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TRAVEL

Winnipeg Free Press - PRINT EDITION

Of prudes and nudes

A North American bares her all at Swiss spa and finds... bliss

By: **Josephine Matyas**

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The spa is a big draw, but Leukerbad is a charming place to visit even if you don't fancy a bit of mixed-gender public nudity.

LEUKERBAD, Switzerland -- I booked a full day ahead for the mixed-gender nude spa. One needs a little bit of mental prep time for that sort of thing.

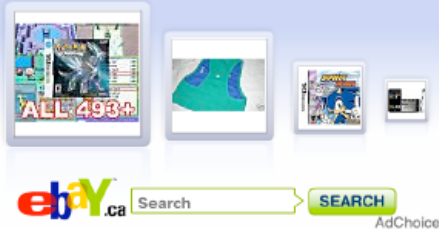
The upside was I had a chance to deep-breathe my way into a Zen state. The downside was that 24 hours on an elliptical machine could never whip me into shape for this kind of exposure. We're talking a-buffo. Au naturel. Without a stitch of clothing.

In North America we've set the spa-culture train

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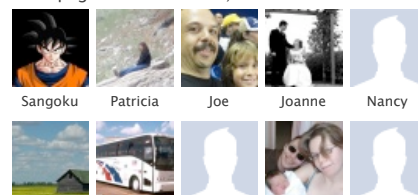
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Josephine Matyas

barrelling down the tracks. Spas on this side of the pond are the Starbucks of the rejuvenation world: Would you like a triple oxygen complexion reviver with your aqua latte bath?

In Europe, not so much.

"The focus here is on wellness," explains assistant marketing manager Melanie Priemer as she hand-holds me through the basics at the Lindner Alpentherme in Leukerbad, Switzerland. "Most of our visitors come here for prevention. We specialize in treatments from all over the world -- Bali, Java, traditional Chinese medicine, as well as other standards like mud packs and massages."

So far, no mention of the tricky combination of total nudity and mixed company.

Leukerbad, which straddles the German/French language line in the mountainous Valais region, is known for the 65 thermal springs that gush from three kilometres below the layer of granite. The Swiss Olympic team hangs out here for training and rehabilitation. (The 51-C waters are loaded with calcium, iron and magnesium, crucial for bone health and fluid movement of the body parts.)

Artistic giants like Leo Tolstoy, Mark Twain and Charlie Chaplin used to come here to recharge their creative juices.

Almost a million visitors a year flock here for skiing in winter, hiking in summer, and the thermal springs all year round. Most are from Europe -- bringing their laissez-faire aura with them. Fewer than one per cent are North Americans, many dragging their puritanical panic alongside.

David Kestens, with Leukerbad Tourism, gets it: "Wellness has to do with being in nature, drinking a good glass of local wine, eating local gastronomy.

Wellness is much more than digging a hole in the ground, putting water into it and calling it a spa."

I'm still stuck on trying to conjure up a vision of Tolstoy in the nude saunas. Nope, can't see it.

There are 30 thermal baths in the village. The largest of all is the commanding Alpentherme, set at the picturesque town square -- three stories of peace and quiet, indoor and outdoor thermal pools, a medical centre, saunas, and the nude-only Roman-Irish bath.

"There are only two of these Roman-Irish baths in Switzerland," Priemer says. "An Irish doctor created the three-hour circuit, combining the hot, moist air of Roman baths and the warm, dry air of Irish bath traditions.

During the sequence of 11 stops, the body is warming up and the pores are opened. At the halfway point, the body purges the pores. At the stops after that, the body cools down and at the end you relax in order to re-energize."

This sounds simple enough. Still no mention of the mixed nude part. Best not to ask.

I start with an innocuous dip in the outdoor thermal pool, bobbing about slack-jawed at the stunning view of tidy chalets, church steeples and the Gemmi mountain range that rises from the edge of the village. This is a bathing-suit-on pool. I am comfortable. Life is good.

The clock ticks down to my appointment time at the Roman-Irish bath, two floors above the pool. I enter the glass elevator, and when the doors slide open at the top floor I suck in my stomach muscles and try to act casual, like I do this every other weekend.

I stash my towel and bathing suit on a hook and step out into a cavernous room that houses the main pool -- the various treatment stages are in smaller rooms around the pool's

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perimeter.

OMIGAWD! There are naked people. And I mean everywhere. The pool attendants are fully clothed (explain that one), and most of the dippers and steamers and scrubbees are there in couples ... and are post-boomer age. No one -- and I mean no one -- seems to be sucking in stomachs.

Priemer's advice was to follow the rooms by number, and I can count from one through 10, even when feeling slightly scrambled. The first few sauna rooms are pretty tepid and I pass the allotted 10 minutes in each by enjoying the view out the windows. My cohorts stroll through every once in a while and I am surprised at how quickly I slip into the Valaisian mindset: this is not about sex, these baths are about wellness. No one cares about my body's rolls and bumps, and they certainly don't expect me to pay attention to theirs.

Things start to heat up considerably by the fourth room, and beads of sweat are rolling down all of my exposed surfaces (which would be, literally, all of me).

At the mid-point of the circuit, I shower off, lie on a raised table, and a young masseur (clothed, I might add) scrubs me down with a mixture of coarse coffee grounds, water and oil. I practise my best nude chit-chat.

The last five stops are a slow, gentle slide down the thermometer -- that is, until station number 10, a 12C bath where the sign suggests staying in for one minute. Fat chance. I last three seconds. That's polar bear swim territory, and a full 25C below healthy body temperature.

The final stop is not so challenging. Sympathetic staff shepherd my lobster-red body from the polar bear pool and into the quiet relaxation room, cocoon me in heated blankets and place a glass of yellow mint tea on the side table. Thirty minutes of bliss time, covered from head to toe, to warm up and doze off.

Now this, I can picture Tolstoy doing.

IF YOU GO:

* Leukerbad is the largest thermal spa and wellness resort in the Alps. www.leukerbad.ch

* The Roman-Irish bath at the Linder Alpentherme (www.alpentherme.ch) is \$80. Once a month there is a special candlelit Roman-Irish night with a pool attendant dressed as Caesar, full dinner buffet and togas for all the bathing guests.

* Leukerbad has a mix of hotel space, pensions and self-contained apartment rentals. The best of the hotels is the Relais & Chateaux, five-star Hotel Les Sources des Alpes. The property has its own indoor and outdoor baths, Turkish sauna and steam room. Tolstoy stayed there. www.sourcesdesalpes.ch

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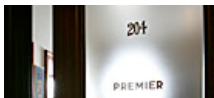
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