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la femme



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Azerbaijan is the latest trendy weekend destination for Dubai dwellers, and so I find myself booked into a retreat there that all my body-conscious friends have been talking about.

The retreat, at Chosro Palace Gabala, has a famous well-established sister resort in Milan, already popular with Euro A-listers and aristocrats, so word has spread the wild west about its second outpost in Azerbaijan and the 700-calories-a-day plant-based diet it serves. The thought of eating fewer than 1,000 calories a day strikes fear into the pit of my admittedly not too-ample stomach, but reduce it I must, so it's off to Gabala.

Chosro Palace looks like a trio of towering Swiss chalets, custom-cloak pretty with a wicker facade, set on an expanse of pine-covered hillside. Around that, there are dramatic 90-degree views of lakes and forest-covered hills that are forever changing colour with the shifting sun and seasons. After pondering the rationality of building a hotel a four-hour drive from the main airport, my perplexity evaporates on seeing this vision of loveliness — they definitely picked the right place.

The disco, artfully assembled by Michel Jourdain, the same French architect and interior designer responsible for the exterior, is at polar extremes to the stark clinic I'd imagined. Jourdain favours warm natural woods, a broad selection of plush magnolia sofas, custom-made, an open log fire and abstract, hand-painted art.



700-Calories-a-Day Vacay

Would you call a long weekend hankering after food in the isolated Azerbaijan hills a holiday? Spa-hardy travel writer Sarah Hootley Hymers checks in to a health hotel in remotest Gabala to discover the effects of deprivation — and comes home zig lighter



• Dinner, however, is not my concern. Currently, food is all I can think about. I have a fear of being hungry, and right now my stomach is emitting more horrific screams than a 5-rated horror movie. Periodically, I realize that I discover that both the bar and room service offer only health drinks. Having traveled straight from Baku without a bite, breakfast was the last meal I had. It's now gone.

"Tomorrow," I tell the man behind the bar, "my programme starts tomorrow."

But there is no club sandwich here, and no convenience store within miles. I beg for solids. I'm given fruit and instructions to wait until 7pm for dinner — and so my dinner, despite my best efforts, begins.

Day One: Consultations and Compote

Lunch and dinner must be ordered a day in advance, so last night's meal was not to my choosing; simply tastes how I imagine Strydom might. I wake with breakfast on the beach. I'm served fruit compote — standard on the 700-calorie-a-day Active Detox programme that I'm following for the next three days. But I feel I'm either too or old too young for purged food, so request solid fruit instead and receive no objections — a small but buoyant victory.

With my stomachs get roaring internally, I treat myself for a series of expert consultations, all part of my package. Cheri Palace has appointment scheduling down to a fine art. No sooner does one session end than another begins, allowing maximum free time to sample additional treatments (suggested during consultations), to be purchased à la carte. On day one I see a doctor who recommends a blood test, a nutritionist who recommends a day of complete fasting during my stay (ha!), an aesthetician who recommends far too many treatments and a "biocenergetic" doctor whom I struggle to understand. They all politely pretend not to hear my growling stomach.

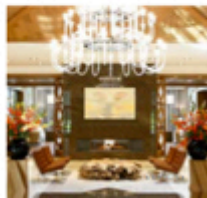
Lunch is a treat. The appetizer of poached pear, followed, indeed and geminated with a cinnamon stick and a scattering of red berries, looks like a Christmas tree decoration. Soup follows, and the main course, Japanese noodles with vegetables, is very a



"If we chew every morsel of our food, in that way we become grateful and when you are grateful, you are happy."

— THEO NEAL HANE

HEALTH WARNING
Certain medicinal diets such as the one our writer Sarah has tried are not recommended for anyone without prior consultation and supervision of their physician. Unfortunately, they are not recommended for long periods of time.



• much of my dressing. Finally, my stomach quiets down.

After lunch, my programme of treatments begins and I get a shock when I meet my masseuse and wow, can her firm hands pop out knots like a steam roller traversing bubble wrap! The Chien Detsu and energetic massages aren't at all sensual either, they're scientific. Electrodes and suction cups are employed to stretch flesh and contract muscles in a bid to "unlock meridians" (an unproven theory in holistic healing that posits a lack of energy flow can cause ill health). I feel an instant improvement.

Day Two: Mad, Baths and Firemen

Hydrotherapy is another daily cornerstone of the programme offered at Chien Palace. Knowing what to expect after my introductory treatment on-day one, I relax and thoroughly enjoy the process.

Finally, I'm put into a tub filled with multi-coloured lights, soaking in nutritious minerals, being pampered by jets. With the right music, this could be an interesting disco bath experience. Then lavender-scented fumes, my hydro-therapist, who makes what could be embarrassing — wearing nothing but oil-firing paper underwear while being pained with mud — seems almost normal, prepares me for the next stage. Chuckling all the while, rattling on about her holidays, she wraps my muddy body in plastic, settles me on a water bed accented with massaging jets working beneath the surface, and leaves me, under towels and a custom-made duvet, to sweat. The physiotherapist in the mud, how easy access to my body via my open pores.

The hour-long hydrotherapy session ends with a hose down in a room fitted with handle bars on the back wall, such is the power of the hose. It's certainly one way to get all that mud out of awkward places. I grip the bars, close my eyes and think of



**"I grip the bars,
close my eyes and
think of firemen..."**

— SARAH HEDLEY HYMERS

firemen. Lovely, lovely firemen.

At dinner, with the lights up bright, the resort's restaurant seems somehow louder. There are two dining rooms with villa guests and families in one, and room guests, couples and solo travellers like me in the other. Other than one business tycoon who makes deals on his mobile phone, we're a quiet bunch. Many guests hail from Russia, down by the familiar language (the people of ex-Soviet Union Azerbaijan speak fluent Russian with a mix of their mother tongue, Azeri).

I pop in headphones and Google "bioregistry" — despite having another session today, in which a heating device was placed on various points of my body, I still don't understand it. Apparently, it's akin to acupuncture, but rather than needles, electric pulses stimulate the body's pathways to get "energy flowing correctly". Okay.

Despite the heat, dinner is the best meal of the day, managed mainly with pasticcini, sushi and almond soup and beetroot and cauliflower steams. When consuming only 700 calories a day, everything tastes so much better.

Day Three: Diet Revelations and Homework

I'm struck by the realisation that the diet I've been consuming at home isn't doing wonders for my body, leaving me feeling grumpy. After just three days of vegan cuisine my skin is clearer, my eyes are brighter, and my recurring insomnia has vanished. I sleep like a log at Chien. The aches, pains and bloating I thought were natural disadvantages of ageing are not — The already healthier and stronger.

Not one grain of salt has passed my lips since I arrived. Condiments on tables include powdered chili, curry and



"Eating is one of the great beauties in life, one of my favourite recreations."

— LEROY NEUMAN

THE VEGAN SEASON

While eggs and vegetables don't lend the Instagram-friendly therapeutic glow associated with it, raw water like a smoothie, there is plenty of evidence that shows making a vegan diet can help with a host of physical ailments (if you choose the right food). Check www.health.harvard.edu/eatingwell for more information.





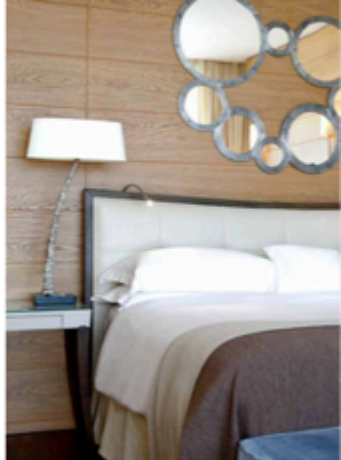
ments, which are much more exciting additions to meals. I must have drunk my body weight in herbal tea, surprisingly delicious barley coffee and fruit-infused waters. My food portions have reduced by half and I'm no longer hungry between meals. It's remarkable how quickly the human body can adapt to change.

I meet with all of my therapists for a final consultation and get some good news. I've lost almost 40g since I arrived – and I've achieved that with very little physical activity. Exercising on an extreme low-calorie diet can be draining, so I've just enjoyed a light morning stroll around the grounds and a dip in the beautifully set and surprisingly warm outdoor infinity pool (the indoor one is much colder).

I'm leaving tomorrow with the motivation to maintain my new healthy food choice habits and a comprehensive and bespoke aftercare programme to follow, created by my consultants. One day of eating vegan food per week and at least one 12-hour fast a month are the foundation of my new diet regime, and, surely, I'm looking forward to it.

The three-day Active Detox is available as a package deal. Conversely, additional days can be booked when further treatments are required. Private intensive treatments are available at cost.

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"I don't want to DEPRIVE myself of GOOD food!"

- SARAH MICHELLE GELLAR

AZERBAIJAN FACTS
This lovely nation, neighbour to Georgia and Armenia, is home to only 9.6 people. It also has a city built entirely around the North English legend an owl all day and is now known for achieving connectivity with hotels, shops and culture.

