

Condé Nast Traveller

SPA SPECIAL

TRUTH IN TRAVEL

MARCH 2010 NUMBER EIGHT

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The best spas in the world

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► cherry sauce for about £2, while a cappuccino at the new Dome Hotel & Spa (www.domehotel.lv) costs much the same, but in chic, modernist surroundings. The cobbled Old Town district is home to Hanseatic merchants' homes, gabled Flemish-style houses and an English church, St Saviour's, built in 1859, at a time when a dozen or more British ships docked in Riga each week.

Despite the triumph of capitalism – Prada, Dolce & Gabbana and Balmain in the boutiques, a Vertu phone shop next to my hotel – there is always, lurking behind every aspect of life, that grimly fascinating Communist history. You bump into reminders of the Soviet era in all sorts of unexpected places: the old public library on Elizabetes Street, for instance, where the smell of stale sweat hit me as soon as I pushed open the heavy door and a large, grim-faced, slipper-wearing attendant took my coat at the cloakroom just inside the entrance.

There is so much to absorb in the city it was only when I slipped into the dimly candlelit ESPA – built over six floors in the art nouveau Hotel Latvia – that I had time to relax and think about it all. Solicitously shown into a large changing room by one therapist, guided out by another, I started off in the glass-fronted sauna. Next I swam, alone,



Above, a treatment room at the Pädaste Manor hotel on Estonia's Baltic coast and, top, the hotel's sundeck

in the large granite pool, the flames of the open fire reflected in the black-and-gold mosaic surrounds and the foil of Champagne bottles at a little bar. (Health & Safety would have had a fit.) Then, fetched by yet another therapist, Liga, who had plainly taken ESPA lessons about speaking in a gentle, tender voice ('Would you like the

music a little softer?' she whispered almost inaudibly as she dimmed the lights), I lay back on the heated massage bed. Heaven. Two hours later, after a scrub, wrap and massage, I was sitting under the stars in the open-air, well-heated Jacuzzi. Eventually, just before 10pm, I made my woozy way back to reception.

'Did the therapist smile enough?' asked the spa manager anxiously. 'We all grew up not smiling. It was dangerous to smile in the Communist era. If you smiled, they knew something was up and you could get into trouble. So we all learned to ►



Above, feeding pigeons in Krakow. Left, Saint Kinga's monastery at the Wieliczka salt mine in Poland. Below, stay in the Czech Republic's Mariánské Lázně region, which has several spa hotels



► keep our faces as expressionless as possible. Since we have been free we have seen how foreigners smile a lot, and we have tried to copy this, but it is easy to forget.'

'Come and have some mint tea and tell me more,' I begged her, and for half an hour we sat in the café, talking about grandfathers sent to Siberia, relatives who just disappeared, the boom years post-1991 and now the biting recession. It was all fascinating.

I loved Riga, and I cannot wait to go back to see more of it; but what I remember most intensely is that magical evening. Next time, I'll hire a car and drive to Jūrmala on the Baltic Sea coast, only about 20 minutes from the centre of Riga, to stay in one of the old spa hotels – once Kremlin favourites – that line the beach. There's so much to explore in this region. From Jūrmala you could drive on to neighbouring Estonia and check into the Pädaste Manor, a grand hotel on an island just off the coast where you can go kayaking by day and dip into the hotel spa in the evening. Lying in its heated, open-air hot tub, gazing over the Baltic Sea as the stars come out, can do wonders for stressed-out souls.

Then, getting into the swing of an eastern European spa tour, you could head for rural east Germany to visit perfectly preserved medieval cities and relax in a heated outdoor spa pool. Bad Sulza, for example, is a state-of-the-art spa west of Leipzig, where doctors take pride in diagnosing niggling ailments that guests have been unable to get diagnosed elsewhere. This ancient spa town is well-known in Germany now for its Liquid Sound spa treatments, which fill the ears and soothe the soul. There's a special session at 9.30pm every Friday evening. A dozen or so bathers are ushered into the Temple of Sound to drift around the pool, buoyant on high-saline-content water and the glorious, sensory novelty of listening to classical music broadcast underwater.

In southern Poland, at Wieliczka, you could end a day spent sightseeing in nearby Krakow with a tour of the extraordinary Wieliczka salt mine, known as the 'underground salt cathedral'. Three kilometres of paths link 20 vast underground chambers that include a chapel, restaurant and sanatorium, all carved out of salt. Because the air is exceptionally pure, rich in sodium chloride, magnesium and calcium, it exerts a beneficial effect on upper respiratory conditions such as asthma and bronchitis. Some spa visitors spend days at a time down there.

And after Poland? Maybe Slovenia or Slovakia, both scattered with spa villages where treatment levels are impressively high and prices still cheerily low. There are great tracts of pine forest across eastern Europe where wolves, lynx and boar still roam, and I can't imagine anything quite so cosy as settling down under a feather duvet in some rural spa, thinking of the wilderness without and the great-value spa treats within. It really is a different world, this other Europe.

For details of the spas featured here, turn the page

10 great eastern European spas



Nové Lazne, Czech Republic

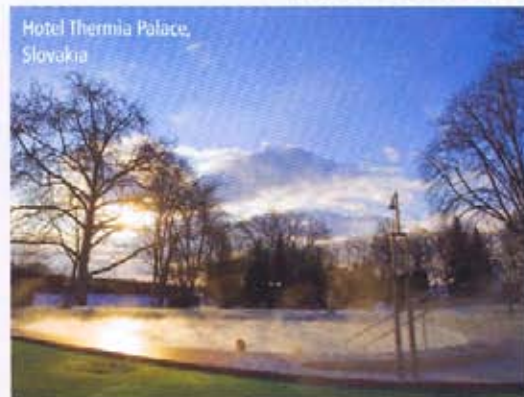
ESPA, RIGA, LATVIA
Easily the most luxurious day spa in the Baltic republics, bringing a new standard to a region where the spa tradition is more sauna-based. Built across six floors, it is the only spa we've ever come across with a Moët Champagne bar. 00 371 6771 5222; www.espariga.com.

PADASTE MANOR, ESTONIA
Set on Muhu island on the Baltic Sea coast, this was once home to a German baron who was hunting master to Tsar Nicholas II. The spa offers a private, wood-fired sauna complete with honey rubs and a Siberian cold tub. 00 372 454 8800; www.padaste.ee. Doubles from €190

HOTEL GRAND SAL, WIELICZKA, NEAR KRAKOW, POLAND
Cosily luxurious, built in former salt baths yards

from the extraordinary Wieliczka salt mine, this hotel has an underground sanatorium as well as restaurant, billiard room and library – all in caves carved entirely from salt, which have proven beneficial to people suffering from respiratory conditions such as asthma and bronchitis. 00 48 12 289 8110; www.grandsal.pl/en. Doubles from about £72

HOTEL THERMIA PALACE, PIESTANY, SLOVAKIA
Piešťany is the largest spa resort in Slovakia, with a long history of visitors



Hotel Thermia Palace, Slovakia



The Grand Hotel Kempinski High Tatras

coming for health-restoring treatments using the sulphuric thermal springs and mineral-rich mud found here, which are especially beneficial for detox and skin-improving treatments. The grand, art nouveau Hotel Thermia Palace is the place to stay. 00 421 33 775 6111; www.spapiestany.sk. Doubles from €164

GRAND HOTEL KEMPINSKI HIGH TATRAS, SLOVAKIA
Newly opened mountain-lakeside hotel in a series of extravagantly elegant buildings put up between 1893 and 1923. The spa pool and treatment areas have absolutely spectacular views over the Tatras mountains – where you can go hiking, cross-country and downhill skiing. 00 421 52 3262 222; www.kempinski-hightatras.com. Doubles €250

NOVE LAZNE, MARIANSKE LAZNE, CZECH REPUBLIC
A grand, glorious confection of a belle époque hotel – a favourite of Edward VII – in the famous resort we



Danubius Health Spa Resort, Budapest

know as Marienbad, which grew up around the 100-plus local thermal springs and in its long heyday attracted composers and writers including Chopin, Wagner, Mahler, Kipling, Kafka, and Mark Twain. 00 420 354 644 1111; www.marianskelazne.cz. Doubles from €67

HOTEL AN DER THERME, BAD SULZA, THURINGIA, GERMANY
The German philosopher Goethe helped establish the spa town of Bad Sulza; the saline spring water tastes pretty foul but bathing in it allows wonderful natural buoyancy. The hotel's

range of spa treatments includes, unusually, a children's programme for six- to 14-year-olds. www.hotel-an-der-therme.de. Doubles from €125

HOTEL WELLNESS PARK, LASKO, SLOVENIA
One of the three Thermana hotels in this long-established resort in the heart of Slovenia, Hotel Wellness Park was a favourite of the Austro-Hungarian Emperor Franz Joseph I in the 19th century, and is now a leading medical rehabilitation centre. 00 386 3423 2200; www.thermana.si. Doubles from €190

DANUBIUS HEALTH SPA RESORT MARGITSZIGET, BUDAPEST, HUNGARY
Large spa hotel just 10 minutes' drive from the city centre, with a dental and laser eye clinic, as well as a hydrotherapy centre with salt cave. 00 361 889 9999; www.danubiushotels.com. Doubles from €82

RADISSON BLU RESORT & SPA, DUBROVNIK, CROATIA
This new hotel on the coast has a large Anne Semonin spa featuring a hydrotherapy area with hammam and a salt cave. 00 800 3333 3333; www.radissonblu.com. Doubles from €150