

BACK IN THE GAME

THE INDIVIDUAL

A PARTY-HARDENED BUSINESSMAN WHO IS FALTERING AT A MID-LIFE CROSSROADS AND IS ON THE BRINK OF BURNING OUT

THE REMEDY

A WEEK-LONG INVESTIGATIVE PROGRAMME AT THE EXTRAORDINARY VILLA STEPHANIE IN GERMANY, ONE OF THE MOST FOCUSED MEDI-SPAS FOR LIFE-CHANGING DIAGNOSTICS

I always had a nagging feeling throughout my teenage years that I was going to die young. And although I am fit and have regularly played sport and gone to the gym, I have also adopted the habits of many a city-dweller, partying very hard while working equally intensely to keep climbing the career ladder. My life felt fast and it felt furious, as I often pulled all-nighters on a diet of booze and drugs and cigarettes. Thursday became the new Friday and then Wednesday became the new Thursday while Thursday continued to be the new Friday.

Then one day I woke up and realised my young head was on an increasingly aged chassis. My body did not feel as indestructible as I once believed it to be. My destiny was not James Dean's. In the summer, I had turned 50. And I was alive. And I realised I wanted to stay that way.

There were so many more things still to do. I had an incredible wife who I wanted to grow properly old with, amazing children who I love too much to sacrifice seeing grow up through idiotic self-neglect – little ones whose own little ones I'd like to meet one day.

Overnight the life of a 50-year-old became a lot more precious. The thought of taking back some control by sitting down with doctors to confess how I lived hedonistically while still holding down a job, which at times had been so stressful that great patches of my hair had fallen out in clumps, didn't seem like such a bad idea.

The allure of Villa Stéphanie – though spas of any kind are an antithesis to me – is that it's not just a place with medical undertones looking to effect healthy changes; it is a full diagnostic medical centre that also happens to be attached to a beautiful hotel. The staff are doctors but the techniques they utilise are not just based on existing technologies, such as we might encounter in the UK. Rather they are more progressive because they embrace ancient healing practices alongside the slickest and most modern machinery.

Then there is the introduction you get to the Captain America figure of Dr Harry König. He is the embodiment of the spirit of Villa Stéphanie: incredibly knowledgeable and professional, wildly friendly and with cartoonish good looks. Out with frosty British upper lips, in with terrific, megawatt-smile hugging. He conducts a thorough examination and third-degree questioning during which I manage to remember all the details of my health I so often hide from myself: a lifelong addiction to antacid tablets, bouts of skin cancer, alopecia, a broken sternum, hernias,

endless torn ligaments, a strange array of peculiar niggles, including ulcers on my eyeballs, and a stream of injuries from countless motorcycle accidents.

It is a factor of a rather British upbringing that all of this had been swept under the carpet until I was cross-examined by an astute observer – coupled with the fact that I knew there was no point trying to hide anything here.

The scrutiny continues in the medical centre with hugely detailed blood and other laboratory tests. A specialist in ultrasounds turns me inside out by reviewing every organ in 3D. My heart rate increases exponentially when he announces he's moving on to my lungs and then my liver. It is excruciating as I wait for the inevitable. And yet somehow they have survived a brutal battering over 50 years. It is not all plain sailing; there are polyps in my intestine, and a growth on my thyroid that needs further investigation. But the comfort of hearing it all is immeasurable, knowing the thoroughness of the investigations, knowing that I can do something about them. Interspersed with the medical know-how is a riot of acupuncture and vitamin drips, and a re-injection of blood taken from my own body to strengthen my immunity.

I am whisked from one immaculate white room to the next, being cared for by ridiculously efficient, healthy-looking nurses. One amazing doctor, a great animal lover, explains how she has successfully trained her dog to aid in cancer diagnostics at Villa Stéphanie; it's a mark of the level of innovation in the spa's medical practices.

During one test another doctor highlights my stress and anxiety levels. These are not words I use in my life, having grown up in an army/navy family who would consider such notions indulgent and absurd.

And yet after I finish my week here, sleeping in the beautiful rooms, having massages and salt scrubs and mud wraps, and eating healthy food, I feel markedly better than I have for an age, and, judging by the remarks of friends on my return, look a great deal better too. The preventative and corrective body and, ultimately, mind therapy has done its work.

The smoking is now a thing of the past, the partying greatly moderated. But most of all, the calmness and serenity I feel is remarkable. This not-rushing, not-leaping, not-sweating, not-racing, this lying in bed at night and waking in the morning with a heart rate on an even keel, well, this is something entirely new.

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