

Your imperial majesty

Let a little Roman decadence rub off on you in Puglia's spa heaven



Honestly, I'm not the type to get hot under the collar about the world of celebrities. Granted, I may have glanced at a copy of *Hello!* from time to time – for the recipes, you understand – but the appeal of following showbiz types' every move has always struck me as an odd way to spend your leisure time.

That said, on hearing that I was booked in for a few days' pampering at Borgo Egnazia, a spa resort in Puglia, Italy, I became quite ridiculously excited. On the face of it, this was because this magnificent hotel had become known as one of the country's leading spa destinations. However, there was another, slightly more embarrassing, reason for my enthusiasm – it was in this glorious space that



Justin Timberlake and Jessica Biel tied the knot last year, in a ceremony rumoured to cost around £5m.

It is, indeed, a location fit for a king (or king of pop). At first sight of the white Roman stone façade, you could easily believe you were entering an ancient fort in Morocco. Once inside, you're enveloped in a warm glow of cream marble with the aroma of vanilla candles inviting you deeper into this palace of pleasure.

From the central hall, with its breathtaking sculpture of hanging bird cages and oversized glass lanterns suspended from the ceiling, to the beautiful outdoor swimming pool and the walls draped in bougainvillea and framed by cacti, it





feels like I've walked on to a pristine film set, made ready for some lavish Hollywood epic.

It's the spa facilities, though, that really make for a memorable stay. The hotel's Vair spa is designed to heal both mind and body, and does so in fine style. Using Puglian traditions in dance, music and colour therapies as well as the treatments, the 15 therapists (or 'magicians', as they like to be called) lead guests through a fascinating and luxurious journey.

Starting in the Roman bath, I moved on a cloud of bliss through different rooms and glowing pools – one warm, the other icy cold to invigorate my circulation and strengthen the immune system – until arriving at some leather

beds where I was swaddled in towels and given a foot massage. Interestingly, no water was used for the latter – just lemon juice to cleanse, olive oil to moisturise and salt to scrub.

Also unusual was a treatment that saw me covered head to toe, scrubbed with salt, wafted with aromatherapy oils and then – and this is the odd bit – smothered in the squeezed juice of dozens of half-oranges. I did feel a little like a hasted joint ready for the oven but it was an incredibly energising experience.

Puglian dance therapy and a flotation tank (not at the same time, obviously) completed my spa experience, before I was handed over to the hotel's expert nutritionist. She took me for a stroll through the grounds, pointing out the extensive garden with its lush herbs and some of the most fragrant, ripe cherry tomatoes I've ever tasted.

Dinner was a suitably healthy affair, with all dishes picked with vegetables and feeling clean and light, rather than rich and creamy. A deboned salt-crusted sea bream was a standout, although I'm not sure how the gelatin ice cream – a creamy pistachio and hazelnut swirl – fitted into the healthy aesthetic. Organic milk, perhaps?

In truth, the ice cream served as a gateway to an evening of mild hedonism, with several ice-cold proseccos accompanying the fading glow of a magical sunset. Thankfully Borgo Egnazia's magicians were on hand the next day to clear away any cobwebs. Find your own inner harmony here, in one of Europe's finest spa hotels.

Rooms from £415 a night, book online at borgoagnazia.com; vairspa.com