

# Guillain-Barré Syndrome brought me to death's door — Schloss Elmau mountain retreat helped me get back on my feet

Jennifer Cox finds intensive care of a different sort at a specialist wellness and culture resort in the Bavarian Alps

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Schloss Elmau REINHARD SCHMID

I have been writing about travel for 20 years. Tripping off with my husband, Nick, a photographer, to paddleboard in the Med, ride Kuala Lumpur's sweaty buses and marvel at ornate lanterns floating down the Cheonggyecheon stream, in Seoul... But for the past 20 months, all our trips have been to St George's Hospital in Tooting, London. In March 2018, I developed Guillain-Barré Syndrome, a rare condition where the immune system destroys your nerves and immobilises your muscles. Within three days, I was in intensive care, completely paralysed and on life support. After five months of emergency treatment, followed by painful rehabilitation, I was finally able to go home.

Fast-forward 20 months and I'm doing much better. I still have no feeling from the knees down, or in my face or left arm, and the nerves in my pupils are dead. Yet, thanks to the incredible, continuing work of the NHS, I can cycle, run four miles and am back working part-time.

But recovery is a slog. And not just for me, but for Nick, who went from being a busy photographer to a full-time carer overnight. By last month, we were both desperate for a restorative break. But I had not travelled overseas for two years and the damage to my body made me nervous about flying. Add the chronic fatigue — I have to be in bed by 9pm sharp

— and it was paramount that we find somewhere both accessible and relaxing. Schloss Elmau, in the Bavarian Alps, fitted the bill.



Jennifer in one of the pools at Schloss Elmau NICK GREGAN

A 45-minute drive from Innsbruck airport, Schloss Elmau is a ritzy spa resort at the foot of the Wetterstein Mountains. It's a fascinating place, an improbable fusion of opulence and philosophy dating back to 1914, when Dr Johannes Müller built it as a cultural retreat for artists and thinkers. These days, it offers world-class classical music, jazz and literary events (more than 220 a year, free to guests) in its grand concert hall, and an extensive wellness programme — more than 45 classes a week, including yoga in a dazzling glass-sided pavilion, qigong and a host of winter sports. There are eight restaurants, seven pools, six spas and two libraries. Would I be able to handle it all?

Arriving in a fog of driving rain, I was wiped out from the journey. Sinking into our super-king bed, I was asleep in minutes. So we were completely unprepared the next morning, when, opening the curtains — pow! — there were the Alps: huge, rugged peaks brilliant with snow. Faced with this sight, my puny, adventure-denied muscles wobbled into life and, after a breakfast of Bircher muesli (me), local bacon and champagne (Nick), we went exploring.

Schloss Elmau sits at 3,300ft on a plateau of meadows dotted with Heidi huts and sprawling pine forests. We paused on a forest path and listened to white noise, not of traffic, but of rushing mountain streams. The sense of peace and space was mind-boggling; I felt my tensions unfurl.

Then it started snowing: huge flakes, like torn-up tissues, swirling lazily to the ground. It couldn't have been more perfect. But it was freezing and, without working nerves to open the

blood vessels, my numb hands and feet were white with cold. We decided to retire to the 35C outdoor pool, steam softening the Alpine views.

Along with the cultural programme, warm water and fresh air are the hotel's secret weapons, according to Schloss Elmau's owner, Dietmar Müller-Elmau (grandson of the founder). "Most of us struggle to do nothing on holiday," he told me. "Spas and warm water relax the body, then music and literature invigorate the brain. This is wellness." Dr Imke König, director of the wellness programme, agrees: "Nowadays, guests want more than just pampering. They want to understand their problems — why can't they sleep, why are they stressed? Exercise and nutrition are as important as relaxation. Get a good book, look at the mountains."



So, over the next five days, we did just that. We ate possibly the best meal of our lives at the two-Michelin-starred Luce d'Oro; watched Thomas Quasthoff, one of Germany's finest singers, in concert; took Pilates and HIIT classes; and were gently pummelled with bubble-filled pillows in the marble hammam. We curled up in the lounge, eating cake and reading novels by firelight, and in bed watched the snow fall. Best of all, we did it together. Nick didn't have to be my carer. And, captivated by this winter wonderland, I didn't worry about... well, anything.

Adjusting to a life-changing illness means constantly working to reclaim your old life, which is motivating, but also exhausting and occasionally dispiriting. Up in these beautiful mountains, the view was clear. And, after just a short break from my inward-looking London life, I could see for miles and miles.

*Jennifer Cox was a guest of Healing Holidays, which has a week at Schloss Elmau from £1,820pp, half-board, including flights ([healingholidays.com](http://healingholidays.com))*