

ITALY

# The new wellness treatment that promises a longer and better life

At the Lefay Resort on the shore of Lake Garda, Elaine Kingett, 72, tries an ambitious new science-based spa programme



A pool at the Lefay Resort

Elaine Kingett

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**M**y yin is out of sync with my yang, my spleen’s messed up because I think too much, my chi is stagnated because I can’t let go of past grudges, and I’ve got to stop the vodka. My left knee is

giving me gyp because I have difficulty accepting the trauma caused by men in my past, my lack of ability to concentrate is cause for serious concern, and I need to get out more and have (non-alcoholic) fun with friends. I'm 72 but I look like I go to the gym; my internal energy is strong and my kidneys are better than they should be — despite the vodka — for a woman of my age. So say the doctors at Lefay Resort & Spa on Lake Garda, near the town of Gargnano.

Some of this I already knew; some I discovered after five nights up a mountain in the Parco Alto Garda Bresciano in northern [Italy](#). Oh, I know that I drink too much, sleep too little and spend far too much time looking at my phone. My exercise consists mainly of dragging myself up and down six steep flights of marble stairs to the eyrie in [Seville](#) I call home. My diet consists mainly of pig, fried fish and the occasional token vegetable or piece of fruit. “A carrot and gin is not dinner, mother,” I am told.

But despite my age I had never felt old or vulnerable, even after a heart attack and breast cancer. Not, that is, until recently, when osteoarthritis dug its pinchy little paws into my left knee and hip. Now I watch my skin wrinkle at a scary rate of knots and mortality stares me in the face.



The town of Gargnano on Lake Garda  
GETTY IMAGES

When a guy in his late fifties offered to help me put my case in the overhead locker on my flight from Malaga to Milan “because my mother has the same problem”, I marked myself as officially old.

I've never been one for the promises of detox or anti-ageing retreats, but when I heard of the new Longevity programme at Lefay, developed by its scientific committee and aiming to “merge western medical scientific research with Chinese medicine to achieve the complete psycho-physical wellbeing of an individual”, it sounded much more persuasive.

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Besides, I already had great faith in many of the treatments on offer. Moxibustion — heating acupuncture points on the body with a smouldering stick of artemisia herb — successfully turned my unborn daughter from her breech position after all else had failed. Acupuncture worked brilliantly when my back went into spasm for months, after drugs and a faith healer hadn't helped. A herbalist in the hills above Lake Como prescribed me a tea when I was living in Milan and trying to get pregnant with my first child — that brought success, too, after 11 years. Osteopathy? Tick. Massage? Tick. Reflexology, guided walking, breathing? Tick!

But my main concern was what to pack for the Lefay spa. I imagined somewhere full of Instagram lovelies with tight buns and foreheads to match. But I needn't have worried. Like most guests I spent my days padding around in the white robe provided, even at mealtimes. Women seemed to wear them better; the men looking more uncomfortable — strangely vulnerable.





Jacuzzi with a view at Lefay

I cancelled make-up immediately. As for jewellery, I normally wear six rings, ten bracelets and two necklaces, and never take them off, not even in the shower. Each piece has a strong emotional attachment, and after removing them for treatments I felt naked in a whole new way. And leaving my phone in my room felt like having my first born ripped out of my arms (well, almost).

I wasn't there to lose weight, although I would be happy to tackle the podge that argues with my jeans every time I try to do them up. I had come to learn how to live better and longer, and make friends with my body again; to get some hands-on relaxation, and to sleep without herbal, pharmaceutical or alcoholic assistance.

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My first glimpse of Lake Garda blew me away. So blue, so big, so pretty. The landscape was *Heidi* meets Sylvania Families, with snow-capped mountains rising 6,500ft and blush-coloured villas trimming the shore; lemon and olive trees and pointy cypresses in a Mediterranean micro-climate, with muscular Michelangelo clouds rolling in over the horizon.

Lefay is high up but low-rise, snuggling neatly into the green hillside. The panoramic view when I arrived was well worth the four stomach-churning miles of hairpin bends it took to get there. Although the family-run hotel has 96 rooms, all with that view of the lake, it feels intimate.





One of the bedrooms at Lefay

Opened in 2008, it remains fresh and reflects the elegant taste of the owner, Liliana Leali, an architect who worked alongside the interior designer Alberto Apostoli to create this temple of healing. This year a whole extra lower floor has been added, with an adults-only spa zone and possibly the best view from any sauna anywhere — Italy's largest lake stretches out in front of you, mist cloaks the tops of the towering limestone mountains and wood smoke rises gently from houses dotted deep in the hillside.

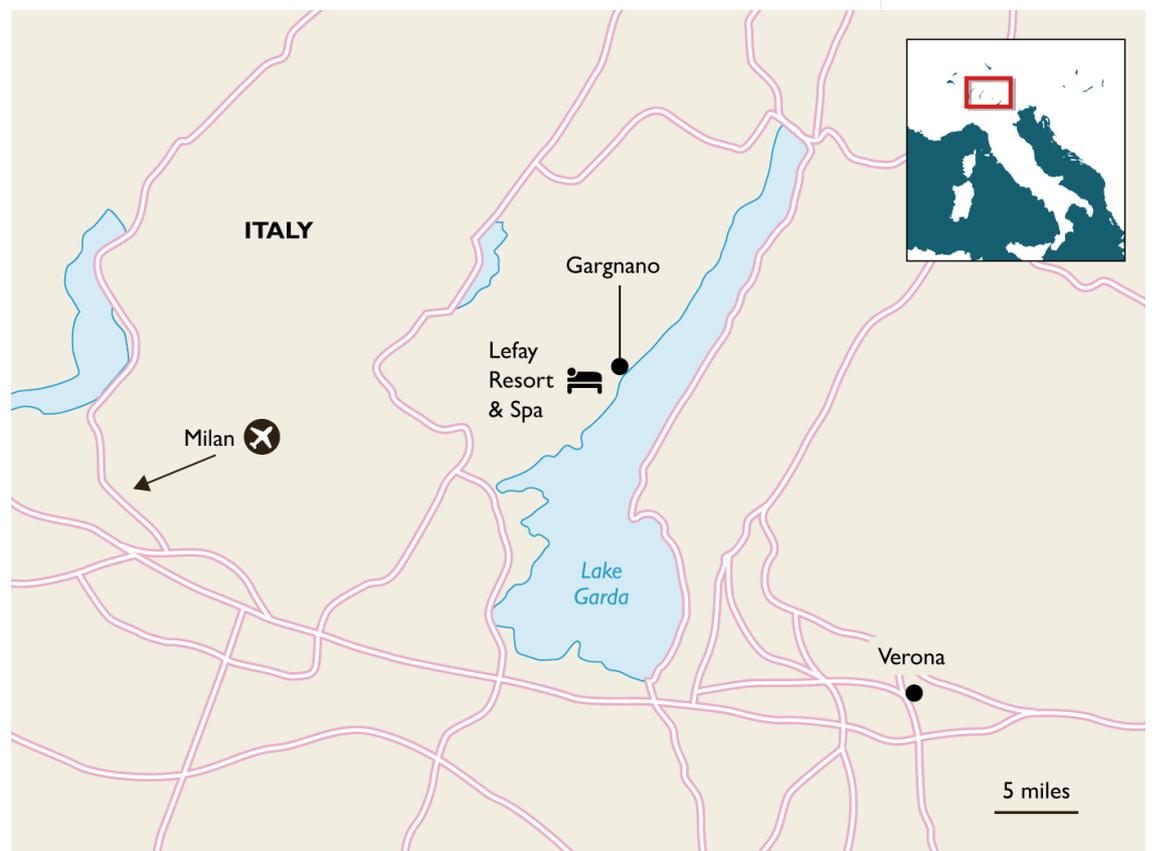
Lefay is a blond oasis of pale wood, local marble and glass. With an emphasis on sustainability and holistic wellbeing, it has solar panels, a biomass boiler, a strong commitment to buying a high percentage of locally produced, seasonal and organic food, and it employs local staff, many of whom have worked here for years.

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For my first session — after I'd rolled around on my super-sized bed, noted the Jacuzzi in the bath, checked the minibar (just water), sniffed the white wisteria on the balcony and hauled on my one-piece, not worn since last August — I spent 30 minutes drifting alone in a low-lit, cobalt-blue flotarium under an

enormous, illuminated moon globe. I could only imagine the gentle musical accompaniment because I'd taken out my hearing aids. (I wear them because of noise damage from loud music, not my age.)

For breakfast, lunch and dinner I was on the spa menu, "light and healthy" (ie no chips). I'd already checked that I was allowed a glass of wine. I was perfectly happy eating on my own while couples around me shared bottles of wine and tucked into proper food. It was good to have dishes that surprised me with their ingredients and deliciousness, rather than keeping to the usual suspects, and I never left the restaurant hungry. The only unhealthy thing about it was the sense of virtue and superiority I developed.



Mind you, when I discovered the Biggest Breakfast Buffet in the Universe, I did go off piste and grab two garlicky chipolatas.

My first Chinese medical consultation astounded me. Dr Gavazzi's diagnosis — based on pulse measurements, observations and questioning — produced in 15 minutes the same analysis that it had taken my counsellor four years to arrive at. I was a classic case of "confident public persona v private inner angst" — thanks, social media. My inability to accept myself and let go, relax and be less driven professionally

was screwing up my psyche, my joints and my digestion. Years of fight-or-flight were coming in to land.

When the massage therapist then came up with the same pronouncements I asked whether they'd been comparing notes in the corridor. The reflexologist gave me the same verdict the next day. Then I remembered the tarot card reader in Rome who a month ago had explained the cause and effect for my state of body and mind identically — sometimes it takes time to see the wood for the trees.



The Lefay Resort, in the hills above Lake Garda  
ALAMY

During my stay at the resort I had a full, individually tailored programme from 11am to 6pm each day, comprising treatments, exercise classes, guided walks and medical consultations. The calming and cleansing influence of water was constantly around me — the view of the lake, the pools, Jacuzzis, the gallons of it I drank. The loudest sounds were blackbirds, bees and sometimes the faint thrum of a motorboat in the distance. Everywhere I went the staff greeted me, held open doors and smiled as well as they could behind facemasks. Everyone wanted to know if I was OK or needed anything, and always had time and attention to listen and explain. I was made to feel accepted, appreciated and understood.

Once I had worked out the geography of the place — soothing decor and a subtle colour palette can make navigation tricky — it didn't take me long to feel very much at home. I had *my* table in the restaurant and *my* place on one of the vast white sofas in the spa waiting area. I worked out the way to the women-only sauna and how to open the sliding glass doors in the water so I could get from indoors to outdoors in one of the three heated

pools. After a few days I strutted around like a regular, noticing the newbies fumbling for their masks in the low-lit corridors.

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One morning I leapt out of bed before realising, “Gosh, I haven’t moved that fast first thing in the morning for months – and nothing hurts!” I knew the squirrels would be playing in the trees at dawn, the hawk would fly over in the late afternoon and that some people ate dinner at 7.30pm – the Sevillanas would laugh if I tried that at home, but soon so did I.

During my stay I gained invaluable knowledge about my health and state of mind, and realised that my body is strong and will carry me forward if I respect it a bit more. My present seems less scary now, and I feel more able to let go of the past and, yes, live in the now. The therapy I received was far deeper than I expected, mentally and physically, and will in consequence, I believe, be longer lasting.



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The philosophy of Lefay is “continuous transformation, providing programmes designed to learn a way of life, a new way of being and a way you can keep in your life when you return home”. And that sounds exactly right to me. Since I got home I have been eating and drinking more healthily, am sleeping better and have lost half a stone.

I am determined to make my remaining years not only healthier, but also much more fun, because I have finally accepted that the responsibility to look after myself is on me — because what’s the point of longevity if you’re not enjoying it?

*Elaine Kingett was a guest of Healing Holidays, which has three nights’ full board at Lefay Resort & Spa from £1,499pp, including flights, transfers and a Discovery programme (healingholidays.com)*

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