

A HOLISTIC ALCHEMY

Bringing Eastern and Western principles to the edge of next-generation technology, Azerbaijan's Chenot Palace Health Wellness Hotel is taking health into the future, in the most luxurious way possible.

by Lindsey Stern

It's the year 2018, yet it feels like 2158 at this otherworldly, five-star health habitat. Lying flat on our back beneath the DXA scanner – a dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry machine that measures bone mineral density (BMD) – a few non-invasive seconds is all it takes to be handed a complete snapshot of your bone health.

No, this is not the sequel to science fiction action film *Elysium*. This is the Chenot Palace Health Wellness Hotel Gabala, Azerbaijan, belonging to the very same Chenot group as the celebrated Palace Merano Espace Henri Chenot (it also has wellness settlements in Russia, Greece, Morocco and Kenya). Only it's bigger. Better. And more high tech. A lot more.

With a *modus operandi* that hinges on a holistic vision of the body, the Chenot Method specialises in preventative and regenerative treatments and products that promote health, healthy living and protection from premature aging.

And now Chenot has found its way to Gabala, a pretty but unassuming rural village, which, let's face it, has up until recently not been on the radar of many. But all that is changing, and the life-changing results from the groups' flagship property Palace Merano are now the holistic jewel of this previously quiet corner.

Henri and his equally prodigious wife Dominique Chenot have brought their successful model and elevated, amplified and superseded it here, introducing a dizzying array of technologically advanced toys from anti-gravity running machines, to vacuum and infrared treadmills, a Cryotherapy chamber, Biophotomodulation devices and Digital Infrared Thermal Imaging (DITI) machines that break down kidney stones and fat... the widgeits and whatchamacallits here can do anything.

Having had the pleasure to meet the founders at the Henri Chenot, Palace Merano, I'm familiar with the principles they've been perfecting for 45 years. But I'm not prepared for this blurring between artificial intelligence and biology. If Merano is the grand dame of detoxing, then Gabala is its revolutionary robotic cousin. But this is no outrageous show pony. This is a clinic with a top-notch team of pros. "The added value that guests get in Gabala," Dr Francesco Marotta tells me, "is all in its new technology."

Thanks to the short three-hour flight from Dubai, a whisk through the quaint Gabala airport and a 17-minute drive to the spa, you can now be engulfed in a fluffy robe and sipping on a

cup of digestive tea in virtually no time at all. It's one of the easiest journeys you'll make. Which is exactly how all journeys to rejuvenation should start.

Everything, from the imposing wooden chalet – the design of which is based on a super-sized ski chalet – to the modern décor courtesy of French interior designer Michel Jouannet (who also worked on Hotel Ritz Madrid and Belmond Hotel Cipriani in Venice) has a foot in the future. Everything, that is, apart from the green, clean surroundings: mountains covered in a profusion of kale-like vegetation, the crisp air and a bucolic manmade lake that could (almost) be real.

Proceedings kick off with a consultation and a bio-energetic screening that looks at the body's "vital functions" through resonance analysis technology. There's a great deal of waffly science, but the incredibly smart and highly informative Dr Francesco (who can talk the hind legs off an Azerbaijani mountain goat) simplifies things by saying that diet is all about "quantity, quality and timing." Like most things in life then. "The right diet," he adds "can help to reduce accelerated ageing."

"Exercise," he continues, "should be about longevity." Good news for those who don't believe in the "go hard or go home" gym philosophy: moderate aerobic and anaerobic exercise will suffice.

The bio-energetic test, using rods to measure your meridians, is conducted by Dr Evangelos Sofikitis who asks you to hold two metal prongs connected to a machine to detect imbalances and stresses in 35 different areas, from the adrenal glands to the liver, lungs and heart. An expert in evidence-based alternative medicine, Dr Sofikitis explains that the machine computerises thousands of years of Chinese medicine and, for the clinic, feeds into a belief in homotoxicology, which assesses the cause of disease as an accumulation of toxins.

My results are devoid of anything dramatic, but he looks me in the eye, bypasses my tough exterior and tells me kindly, but firmly to: "Stop being so sensitive." I immediately blink back tears. "You'll be fine, just stop letting people hurt you and breathe in turquoise – you like turquoise, right?"

Colour therapy is actually included in hydro-aromatherapy, one of the compulsory daily rituals part of the detox programme. A three-part toning and lymphatic detoxification treatment that stimulates circulation by exposing the body to water of varying temperatures, it involves a powerful jet bath with alternating rainbow coloured lights (focus on the turquoise), followed by a phyto-mud therapy, a warm, slimy, sulfury algae wrap that's a lot more relaxing than it sounds.

Daily massage – don't mind if I do – is also part of the programme with full body cupping their signature treatment. I'd fly half way around the world for these revitalising treatments, let alone three hours.

For skin tightening, the SKINeo system is a combination of ultrasound and electrotherapy that vibrates and tickles for anti-ageing action on the face, neck, hands, abdomen and buttocks. It's a firm favourite with stressed-out businessmen who regularly fall asleep during the treatment and then wake up and make enquiries as to where one can purchase this magical mechanism.

My most coveted toy has to be the Vacuum and infrared treadmill which burns a whopping 400 calories in just 15 minutes. Considering we were only consuming around 700 to 800 calories a day, that's pretty darn impressive. A neoprene skirt creates a vacuum effect with localised depression on the lower body which intensifies the exercise and boosts the blood and lymph circulation, while infrared rays activate microcirculation and increase vascularisation. It may sound like gobbledegook, but all you need to remember is: 400 calories in 15 minutes!

The 25-metre swimming pool is also a huge hit. "There's nothing high-tech about a pool!" we hearyoucry. Oh, but there is. Because this is not your run of the mill chlorine-infested, or even saltwater pool. The water here is treated with ozone, meaning the biodegradation rate of natural organic matter (NOM) is increased. In a nutshell, it's healthier, less odorous and more skin and hair friendly.

But what about the food? As minuscule as the detox menu is, lunches and dinners are served

in three courses, so you can at least pretend you're in a fine dining restaurant. The alkaline food is ingénue fresh and light, but still full of robust flavours. Breakfasts are beautiful berry concoctions followed by warm oats, quinoa or rice pudding; lunches entail vibrant vegetable camelloni or wild rice with coconut and stir-fried vegetables, while dinners include the likes of spicy tempeh with taccole, amaranth stew or surprisingly tasty burgers made from soy-free meat substitute seitan. Plus, there's plenty of (caffeine-free) barley coffee to go around. Losing weight is not the goal, but a side effect with Mr Chenot insisting that this is not a "baptismal-style purification" – but you're guaranteed to shift a few pounds.

You'll want to retire early which is no hardship given the gracious rooms with beds so comfortable you're likely to fall asleep as soon as your head hits the pillow. Once the initial fog of the first day or two lifts, you'll start to feel sprightlier and more inclined to partake in Pilates, lake walks and morning stretch sessions. For those with aches and pains, Neurac, an active treatment approach with a physiotherapist trained to use the Redcord suspension system, is highly recommended.

Does the Chenot Palace Gabala know the secret of life? They're certainly getting close. Plus, they're willing to spend a lot of money to get to the bottom of it. *The Rake* can attest that it offers one of the most metamorphic interludes out there. Even existential nihilists are known to have been converted. ■

For more visit chenotpalacegabala.com; *The Rake* was a guest of Chenot Palace Gabala



Chert Palace in Gabala is a destination health and wellness hotel that has been built exclusively to support its preventive and wellness programmes. State-of-the-art diagnostics allow medical professionals to assess the guest's wellness and create customised treatments.

