

Spa breaks

# Pain and gain

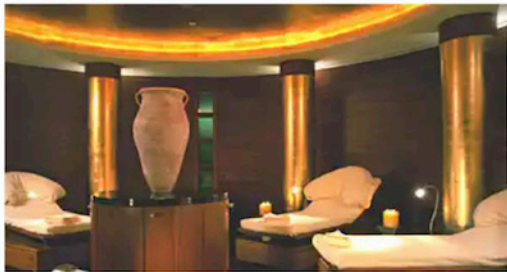
As part of a detox drive, Justine Reilly submits herself to an extreme makeover of the mind, body and soul, while below Carolyn Fry rounds up the UK's [top spa breaks](#)



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Justine Reilly

Friday 17 February 2006 17:47 GMT



Welcome break ... after a power walk along the Thames, the relaxation room at the Chancery Court Hotel.

I'm not normally one to be guided by the official calendar of events. You know how it goes - Christmas: drink yourself stupid and accompany with near-suicidal levels of cigarette smoking. New Year: panic about the year ahead and begin to wind down the party for the inevitable detox mission.

This year, however, convention had gained an early upper hand. "Detox and revitalise" were already on my agenda. I'd started weekly yoga - I'd even cut back to one or two drinks at the pub, rather than countless pints of toxic amber. But some part of me - perhaps the liver - knew this wasn't quite enough.

## Unadulterated detoxification

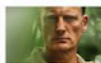
Armed with this corporeal knowledge, I embarked on a day of pure, unadulterated detoxification at London's Renaissance Chancery Court Hotel, a bastion of palatial grandeur on High Holborn. The building, hosting a decadent 12 varieties of marble, was once home to Pearl Assurance, which explains the hotel's "Pearl Bar", dripping with entire curtains of them, and typical of the elegance of the entire establishment.

It would be here, at this urban oasis, that I would hand myself over to be putty in the hands of skilled professionals, for an extreme makeover of mind, body and soul. First, a personal trainer at the hotel would put me through my paces on a power walk through central London. Then I'd be plunged into the depths of relaxation at the hotel's award-winning basement spa, for a well deserved Detox Body Experience.

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As I waited in the foyer to meet my personal trainer, there was time to confirm some niggling reservations: I'd never been to a personal trainer before. I had been to doctors - they'd told me my blood pressure was perfect. Yoga instructors said my chi was fine. Alas, a personal trainer may not be so forgiving. But my fears were soon allayed.

Chiraz Hasnaoui- a petite bundle of highly-charged energy whose repertoire of classes includes "Pump and Jump" (with trampolines) and Kangoo (involving shoes with springs) - bounded into the foyer armed with blood pressure measuring device and clipboard folder.

Chiraz spent time thoroughly getting to know what I'd been putting into my body and what I had - or hadn't - been doing with it. She measured my maximum heart rate, handed me some half-kilogramme weights and issued instructions in her enthusiastic Euro-voice. We would be pushing my heart rate up to "level three" - 80% of its maximum - and sustaining it there for the majority of the walk. This, plus a heel-to-toe walking action and correct posture, would be integral to burning enough calories.

### **Friendly but firm**

As we strode out in the direction of the Thames, I was surprised to find that walking could be so tough. Each time I showed signs of reverting to my usual manner of pavement pounding, Chiraz was on the case, with her friendly but firm advice. "Remember, heel-to-toe action! Come on, push the hips forward - tight bum!" came the calls, sometimes followed by her poking my glutes to ensure they were satisfactorily engaged.

As we started to cross the river, Chiraz told me we'd be pushing my heart rate up from level one to two. By the time we reached the South Bank, my feet and lower legs were beginning to feel like dead weights. But we were soon to break through my pain barrier and, as we pushed on to level three, we flowed into a hip-swivel action, which had me laughing on the inside as images of people in scoop shorts and Brylcreemed hair à la Kath and Kim made their way into my mind's eye.

As we neared Tower Bridge, it was time for lunges, sprints and push-ups on the steps of City Hall. Now I really felt like Madonna on a typical day out in London.

As well as covering much ground geographically, Chiraz managed to pack a lot of good advice into our 1.5-hour walk. But in her pragmatic way, rather than throwing facts at me, she'd ask questions. For instance, rather than saying, "Quit smoking," she asked how long I'd been doing it and whether I'd tried to give up. Her response was that if I had to smoke, I had to balance it with regular exercise. In a skilful display of psychological nous, by the time we returned to the hotel, she even had me considering the state of my arteries in 30 years' time.

Back at the hotel gym, Chiraz helped stretch my muscles back into their usual shape, while a pair of American businessmen lifted weights and utilised the hi-tech machinery. "Good for you," I thought - proof beyond doubt that something inside me was changing.

## Vortex of bliss

And so, time for my reward. You don't really have to go beyond the spa's reception area to feel relaxed. But through the next door lies the real vortex of bliss. The labyrinth of slate-tiled secret chambers was reminiscent of Castle Wolfenstein - but, when rounding a corner, rather than being confronted by a soldier with machine guns, you were met by a zen waterfall or some calming orchids.

After a quick spell in the sauna I was fetched and taken to the treatment room. Here I met my therapist, Renée, a fellow Australian who had come to this job straight from a stint in Dubai. She began with a "Padabyanga foot ritual", which involved bathing my feet in a bowl lined with stones and filled with water and tingly citrus oils, followed by a "Marmar" pressure point foot massage. She then invited me to lie down on the heated massage table for the preparatory salt and oil scrub, which served to make my skin feel cool and fresh. With the utmost discretion, I was directed to the shower to rinse off all traces of salt.

Back on planet massage table, a pan-flute version of Pachelbel's Canon wafted through the atmosphere (which I'm sure had all the right ions floating about in it). For an unknown quantity of time, Renée's hands corrected the mechanics of my body - decreeing that the evil demons of my lymphatic system be gone - as my mind was lulled into a state of peaceful emptiness. It was as if I was practising that "when one thought comes into your head, gently let it pass" meditation technique without even knowing it. Renée somehow continued to gently massage me and simultaneously make me feel like I wasn't being touched, nor could be, given that I was in some other realm - inner space, perhaps?

Finally, it was off to the tropical shower, essentially a spiral-shaped wet room with the bathing equivalent of Dolby Surround sound system. And, for the finale, it was time for a little lie-down in the Relaxation Room, where lush tropical fruits and a smoothie awaited my arrival, and the return journey to reality began.

After spending the rest of the afternoon indulging in my newfound bliss and hopelessly attempting to do some work back at the office, the key test remained: had anything changed?

## Change for good

The short answer is yes. Both Chiraz and Renée knew a lot about holistic health and both were keen to impart their knowledge to me. The short-term effects of my detox day have been clear - more energy and a lessened desire (both mental and physical) to fill my body with poisons. But some of the advice, particularly the stuff I didn't want to hear from Chiraz - about the need to do weights, cardio work and keeping your machinery well-oiled if you want to be cruising in your old age - has stuck. And some part of me, perhaps the better half, knows that a lot of it is here to stay.

### Way to go

Throughout February and March, the Renaissance Chancery Court is offering the "Alternative Fitness Weekend" for two. The price of £380 plus VAT, includes a twin or double room for one night, breakfast, a jug of ginseng smoothie, a Fitness Body Massage (55 minutes) each and one hour of power walking around the capital with on-site trainer Chiraz Hasnaoui. Subject to availability.

The "Detox Body Experience" costs £140 and lasts 1 hour 55 minutes. For those on a less extravagant budget, both the "Salt and oil scrub" and the "Rejuvenating back massage" cost £35 and last 25 minutes each.

For more see [www.spachancerycourt.com](http://www.spachancerycourt.com)

### Give me a break

Carolyn Fry rounds up the UK's top spa breaks.

#### The Club Hotel & Spa, St Helier, Jersey

Situated in a chic townhouse and open since July last year, the Club has 38 guest rooms and 8 suites along with a spa and Michelin-starred bar and restaurant, Bohemia. You can combine blustery walks along the island's rocky shores with a spot of new-year pampering courtesy of the Club's two-night spa break offer, which runs until March 1. The price of £749 for two people includes: a glass of champagne on arrival; two nights accommodation in a deluxe double or twin room including continental breakfast on both mornings; dinner in Bohemia on one night and the Club Cafe on the other night; plus a half-day spa package. 01534 876500, [theclubjersey.com](http://theclubjersey.com)

#### Seaham Hall, County Durham

Get down and dirty in February with a free mud bath when you book a stay of more than two nights for two people (Sunday to Thursday) at Seaham Hall. Located beside the North Sea in County Durham, the hotel is linked to Serenity Spa by an underground, water-lined walkway. The price of £99 per person per night includes a Rasul treatment at the spa and full English breakfast. If you've been over-indulging, you could also detox with a Karin Herzog Bodicial treatment. This medical, lymphatic drainage massage is designed to clear the whole system and costs £110 for 120 minutes. 0191 516 1400, [seaham-hall.com](http://seaham-hall.com)

#### Oxley's, Lake District

Book a stay at one of five-star holiday homes at UnderScar in the Lake District and get free access to Oxley's, a private Molton Brown health spa and bistro. The chalets have one, two or three bedrooms and lie on the lower slopes of Skiddaw Fell with views across Derwent Water to Scafell Pike. Oxley's is located within UnderScar's 40-acre estate of woodlands and formal gardens. Offering a range of therapeutic treatments based on winter reflection and regeneration, the centre has an indoor heated swimming pool, spa bath, sauna and gym. Prices start from £500 per week for a two-bedroom property sleeping four. 01768 775544, [heartofthelakes.co.uk/underscar](http://heartofthelakes.co.uk/underscar)