant, provide some emotional back-up for the wounded, then there wouldn't be a better, more encompassing spa in the world. Would I recommend it? It's expensive, but if you can afford it, go. If you are ill and prepared to commit to food that sometimes tastes disgusting, it's worth it. Meanwhile, let's hope this feedback filters through.

Healing Holidays (+44 20 7843 3597; www.healingholidays.co.uk) offers a seven-night, full-board stay at SHA Wellness from £2,880 per person based on two people sharing, including flights, transfers, treatments and consultations for the SHA Essence Wellness programme