

Pampered in Prague and the spa town of Marienbad

BY BEVERLY MANN

Who would think I would be bathing in the same bath cabin as King Edward VII or luxuriating in a mineral bath frequented by such notables as Goethe, Chopin, Richard Wagner and Prince Friedrich of Saxony?

I was experiencing the royal treatment in the ancient spa town of Marienbad, (Marianske Lazne), a three-hour rail journey from the story-book city of Prague – where I later returned for further pampering.

As I passed peaceful farmlands, the train arrived at a pristine Shangri-la with Romanesque and Baroque-style edifices surrounded by tall trees and medicinal flowing springs. Most all of the buildings were painted pastel peach, yellow and white – soothing to the eye and mind. Some say that Marienbad is a city within a forest, as well as having a forest within the city.

There are 40 different mineral sources within this picturesque enclave and 100 mineral springs in its surrounding areas. Such American notables as Thomas Edison and Mark Twain, and a long list of royalty were enthralled with its medicinal effects and frequented this spa town over the past several hundred years. Certain illnesses and conditions that are treated here include urinary and metabolic disorders, along with gynecological and joint diseases.

The town's colourful history dates back to the 12th century when monks first noted the salted spring water. The name Marienbad first appeared in 1786. In 1865, it became a certified town. By the 20th century, one million bottles of mineral water were exported annually. Unfortunately, in the throes of both World Wars, Marienbad became downtrodden, but emerged again after 1989 when communism fell.

The Danubius Hotel Group has four luxurious spas for an individual to relax and rejuvenate for an average of a week to two weeks. I stayed just for a weekend in their newest complex, the art nouveau-style Spa Hotel Butterfly, the only one in the town and across from the park. The other three are more Romanesque and Baroque in style: the Nove Lazne,

Centralni Lazne and Maria Spa Courtyard. These three are all located in the heart of the city, connected by a covered promenade and featuring the oldest peat spa in Europe, and Roman mineral baths from 1896 with Tuscan, marble columns.

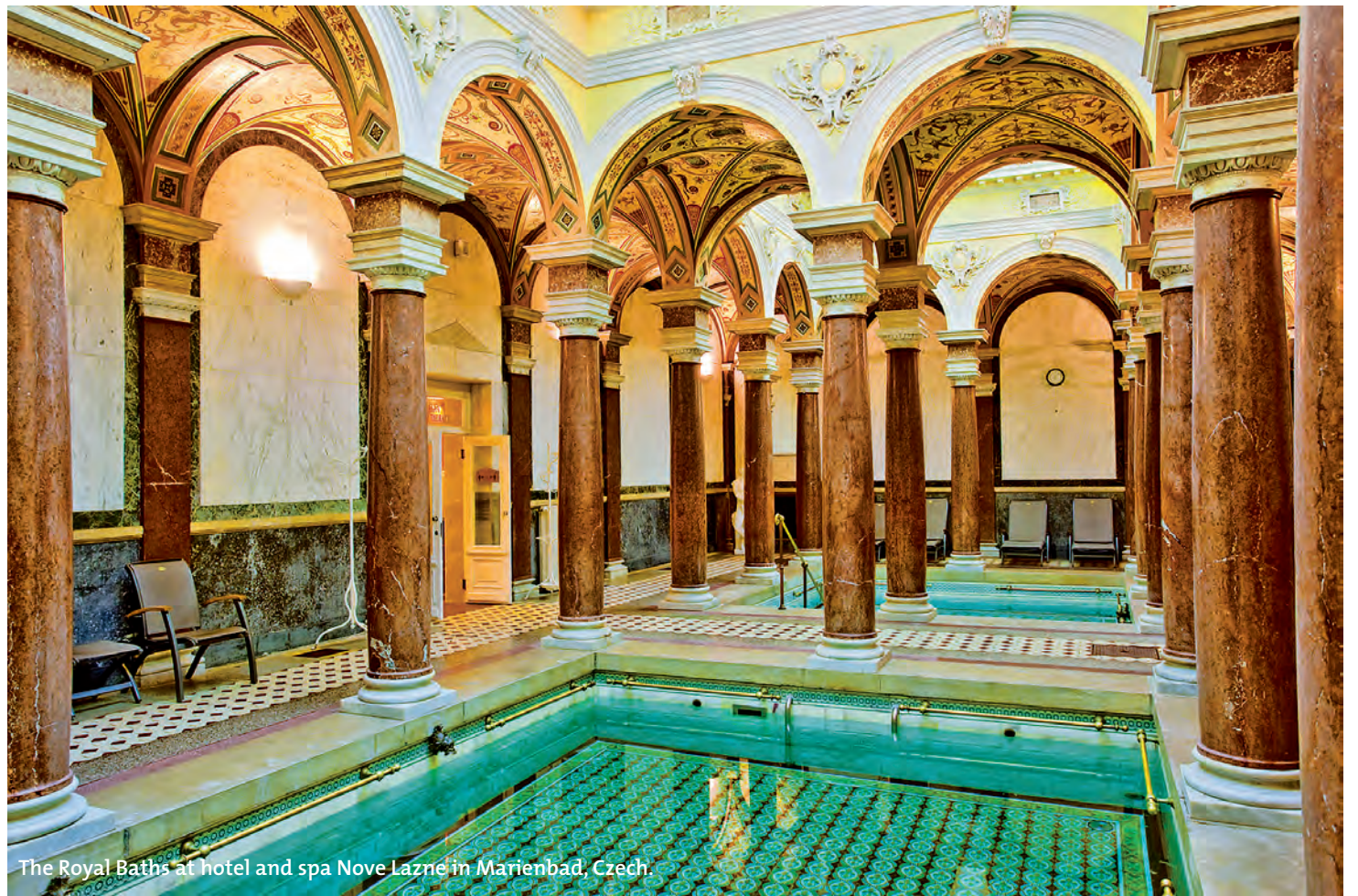
The city's main lure is the Lazenska Kolonnada, a huge gold-leafed colonnade with hand-painted murals on the ceiling and Corinthian columns built around eight of these springs. Visitors come with their own porcelain cup, or leave the cup on a shelf at the colonnade, if they are frequenting the springs several times daily. The cups have a built-in straw to allow the water to go down the throat without touching the teeth. This is to avoid mineral deposits on the teeth.

My first treatment was at the spas in Nove Lazne and Centralni Lazne. As part of an all-day spa pampering, I received a deep massage while being oiled down from head to toe. There cannot be any modesty here, because you undress in front of the masseuse, unlike in the United States where you have a bit more privacy to remove clothes and slip under the covers. The massage was followed by a peat pack to increase blood circulation in muscles and joints. My final treatment was to relax in a series of mineral baths.

All of this is reasonable, considering US standards. There are special packages for those staying several days to a week. At approximately \$150 per day, you get half board, which includes breakfast, lunch or dinner, and at least two treatments a day – a total bargain for the buck.

To complete the royal treatment, I had a healthful, tasty lunch back at the Butterfly Spa Hotel, which consisted of shrimp salad and a desert of farm fresh strawberries on tiny pancakes with whipped cottage cheese and cinnamon. The soft sounds of a harpist playing in the background and a flowing fountain added to my relaxation.

The following day, I had the most unusual natural carbon dioxide gas bath in which I was fully clothed, wearing spa slippers. During the treatment, I watched a film about the spa as an image of a muse appeared through the smoke screen – a bit



The Royal Baths at hotel and spa Nove Lazne in Marienbad, Czech.

Hollywood, I should say.

There are also doctors on board. I had a CO2 injection, which is supposed to help joint pain. I was told you need a least three treatments to feel an effect.

My final evening, I took a leisurely stroll to the Singing Fountain for a theatrical, music performance. Every other hour, the fountain flows in coloured lights, while playing Chopin and other famous classical works. Children and adults alike were in awe of the water spectacle on the evenings that I was there.

Back in Prague, I continued my pampering. Normally, I am cognizant of the dollar and try to find a boutique hotel. However, I realised that I could experience the royal treatment for just a bit more in Prague.

I stayed at the five-star Kempinski

Hotel, located on Hybernska 12, which was in walking distance from the main train station. Nestled in a neo-classical building, which was originally a Baroque mansion, the hotel prides itself in the Le Grill Restaurant, which offers a three-course meal for around \$40. I relaxed at the outdoor Winter Garden with a glass of wine after a day of sightseeing around the historic Old Town (Stare Mesto), where the famous glockenspiel or clock chimes on the hour. The main sights were only a 10-minute walk from the hotel.

A 60-minute massage spa treatment was also available for under \$100. My room included access to a jacuzzi, sauna, steam room and indoor swimming pool, all located in a nearby building. A fitness trainer was even available to customise a

workout during the stay.

I had dinner at the new CottoCrudo at the swanky Four Seasons Hotel located on Veleslavinova 2a. The restaurant's menu specialises in Italian and Mediterranean dishes from fresh seafood, homemade pasta, to artisan products from the Tuscany regions of Italy. The bird's eye view of the 14th century Charles Bridge and fairytale Prague Castle was my dessert. My quintessential palatial experience was when I walked over to the romantic Charles Bridge at sunset.

It was a magical moment that literally brought tears of joy, as I bathed my eyes in the vista of the golden Prague Castle illuminated in the distance. The outline of the medieval houses of the neighbouring Mala Strana (Lesser Town) framed the glistening Vltava River.

I almost had to pinch myself to know that this was real and not a painting or an illusion. As my eyes fixated on the castle, I thought of Mel Brooks's comedic refrain from "History of the World Part I," "It's good to be the king."

Or better yet – "the queen".

For more information:
www.czechtourism.com, www.marianskelazne.cz/en/turista/ or www.marienbad.cz

Beverly Mann has been a feature, arts and travel writer in the San Francisco Bay Area for the past 28 years. She has received numerous accolades in the fields of travel writing, education and international public relations, including a Bay Area Travel Writers Award of Excellence in Newspaper Travel Writing; www.beverlymann.com



The view of Prague skyline, including the historic Castle.



A customer enjoys a spa treatment and bath at the Nove Lazne Hotel in Marienbad.

The consummate traveller: The trials of travel and diet

BY MICHELE GONCALVES
EPOCH TIMES STAFF

Enjoying your meals is certainly a part of travelling – a HUGE part in fact for most people. I admit that I love food, and I look forward to seeing what culinary adventures I will face on my three-week business trips abroad. There is always something unique and interesting to try – whether it be a fluffy fantastic pastry, spicy sauces and dips, or creative meat dishes. However, trying to manage or (dare I even say) lose weight while on the road is something that I continue to struggle with.

About one month ago, I went on a vegan-eating plan for a few weeks to try my luck at getting more veggies in me, and hopefully shed some pounds in the process. I have been a carnivore all my life, but I wanted to try something new. While I didn't lose too much weight (thanks to eating too many nuts), I did shed some inches and was feeling pretty good.

My heart sank, however, when I looked at the calendar and saw that I would be leaving for my three-week business trip to Argentina – the MEAT capital of the world. Could the timing be any worse?

I packed my things, headed to the airport, and prepared myself mentally. I told myself that my goal

should not be about total avoidance of meat, or total indulgence, but rather finding that sweet balance of enjoyment while also maintaining my weight.

I am happy to report that I didn't gain any weight at all! With some pre-planning and a little self-control, I think I may have found a formula to help me stay on track, which I would love to share.

1. Enjoy a royal breakfast:

My strategy this time was to eat my largest meal at breakfast to hold me over until noon. Each day I balanced my plate with an egg dish, two or three scoops of sautéed breakfast potatoes, a filled-up bowl of fresh chopped fruit, and one, tiny wheat roll about the size of a plum.

The variety of protein and some carbs held me over until lunch. Frequently the room rate includes breakfast, which allows you to take advantage of this perk and keep budgets in check during a long trip.

2. Salads are king:

While I am grateful that there was a cafeteria at my company, each day seemed like Groundhog Day. The stars of every meal were some sort of quiche creation, grilled chicken, breaded and fried tofu, and sometimes beef.

Thank goodness, they had a small salad bar where I could load up on

tomatoes, lettuce, cabbage and other veggies to supplement the monotonous proteins offered time after time. I managed to feel satisfied with this combination, but not overly stuffed. This allowed me to enjoy a small dessert or to nibble on a few cookies that graced our conference room every day.

3. Eat dinner like a pauper:

In my opinion, I think this next point was the key to my entire success. For about 75 per cent of my trip, I ate a very light dinner. I brought along a large supply of pre-packaged snack bars; the only ingredients were dates and nuts. I ate two or three a day, along with a piece of fruit. Believe it or not, I felt fine and was not hungry.

This is not my usual repertoire while on a trip. Typically, huge dinners with my hungry colleagues are on the agenda. On top of that, Argentina is known for their late dinners (forks up at around 9 pm or 10 pm), which didn't fit into my evening plans and thankfully made it easier for me to do my own thing.

While I sacrificed somewhat during this trip, I did have some amazing meals that I will never forget. What I learned is that with a little planning, some self-regulation and strategising, you can in fact have a nice trip with no impact on your waistline.

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