



Palazzo Fiuggi review — the Italian wellness retreat where you can eat cake

Forget fasting: this palace spa near Rome has a delicious approach to dieting



The dining room at Palazzo Fiuggi

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One of Europe's hottest hotel openings this year is a fancy spa in a flamboyant Italian palace that promises to impart the secrets of weight loss and healthy ageing. So far, so spa. But here's where it gets interesting: I will not, I am told, be subjected to a miserable diet of bean sprouts and fresh air. Instead I will breakfast on cake, enjoy pasta at lunch and devour four-course dinners — all devised by the chef behind Rome's only three-Michelin-starred restaurant. Sceptical old me wonders if Ryan Gosling might also be on hand to place my napkin, because this sounds suspiciously like La-La land.

Palazzo Fiuggi is an art nouveau beauty an hour outside the Italian capital. Its wedding-cake architecture is enhanced by a spectacular hilltop location, overlooking Fiuggi's medieval old town and romantic wooded landscapes.

The lobby is a masterclass in polished pink and cream marble, with sparkling crystal vases containing white hydrangeas so huge they deserve their own Instagram account. There's a stone fountain, a statement staircase and a procession of smiling staff. It's the kind of golden-era evocation that makes you instantly feel ten years younger.



Palazzo Fiuggi and the surrounding countryside

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I'm keener on getting 10lb lighter, so take my seat in an airy dining room, its triple-height ceiling dotted with handblown Murano chandeliers. Sunshine pours through French windows, casting a spotlight on turn-of-the-20th-century frescoes — befitting in a palace built for Italian royalty to entertain high society, where celebrity guests have included Pablo Picasso and Ingrid Bergman. Three years ago this confection was bought by the Italian and Russian owners of Forte Village in Sardinia, an A-list resort beloved by the Beckhams and Abramoviches. After a £26 million transformation into a high-tech wellness retreat, the palazzo reopened in May.

Happily my dishes match their majestic setting. My first lunch starts with buttery spaghetti topped with redfish and courgette — there's loads of it so, strictly speaking, I don't need

my main of mullet and Mediterranean vegetables. And definitely not the dessert, a chocolate cannelloni stuffed with red-fruit gelato. A typical dinner might include vegetable gazpacho followed by marinated amberjack fish with camomile pesto and aubergine tartare, hay-cooked chicken breast with spinach and parsnip, then fruit salad with strawberry ice cream. There's always dessert at breakfast, perhaps blueberry muffin or apple crumble, as well as toast, egg-white omelette or cornflakes. Apart from the rice crackers — like chewing on carpet underlay — everything is mouthwatering. I decide it doesn't matter that I am clearly not going to lose a single ounce.

Enter Heinz Beck, executive chef at the three-Michelin-starred La Pergola in Rome and the spa's nutritional wizard, to explain how this culinary sleight of hand works. I can't help noting that this Heinz is indeed full of beans. He asks the maitre d' to check the time in Hanoi as he needs to make a call there, orders a coffee from a waitress and gives a plate heading to another guest the once-over, all while fist bumping me and asking how I'm enjoying my stay.

“Our focus is food as medicine,” Beck says. “We harness the power of essential nutrients and micronutrients to create delicious meals that boost immunity and general health and achieve safe weight loss, without the usual feelings of hunger.”



One of the suites at Palazzo Fuiggì

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The other half of the duo is the medical director, David Della Morte Canosci, who divides his time between the University of Miami, where he is associate professor of neurology; Tor Vergata University of Rome, where he is an associate professor of internal medicine; and Fiuggi, where he was born. Together they devised the Food Line concept, creating 1,600 recipes that feature in the 1,200-calorie-a-day Detox and 1,800-calorie Intro plans, which I am sampling. Their aim is to target fat reduction without adversely affecting muscle mass or resorting to punitive regimens, although coffee and alcohol are banned.

The pair are also busy overseeing the final touches to an on-site nutritional research laboratory, which will allow them to analyse guests' DNA and chart changes to their body fat and metabolism during their stay. "People think it's better to eat carbs at lunch than in the evening but, depending on how you metabolise food, that might not be true," Beck tells me. "From your DNA we will know when, what and how you should eat for maximum health, letting us create personalised menus."

As this screening is not yet available, I choose a holistic health assessment: a bioresonance test. In the white marble and glass spa I settle in one of the 36 treatment rooms, electrodes attached to my body measuring my heart rate and calculating the health of my brain, immune, digestive and endocrine systems. It suggests my biological age is 21 years younger than my chronological age, so I don't need to draw on the expertise of the spa's eight doctors, or state-of-the-art technology including the shiny new MRI, CT scan and sleep lab monitors. Instead I am prescribed several treatments involving Ancient Mariner quantities of water.



The palazzo's roof terrace

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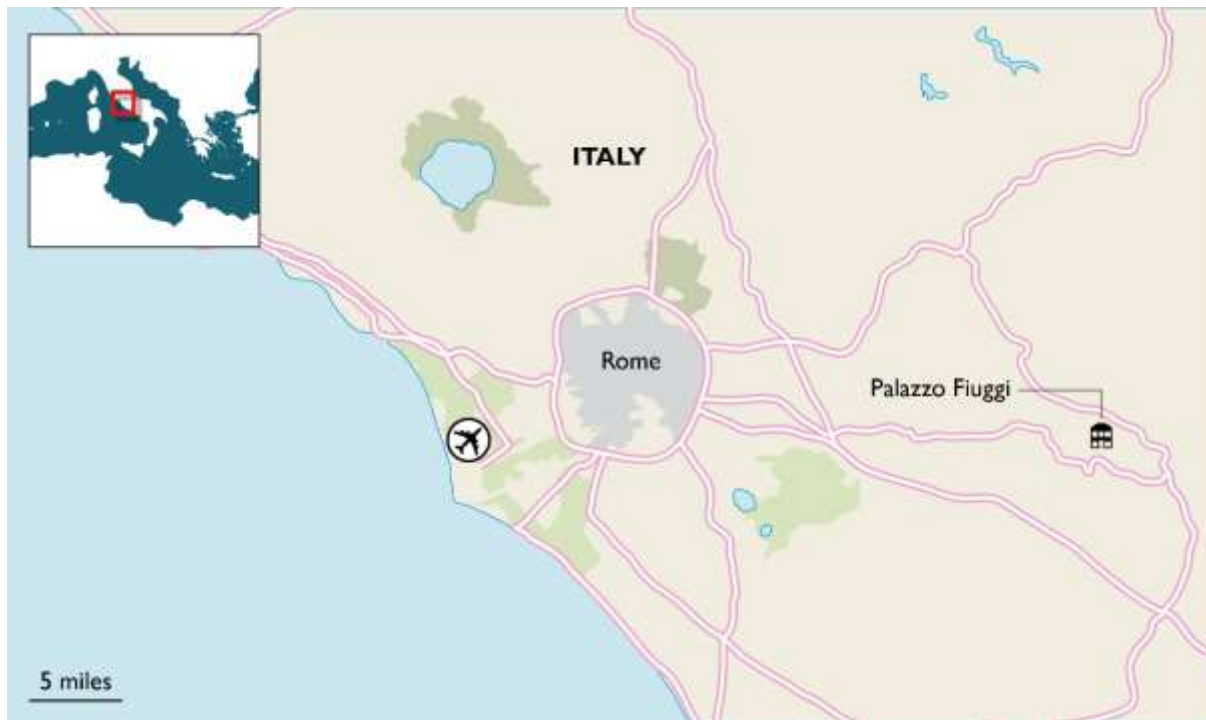
The unpretentious town of Fiuggi has been famous for its healing springs since the Middle Ages — Pope Boniface VIII and Michelangelo believed that it cured their kidney stones. Until about ten years ago Italian health authorities were still recommending Fiuggi water for renal conditions. As well as drinking copious amounts, I bob about in the three super-buoyant thalassotherapy baths — one warm, one tepid, one icy — where Fiuggi's finest H₂O is laced with sea salt, oils and therapeutic minerals. I also take the three-step Hydro Cure: a hydrotherapy bath with soothing “colour therapy”, followed by a wrap using

Pompeii mud and concluding with a “Scottish shower”; so called because it leaves people a wee bit cranky, I speculate. My therapist sluices the mud off me using a high-pressure hose, providing more insight than I need into how a Ford Fiesta feels in an old-fashioned car wash.

The three swimming pools offer a more enjoyable submersion. You can swim from the huge indoor one to an equally huge outdoor one, with an enormous hot tub that overlooks Fiuggi old town’s caramel-coloured villas, squished across a neighbouring hillside. The Roman baths have yet another pool, this one Olympic-sized and guarded by ancient sequoia trees. There is tennis, padel tennis and a jogging trail if I tire of sunbathing. I don’t.

My standout treatment is Spa Wave therapy. I listen to vibrational frequencies designed to slow down overactive minds while lying on a couch that delivers a surprisingly decent mechanical massage. I follow this with sound therapy in the yoga studio. It starts at 6pm, just as a joyful peal from the town’s church bells subsides. I sleep brilliantly that night; while the decor downstairs is exuberant, the 102 bedrooms are confidently neutral, understated and calming.

Refreshed, I give my brain a proper workout in the former ballroom, now converted into possibly Europe’s swankiest gym. I try Icaros, a virtual-reality fitness system, wearing a headset while balancing my shins and forearms on a “flying contraption”. Shifting my body to negotiate mountain peaks and steep ravines, it tests my reflexes, cognitive skills and core strength to an exhausting extent. It could have left my torso traumatised, but a pre-workout stint in the cryotherapy chamber, where for three minutes I froze in vaporised nitrogen at temperatures below minus 100C, aids muscle recovery. Because I want to improve mobility, the rest of my gym work is more about posture than perspiration; the trainer Armando, who previously worked at Lazio football club, guides me through exacting hip and shoulder exercises. Early each morning I also take group yoga classes with Marya. One day I am her only student, so we take our mats out on to the terrace. In the palazzo’s heyday Sophia Loren might have gazed at the misty hills from this exact spot.



It's the only time we practise yoga outside, and the lack of fresh-air exercise otherwise is a disappointment. Similarly frustrating, there is nowhere to dine alfresco — one of the great joys of being abroad. There are plans for a poolside diner, but in the meantime I have to sit at the same table in the same restaurant for every meal to ensure staff serve me the correct plan. This Groundhog Day dining scenario quickly becomes boring. I am also amazed that there are no mindfulness or meditation classes, or guided forest bathing in the palace's lush parklands. And it was a shame that the sumptuous cinema, with its decadent red-velvet seating, didn't show a single film during my five-night stay.

On my final morning, though, I get a Hollywood-style happy ending — I discover I have lost 3lb, without the merest hint of a hunger pang.

Susan d'Arcy was a guest of Healing Holidays, which has four nights' full board from £2,599pp, including flights, transfers and treatments (healingholidays.com)