

And, *relax*...

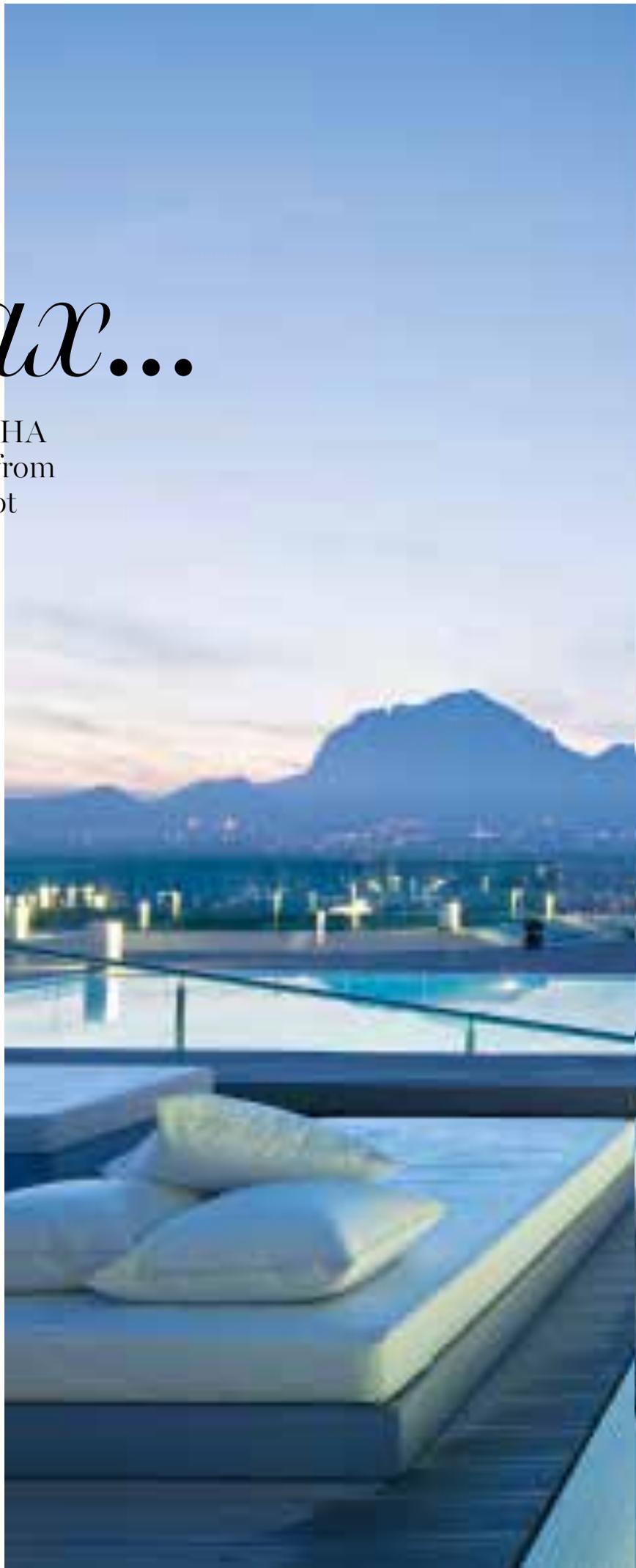
Close to burnout? Alice B-B's trip to the SHA Wellness Clinic in southwest Spain turns from a pre-party primp to a life-changing reboot

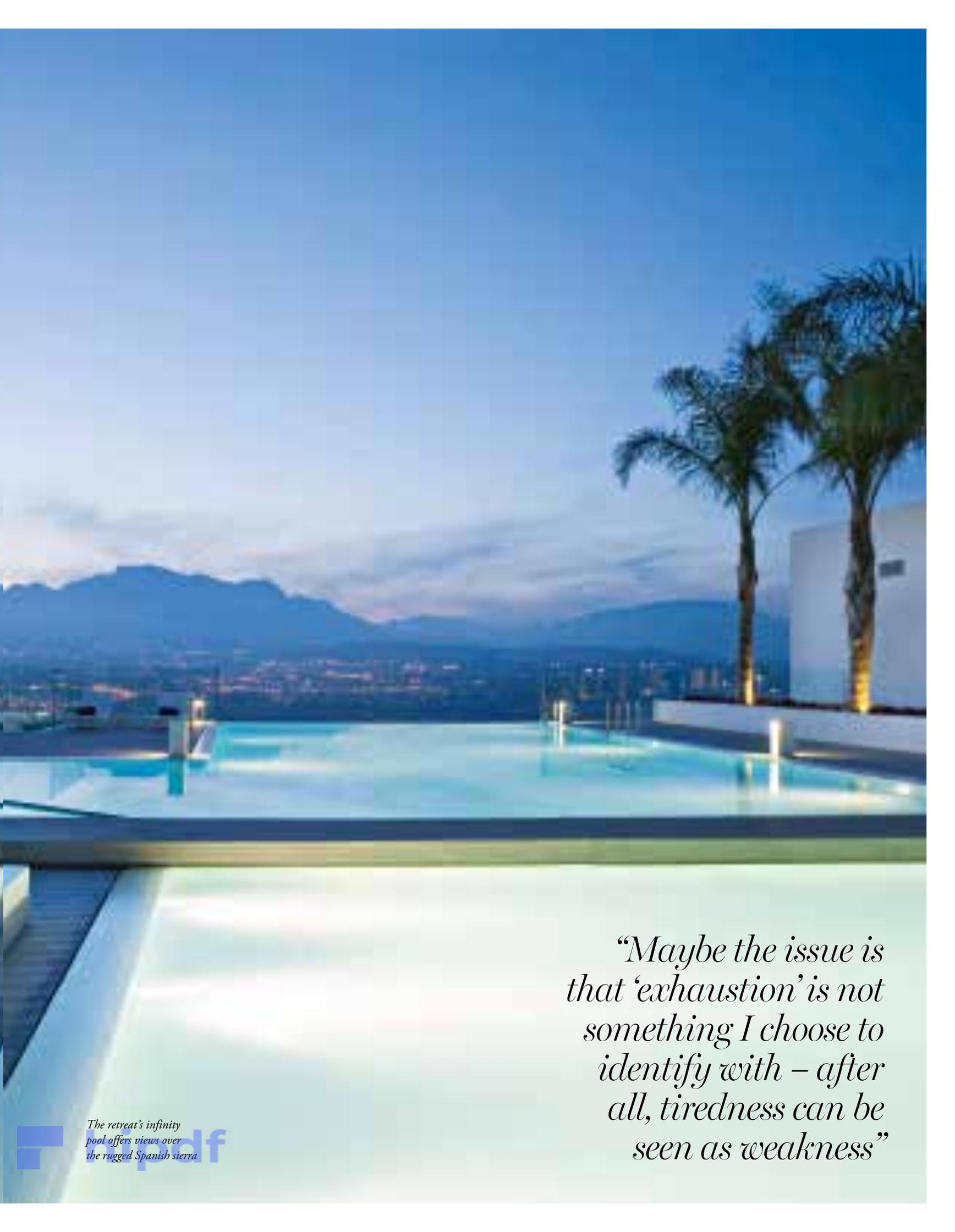
Well, that was unexpected. I thought I was heading to the SHA Wellness Clinic in Altea, Spain, for a pre-Christmas pick-me-up so I could slink around parties in my box-fresh dress. You know the sort of thing: a week off booze, sugar and my phone, replacing them with massage, vitamin D and some new-fangled facial at a clinic combining Eastern and Western philosophies, with a medical facility that spans Botox to dental surgery. As it turned out, I got all of this... and a darn sight more.

I found myself on the Discovery programme – a taste of what SHA has to offer, with space to push specific areas if needed. All programmes begin with a nutritionist appointment and a medical check-up. Going through my history, I falter when the doctor asks about depression and admit to having had more than a few 'blue periods' over the last year. But I try to brush it off as a combination of forty-something perimenopausal hormones, the odd panic attack and general anxiety about 'what's next'. "It's probably just a boring old midlife crisis," I say. Empathetically, he acknowledges the tears stinging my eyes. "Forty per cent of people who come to SHA are now suffering with burnout," he says – a disorder that, this year, was officially recognised as an 'occupational phenomenon' by the World Health Organization. He adds mindfulness, acupuncture and several sessions with a neuroscientist to my programme.

Thus ensues four full days of appointments and therapies working on 'Project Me'. The clinic looks like a modern tiered wedding cake, with plants pouring over the balconies and 92 suites realised in detox-friendly minimalist lines. There's functional movement training (which trains your muscles to work together), watsu (massage in a pool), microneedling and red-light facials to boost collagen, and Indiba treatments (noninvasive radio-frequency therapy) to target fat and cellulite. This is upbeat wellness; wandering through the main outdoor area, you might think you've landed in one of Nikki Beach's luxury resorts (minus the cocktails and electronic dance music). Beside an infinity pool surrounded by palm trees, white four-poster sunbeds are served by staff with the sunniest smiles.

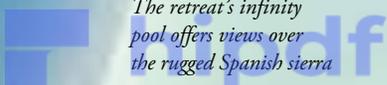
The clinic was created by owner Alfredo Bataller, who credits the protocol devised by macrobiotics expert Michio Kushi with restoring his health after he was diagnosed with life-threatening gut issues. The dietary concept is surprisingly delicious: a macrobiotic regime rich in grains, legumes and vegetables (no sugar, eggs, meat or dairy) with just a little seafood protein. Bizarrely, breakfast begins with miso soup (excellent for detoxing, plus it's cholesterol-lowering and anti-carcinogenic), swiftly followed by quinoa porridge, pear compote and lentil hummus, all in elf-size portions. Weight loss is the number-one reason people come to SHA, but there's a panoply of programmes here, including Healthy Ageing, Sleep Recovery, Stress Management and the 28-day Life Reset. >





“Maybe the issue is that ‘exhaustion’ is not something I choose to identify with – after all, tiredness can be seen as weakness”

The retreat's infinity pool offers views over the rugged Spanish sierra



It's impossible not to play 'guess the programme' over breakfast; I see a pair of large men who have clearly never said no to pudding, a chap desperately trying to stay off his phone, and a guy who can't stop fidgeting with his long, elegant fingers – definitely on the Anti-Tobacco programme.

After breakfast, I see an acupuncturist. She feels my meridian channels, then announces: "You're exhausted." I beam my most energetic smile and protest that my energy's good and my sleep's OK. "That's probably because you've normalised the exhaustion," she says. She pops in some needles and I promptly fall into a dreamy sleep. When I wake, I reflect that my body may not be tired, but my mind feels completely spent. Maybe the issue is that 'exhausted' isn't something I choose to identify with, particularly in a world where tiredness can be seen as weakness.

"Select any new projects with your head, your heart and especially your hands," says the acupuncturist. "Get your hands dirty – it will get you out of your head." Later that day, after a meditation session, the mindfulness therapist is equally direct: "You wash your face, you shower your body, but what about your mind? Meditation is a shower for the mind – it needs cleaning every day."

Then I meet SHA's shiny new star, neuroscientist Professor Bruno Ribeiro do Couto. He heads up the Cognitive and Emotional Health Development department, carrying out pioneering work using both psychological analysis and NASA-developed high-tech equipment for SHA patients suffering from Alzheimer's disease, insomnia, migraine and other conditions. He asks a lot of questions. I explain that I'm here to check how my focus and memory are doing; my family has a history of dementia. I also tell him we have a propensity for depression, but merrily add that I knocked my own bout of it on the head in my teens, the first time I took ecstasy. The prof raises an eyebrow, but says he's not surprised, as MDMA was originally created for psychotherapeutic purposes. Then, not so merrily, I admit I've been feeling a little low over the past year. I'm taken aback by how shameful this feels – again, as though confessing a weakness.

Dr Ribeiro gives me a series of IQ-like memory and focus tests before declaring: "You have an excellent ability to learn new things." Which is pleasing. Next, he

slips a John McEnroe-style headband over my hair and my brainwaves appear on a giant screen, broken down in charts. "Your sleep and stress levels are good," he says, "but your gamma waves are a little low." He strokes his chin. "I think you're more depressed than you think." I hold back the tears. "Because of your genetic propensity for depression, a crisis will hit you harder than most people." I realise he's right. And my blue moods have a name.

We make an appointment for the next day, then I wander back to my room and sob. I don't see myself as a depressed person. What does this mean? Will I have to take medication? I reach out to some friends, and one sends me a link to a Ted Talk by journalist Johann Hari called, 'This could be why you're depressed or anxious'. For 20 minutes, Hari talks about some of the modern blights on mental health: loneliness, lost connections, and my generation's new junk value system. It's as if he's talking straight to me.

The next morning, I tell Professor Ribeiro I must be the happiest depressed person ever. I feel lucky, I explain, that I've come to SHA and learned this information about myself. Because now I can do something about it.

But here comes the best bit: a session of transcranial direct-current stimulation, in which electrodes are popped through tiny holes in a neoprene hat relating to different parts of the brain. The professor opts to stimulate my frontal cortex and, after just 10 minutes, the world is shiny and technicolour. My brain feels abuzz with creativity, and I can read at a million miles an hour. Dr Ribeiro seems pleased with my response. And I feel like I've seen the future. I wish I could have more sessions, but it's my last day. So, together, we put a plan in place for the potential life changes needed to make a difference to my moods.

When I arrived at SHA, I was handed a tote bag embroidered with 'Change begins here'. Fat chance, I scoffed inwardly. But how wrong I was. And that's the point of this and most wellness retreats: they will probably move the dial, but not always in the direction you expect. So, I head home with a freshly twiddled dial, tote bag firmly on my shoulder. And I can fit into that new party dress too. □

For more details, visit shawellnessclinic.com

*"Newly enlightened,
I feel like the happiest
depressed person ever"*

LIFE-CHANGERS: THREE MORE REBOOTING RETREATS

1/



LANSERHOF, GERMANY

Lanserhof is brilliant but brutal. This strict detox in Tegernsee is FX Mayr-based, which means giving the gut a proper rest. Endless chewing of small portions, mostly of buckwheat toast, sheep's yogurt and vegetable soup – washed down with a cocktail of minerals and Epsom salts – makes for an intimate knowledge of the bathrooms. The medical wing is seriously high tech, the massages amazing. And it really does work. You'll lose weight, you'll feel great, and, as if by magic, you won't crave that chocolate bar when you hit the airport to go home. lanserhof.com

2/



YEOTOWN, DEVON

I can't stay away from Yeotown, the intimate detox retreat set in the home of owners Simon and Mercedes Sieff. After the 2008 credit crunch, they decided to start a business based on the things they love, so each day is a mix of hiking, yoga, healthy eating and body treatments in a nurturing environment with a maximum of 12 guests. Looking for a faster metabolism, a leaner figure and a glow that only comes from being blown about on the stunning Jurassic coast? Then make tracks for London Paddington and jump on a train heading west. yeotown.com

3/



AMANZOE, GREECE

The Amanzoe in Argolida is one of a few of the hallowed Aman hotels taking wellness to the next level. Pillared villas sprawl down to the Aegean, with a spa worthy of Aphrodite and tailored treatments from a Traditional Chinese Medicine therapist. This is wellness within a hotel environment, so you can detox while friends and family have a regular holiday. The downside? Baklava and cocktails within swiping distance... it's the ultimate test of willpower. aman.com; www.harrods.com/abercrombieandkent