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From one farm to another...

by Liz Tray

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Set in a picturesque stately home, Champneys at Tring in Hertfordshire, the UK's first health farm, as they were then called, opened over 80 years ago. After first visiting in the 80s, having tried other spa and health resorts since, my aunt, who had invited me, had always come back to Champneys and I was keen to find out why.

The previous weekend had been spent floating around the Glastonbury Festival on Worthy Farm in Pilton, Somerset and, while it was undeniably a dose of musical heaven, I might suggest that it is harder to cope with for those who are figuratively and somewhat literally allergic to the outdoors, as I am. I find it physically demanding but, as I lay in my shaking tent as the wind and rain swept in at night then baked in the hot sun all afternoon, I couldn't help but think that indoor activity is more my style.



I was utterly exhausted and the second I stepped through the door on Friday evening I felt a sense of calm descend. Dinner first and, to my surprise, the lettuce leaf buffet that one might expect was nowhere to be found. Instead, I was confronted with gourmet cuisine. As is often the case, there is little choice for the vegetarian. Still, I had no complaints; the food I did choose all weekend was fabulous - healthy, full of protein but brimming with flavour, light and prepared with care. It never felt like the kind of punishment food one might expect.

After a game of snooker and a decent sleep I already felt relaxed and ready for Saturday's feast of pampering and fitness, hoping to find the perfect balance between the two. I was greeted by the best start to any day - the thalassotherapy pool. This was like several Jacuzzis pinned together into one medium sized pool. Each corner had different types of water jets to attend to your various aches and pains and the salty water was full of minerals that cleansed the skin.

After lunch it was time for my first real exertion, a Pilates class. I'd never done Pilates before and suspected it wouldn't be my kind of thing. I wasn't wrong; it felt like static aerobics with little of the

connection to my own energies that I was looking for. After a strenuous but enjoyable couple of hours of swimming, something I had not done in years, the first day ended with another couple of hours of table tennis. I was fairly awful at the start but quickly improved, ending the evening by learning, to my amusement, that I could play well both left handed and right.

Sunday started with a yoga class, which was much more up my street. The teacher, in her early 70s and as bendy as a teenager, told of the spiritual philosophies, translations and origins behind the Indian exercises, giving me the body and mind nourishment that Pilates didn't.



Since I am unused to physical activity beyond lifting the remote, the exertions left me aching so the balance was found, on both days of my stay, in treatments. A relaxing massage on the first afternoon was followed by a gentle facial before I left. But I couldn't end my stay without taking on a treatment I had always been fascinated with - acupuncture.

I had always imagined it to be like having invisible toxins released through a virtual pressure valve on your main centres - legs, ears, hands and feet - and I was spot on. I listened carefully to my acupuncturists' dietary and life advice as it related to the body's energy and got the maximum out of it. I felt blissful afterwards and ready to stave off the stresses of modern life for a

few days at least.

Summary

The calming and sumptuous environment hugely enhanced all of the experiences, treatments and classes. It's the personal touches that set Champneys apart from the endless health chains now at your disposal.

The first task comes to praising the attentive and knowledgeable staff. They take extra care to ensure each guest receives the maximum service experience. That is, aside from the fairly short tempered, and somewhat predictably French, gent at main reception. A criticism would be the standard rooms, reasonably sized but with an impossible to work shower and a miniature TV. It's certainly expensive so I would recommend going all in and spending even a little more on the stunning premium rooms rather than the hotel style rooms by the treatment centre.

This being my debut visit to a health resort it is hard to evaluate whether the endless product placement is the norm. Despite the refreshing lack of up-selling I did find the barrage of sponsored products a little tedious. The Champneys own brand products were subtle and reasonably priced but I could have done without the name brands greeting me around every corner. Overall, from a hospitality perspective it was a flawless experience and a lesson in perfect service.

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