



# Go with your gut

*Is a healthy gut the secret to happiness? One guest at an exclusive detox clinic seeks answers within*

By DANIEL PEMBREY

**WHETHER YOU FEEL FLAT,** stressed or just peachy, it's almost certainly linked to your gut. There's a reason they say 'trust your gut', but in everyday life, it isn't always clear what's going on in there. Various places offer 'gut checks', but arguably nowhere more thoroughly than VivaMayr, sought out by everyone from Elizabeth Hurley to Kate Moss.

'The gut has the greatest surface area of the body and it holds the majority of our immune system,' says Dr Harald Stossier, the appropriately trim and neatly bearded co-founder of VivaMayr. 'In fact, the intestinal lining covers at least

4,000 square feet.' That's a lot larger than their calm outpost on Harley Street, which I visit for my pre-trip consultation. Dr Stossier kneads my stomach, places stimulants on my tongue and feels the resistance strength of my leg muscles. His assessment is instant.

The lactose intolerance I had suspected; the fructose intolerance is a shock. I assumed fruit was beneficial, and herein lies the first lesson: personalised treatment is key. No longer will I follow newspaper headlines exhorting one food type or decrying another.

Soon after, I'm beside sublime Altaussee in Austria, breathing in

the freshest of clean air. The striking wood-cladded facility here opened in 2015, while the 'mother ship' clinic at Maria Wörth has been going for 15 years. Streaks of cloud hover before mountains rising vertically from the water. No wonder the 2015 Bond film *Spectre* was shot here. I can't help but think of Daniel Craig's fictional journey as I'm met by a battery of tests and related activities inside.

But needs must. The gut was simply not meant for modern eating habits. We were made to hunt and gather; to feast on a kill and then to fast, foraging where possible. Our digestive systems, adapted to this lifestyle over tens of thousands of years, now have to deal with an unrelenting surfeit of sugars, glutens and other stimulants. Very often they can't cope, and this can lead to a parade of health 'horribles': bloating, fermentation, intestinal gases, leaky gut (holes appearing in the intestinal wall) and, extraordinarily, parasites. The prevalence of the latter can reach as high as 40 per cent in parts of the world. And it gets worse; according to two recent authoritative studies, bowel cancer is on the rise among the under-50s. Causes of cancer are complex and subject to debate, but poor gut health can't help.


So how can VivaMayr minimise these potential woes? It's known for weight loss, yet its real aim is to induce a general slowing down. Alpine relaxation, stress reduction, eating thoughtfully and chewing thoroughly reflect a core ethos that all food must be 'completely broken down in a timely manner'. But it's the personalised regime that proves key. Toxins are evacuated from the body, repair and rebuilding begin, acids and alkalines are rebalanced (excess acids bringing their own host of issues from gut inflammation to joint pain), and the list of food types suited to each guest is refined. For me, fructose is now back on.

And treatments here promise to become ever more personalised.

VivaMayr plans to sponsor a professorship at Sigmund Freud University in Vienna in order to research bacteria related to specific ailments such as Alzheimer's, plus links to moods and mental states. These may be hot topics, but the preternaturally youthful-looking managing director at Altaussee, Dr Dieter Resch, says: 'It's the cherry on the cake. The cake is everything else – the 70 to 80 per cent of the process of changing your lifestyle.'

'There are no cakes or cherries anywhere in this building!' I want to cry out. Apparently, acting out is common during the initial stages of 'the cure'. The rules can feel overwhelming at first, especially given the fine beer, sausages and baked treats being enjoyed in the charming restaurants surrounding the site. But those places don't offer Watsu, aerial yoga or an elegant swimming pool overlooking the lake. In the restaurant here, food is delightfully presented and never less than nutritious-tasting (say, avocado crème with chard caviar). All the while, the regime does its work, accelerating the replacement of gut flora with good bacteria. During the second week, the benefits spread to the deeper tissues and to other parts of the body; soon, my stomach is firm and my skin is clear. Most surprising of all is the energy boost – and the sense of contentment, even happiness – by the end of it all.

Various guests recommend staying for at least 10 days. Younger ones, especially the British, make repeat visits in order to stay healthy and defer ageing. The young/less young split seems to be half-and-half; the experience is relevant to all. 'You're only young and beautiful if it comes from the inside,' notes Dr Resch. On a practical level at least, it doesn't get much more 'inside' than intestinal wellbeing.

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