

# Time to shine

With spa retreats offering an increasingly popular way to attract guests, we visit Austria's European Ayurveda Resort Sonnhof to experience an energy healing programme with shaman Gabrielle Scharnitzky

REPORT BY DAVID FAGAN

**W**hen Brigitte and Johann Mauracher purchased a traditional guest house on the higher plateau of Austria's Thiersee Valley in 1987, they could not have pictured the ways in which their family home would blossom over the next 30 years. What was described by their daughter, Lisa, now resort manager and development director, as a 'typically Tyrolean' hotel serving "a lot of meat and a lot of schnapps" has grown into a holistic resort that is renowned as a pioneer of its own trademarked brand of European Ayurveda.

The move towards adopting the ancient Indian system of medicine stemmed from Brigitte's interest in medicinal herbs, which began during her childhood in a nature-loving family. But it wasn't until 2005, when a friend introduced her to the concept of Ayurveda, that the lightbulb moment finally happened.

"She had never heard of it at the time," says Lisa, "but she started to do workshops and take courses, learning more about yoga, healing and spirituality. By 2006 the vision was complete. We had rebuilt the hotel and added 15 new rooms as well as the swimming pool, yoga room and the saunas and therapy rooms. Then we reopened as an Ayurvedic resort."

The shift in focus was dramatic and had immediate consequences on the family business. "Of course, all our old clients were gone as the new mentality and philosophy was completely different," recalls Mauracher. "It was difficult because we started again from zero, but after the initial hard work you make your own luck. The vision was good enough that we were able to progress things well."

Since Brigitte Mauracher passed away her two daughters, Lisa and Christina, have remained committed to her vision alongside their father Johann. The hotel's recently launched tagline, which encourages guests to 'Shine on!' exemplifies their spirit and in 2012 a further €2m investment saw the creation of a new restaurant, lounge and reception areas, as well as an underground car park and the hotel's restful Garden of the Five Senses.

## From the outside, in

Still displaying many of the external characteristics of its former incarnation as a 'typically Tyrolean' hotel, European Ayurveda Resort Sonnhof draws guests in past the soothing sounds of a rugged water feature and through double doors whose handles are emblazoned with sun symbols.

Past a boutique retail area, which offers everything from yoga clothing to oils, scents and Ayurvedic herbs, is a large rustic, wooden reception desk, set in a warm and homely space with rugs on the floor and the twinkling of lights. Here guests are welcomed by the friendly staff before being shown to their rooms on the floors above.

Refurbished earlier this year at a cost of €600,000 (£529,000), the resort's 30 guest rooms and suites continue the prevalent colour scheme with lush, iridescent green fabrics and luxurious purple tones offset against a neutral, earthy palette. Natural materials are to the fore throughout and, in a deliberate move

Clockwise from far top left: Yoga at sunrise in the Garden of the Five Elements; a gentle water feature at the centre of the hydrothermal suite; the traditional exterior of European Ayurveda Resort Sonnhof; a sublime Shirodhara treatment



"We have three pillars – diagnosis and treatments; ayurvedic nutrition; and yoga, mind detox and meditation. Every part is really important to achieving the goals our guests deserve."

Lisa Mauracher Resort manager





to encourage guests to 'log off' during their stay, WiFi is not available in the sleeping areas. However, guests can still check emails and keep in touch with friends and family as it is offered in the relaxed Spirit Lounge, where they can also sample Ayurvedic teas.

Elsewhere in the main building are the Annapurna buffet, where fresh local ingredients are laid out for breakfast, and Buddha's Place restaurant, which connects to the Indra Garden conservatory.

Through corridors decorated with evocative golden designs and a shrine to the god Ganesh, complete with burning incense sticks, guests enjoy a journey for the senses before reaching the resort's Ayurveda centre. Here are two medical rooms, a beauty studio and 15 treatment rooms that use Ayurvedic oils from Midgards Kalari as well as products from Pharmos Natur, Thalga, Alpienne, Pañpuri, Lakshmi, Doskar, Ortho Therapie and Amla Natur.

In addition, the two-storey centre offers a selection of hydrothermal experiences that are specifically designed to complement the range of treatments on offer. The perfectly formed spa area was designed by the Maurachers with help from architect Peter Urban and his wife Brigitte, and subtle elements, such as curved walls with reflective flecks, make the most of the compact spaces.

Both the panoramic indoor pool and the circular yoga suite benefit from stunning views over to the Kaiser mountain range in the distance, while the latter's ceiling is characterised by thousands of small holes of different sizes that create an interstellar effect for yogis as they turn their gaze upwards.

Among the Ayurveda-oriented KLAFS heat experiences are a detoxifying steam bath, a herbal clay sauna and a gemstone therapy room, as well as a 'sun' honey bio-sauna and a 'moon' meditation sauna. To complement these are four infrared heat cabins by Physiotherm and an energy fountain, as well as the



Clockwise from top left: The atmospheric 'moon' meditation sauna; refreshment and relaxation within the curved walls of the indoor pool; a full body Jambira Pinda Veda massage; the floral main entrance to Sonnhof

'Shakti' fitness room with equipment by Nautilus.

Completing the offering is a Stimularium cell regeneration lounge, a 'Vishuddha' purifying bath, the 'Om' meditation room and the 'Swasthya' peace room. Guests are further invited to take refreshment from three types of the hotel's own-brand European Ayurveda tea that are freely available at the heart of the spa area.

Viewed from the yoga suite and pool area, the resort's Garden of the Five Elements further focuses on spiritual awareness and was designed according to principles of ancient Vastu Shasta teachings. This tranquil outdoor area aims to facilitate the flow of guests' energy through its rose garden, which represents unconditional love; statues of Ganesh and Buddha; and a Shakti fire place that is said to symbolise the female aspects of creation while also providing a copper bowl that can be lit to enhance outdoor yoga experiences.

In 2016 the Mauracher family took ownership of a nearby farm, Lindhof, which now supplies much of the fresh, organic vegetables, herbs, spices and grain used in the resort's cuisine



### Shamanic energy healing at Sonnhof

Shaman Gabrielle Scharnitzky (below right) on how energy healing complements the work of the Mauracher family's European Ayurveda concept at Sonnhof

"The Ayurvedic medicine and therapies Sonnhof offers help to release toxins and balance the body so the individual's self-healing properties are activated and restored.

"No matter if dealing with an illness or just trying to get back to balance, the client does deep inner work while attending a *kur*, and this is where my work as a shaman beautifully intertwines with the Ayurvedic approach.

"Everything is brought to the surface so it is much easier to look at it. It has been swept from the bed of the ocean and onto the shore and it's almost like I am filtering it.

"Everything in the shamanic tradition is about balancing the feminine and masculine energies by detoxing the soul, brain, body and heart from old, negative and traumatic information.

"Teaching the client how to connect with the energies of the Earth and with the heavens. This divine connection to 'spirit energy' helps the cells to get a boost that heals, rejuvenates and raises their frequency.

"It is like reclaiming the youthful innocence of the body, mind and soul and then returning to the feeling of unity, joy and balance so the clients are prepared to step into the highest version of who they really are.

"The biggest goal of the shaman is to remind people of that balance of the female and the masculine, because when that is in balance we know what to do. It becomes crystal clear.

"All we need in this lifetime is structure, but not one based on man-made laws as those are in themselves convoluted and based in polarity. The divine law, however, is non-dual. It doesn't have good or bad. For thousands of years it was very clear 'this is good, this is bad' but nowadays we don't know anymore. For example, it can be very good to have a cruise on

a big ship but it is not good for the ocean and the life in it.

"For centuries we have been trained to obey man-made laws and deny our true perceptions. We have learned to live in a kind of tilted frame of mind. Learning how to use the Seneca medicine wheel helps clients to listen, understand and act upon the soul's desire to return to centre. It is an inner compass for life."



**"I have worked with Gabrielle and it is an extremely good experience – it goes really deep. It very much complements our Ayurvedic treatments and it means guests can do something for the body, and also for their mind and their soul."**

Lisa Mauracher Resort manager (above left)



and treatments. Even the honey that is part of each day's breakfast buffet originates from this smallholding just a few minutes drive away. In addition, during the summer season, the grounds surrounding the farm are an ideal location in which to immerse guests in outdoor 'forest bathing' pursuits, allowing them to soak up the natural beauty of the landscape.

#### What is European Ayurveda?

When Brigitte Mauracher decided to make a home for Ayurvedic practices in her native Austria, she soon realised that the best way to provide an authentic experience for guests was not to simply import, wholesale, the concepts and constituents of the Indian modality, but rather to adapt its principles to the resort's physical environment. So was born the concept of European Ayurveda, which the family trademarked in 2015.

"For us it was really important to establish this concept as we are European and therefore different in many ways to Indian people," explains Lisa Mauracher. "So we researched what was needed to specifically complement the European way of living. We have three pillars – diagnosis and treatments; ayurvedic nutrition; and yoga, mind detox and meditation. Every part is really important to achieving the goals our guests deserve." Mauracher says around 80% of

the resort's guests come to take its panchakarma cleansing programme, which usually lasts between 7-10 days, but can be extended up to three weeks in duration.

This experience begins with a consultation with the resort's principal physician, Dr. Gaurav Sharma, who uses a traditional Ayurvedic pulse diagnosis to determine the balance of the guest's doshas, or body types, ranging from slender, quick-thinking Vata types, to agile, assertive Pittas and composed, gentle Kaphas. Along with dietary, sleep and lifestyle information, this helps determine the personalised detox, exercise and relaxation regime that will be followed during their stay.

"We have three medical specialists in-house," says Mauracher. "Dr. Sharma; Ayurvedic naturopath Rajat Vashisht; and Dr. Alaettin Sinop, who performs acupuncture. This core team carries out research and trains therapists in massage techniques, as they have the post-diagnostic knowledge and know best what is important for our guests."

This knowledge is passed on to staff through Sonnhof's video-based Ayurveda Academy, and the result is a team that is dedicated to delivering the best in health-giving therapies.

"For the treatments, we looked at what clients were seeking help with – what are the specific problems of European guests? – and then we tailored them accordingly," continues Mauracher. "We changed our full body massage into the European Ayurveda style to better address, for example, the nervous system. A lot of people can't sleep, so we have added some pressure points to aid deeper rest."

#### The making of European Ayurveda

Dr. Gaurav Sharma (below) discusses the adaptation of ancient Indian healing practices into modern-day Austria

"The root of Ayurveda is in India, but we are in Europe, so we had to look at the conditions here that would work with Ayurvedic concepts."

"In India there are six seasons and six tastes – the monsoon and before winter periods are the extra seasons – that is why Ayurveda says that after two months you have to change tastes. Nature tells us the same – there are bitter salads in winter and green salads with less taste in summer. However, we have four seasons here, so we respect nature in working with the herbs, oils and vegetables it provides at different times of the year."

"The first point in Ayurveda is that food should be regional and seasonal, so whereas in India I would take the fruits, grains, everything from there, in Europe we have different crops, but there are always compensations and replacements. For example, radish and ginger – both are sharp; chilli can be red or green; and pepper black or white. So we combined the whole concept."

"This extends to the oil used for massages; we use herbs that are a bio-available resource direct from the mountains here. These things are familiar to Europeans and they work better in this context."

"The other point is that we take therapists from Europe and train them in Ayurveda. They already have a full knowledge of the muscles, but in Ayurveda we don't follow the muscles, it is more about the flow. However, if the therapist also has this knowledge then they can focus deeper on any specific problems the client may have."



## A luxury spa experience begins with BC Softwear



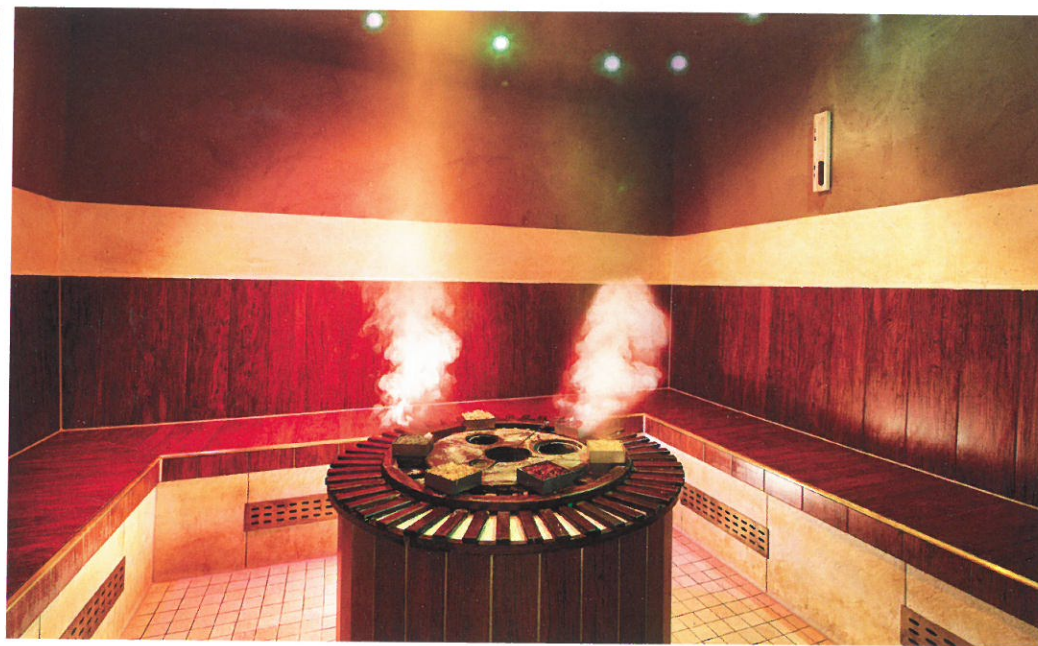
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Above from left: A guest enjoys one of the resort's own-brand herbal teas; the spa's atmospheric Pitta herb clay sauna

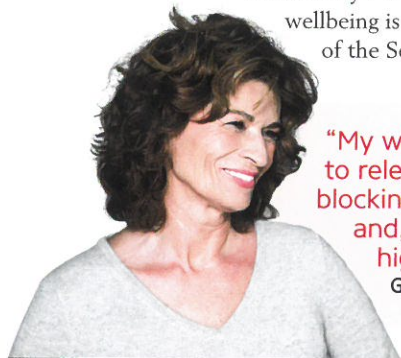
Among the protocols offered are full-body Ayurvedic massages, abdominal massage and Shirodhara, in which warm oil is gently poured onto the forehead to relax the mind, making it also an effective remedy for the sleep issues Mauracher alludes to.

"Likewise, with our yoga, we chose another style that is good for everybody," she explains. "We have some people who do it for the first time during their stay, but also we have yoga teachers who visit and they can still take part in the classes. It's really important to address everything at the same time – the body, soul and mind – and we must be able to fulfill these needs for every guest who stays with us."

#### Enter the shaman

Sonnhof's drive to provide guests with a holistic approach to health and wellbeing has led to the staging of a retreat in collaboration with shamanic energy healer Gabrielle Scharnitzky. Also a well known actress, soon to be seen in a TV spin-off of the Jason Bourne series of movies,

Scharnitzky's transformational approach to wellbeing is based on the 'Pathway of Peace' of the Seneca Nation, taught to her in the



**"My work as a shaman is to release energies that are blocking the natural balance and, therefore, the divine or highest self in each person."**  
Gabrielle Scharnitzky Shamanic healer

1990s at the Cattaraugus Reservation near Niagara Falls by the Chief Grandmother Twylah Hurd Nitsch, who adopted Scharnitzky into the tribe.

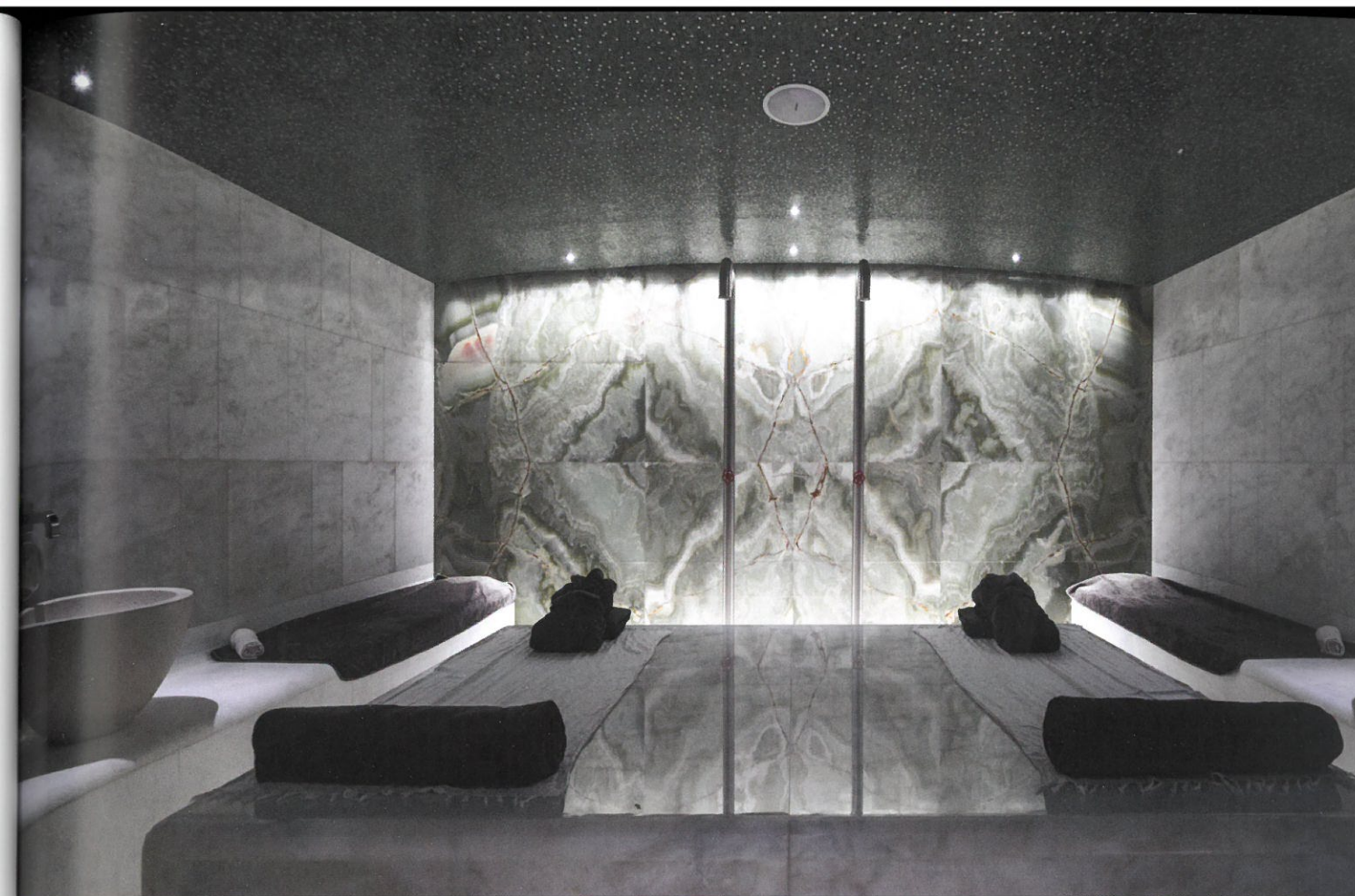
"I believe that the conflicts we have on our planet are due to the imbalance between the masculine and the feminine," she explains. "When women, as well as men, have truly accepted that our planet is governed by the divine feminine principle, they understand that by hurting Mother Earth we are also hurting ourselves. Becoming the master of your life entails the integration of the highest energies of the divine feminine, of Mother Earth, in balance with the highest energies of the divine masculine, or Father Sky."

"My work as a shaman is to release energies that are blocking this natural balance and, therefore, the divine or highest self in each person. With a daily routine of cleansing the body from low energies, a healing process can take place on every level – from the sub-atomical to the physical, emotions, relationships, finance, careers and business."

Scharnitzky uses the traditional medicine wheel of the Senecas to take people on a journey along their spiritual and earthly paths. Along the way they are encouraged to find a single stone that will represent the 'best' version of themselves after their learning. A further 12 stones are positioned at compass points around the wheel to represent fears and insecurities; generational and past-life contracts and burdens; external pressures and self-limiting beliefs; and, ultimately, the transformations each person wants to achieve.

"It is about gaining an inner balance between the physical and spiritual that stays strong even in stressful situations in which we usually react from our fight-or-flight response," she explains. "Our bodies are bombarded with so much information that we operate constantly with an excess of adrenalin, which is bad for us. If you don't know how to release stress it gets stored in your body and energy field."

"I apply the medicine wheel and wisdom of the Seneca

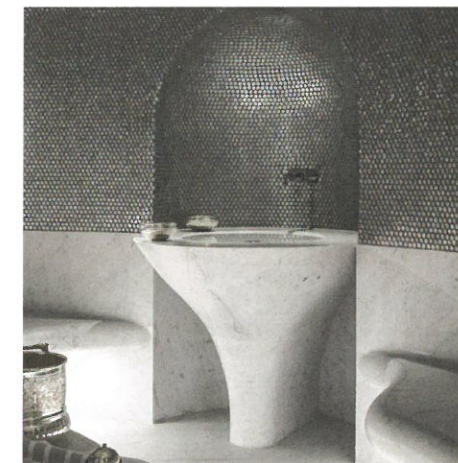


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Right from top: Natural materials are at the fore of the interiors throughout; the resort's shamanic healing retreat aims to complement its focus on meditation and movement; eastern design influences at the entrance to the indoor pool

- ▷ Nation to open the client to non-physical realities. From there I help and teach a daily practice to release blockages in the energy field. These energetic clusters are also the gateway to lost particles of the soul that is caught in old traumas, belief systems, genetic contracts and ties with other lifetimes.

"I can see the soul holographically and identify in which lifetime it is caught. By getting into a very real dialogue with it I am helping to release the source of the trauma. During this process the client learns how to open up to the impulses of the soul, which knows what is best for us, both in daily life and in the long run. By being in dialogue with your soul you are becoming a resilient master of your own life."

Lisa Mauracher believes this view of nature, spirituality and wellbeing is perfectly complementary to the Sonnhof philosophy of European Ayurveda.

"This is the first time we have had a visiting practitioner and also the first time we have staged a shamanic healing retreat," she reveals. "I have worked with Gabrielle and it is an extremely good experience – it goes really deep. Also, shamanic healing very much complements our Ayurvedic treatments – it means guests can do something for the body, and also for their mind and their soul, so they work very well together."

As well as being open to the possibility of collaborating on further retreats with visiting practitioners, the Mauracher family are also now starting to consider how to further promote their exclusive European Ayurveda concept beyond the confines of Sonnhof itself.

"We are thinking about expanding our concept to other places, maybe our own property or maybe as some kind of franchise or partnership, but this is in the very early stages of planning," says Lisa. "This could be in Austria or a German speaking country, or maybe even in the UK."

Scharnitzky's shamanic emphasis on feminine creation is reflected in much of the symbolism displayed around Sonnhof and its grounds, as well as in the methodologies of European Ayurveda itself. Ultimately it also flows back to the very seed from which the business first grew. From Brigitte Mauracher's stated desire to 'work with the home-grown treasures that nature has given us', her daughters and husband have developed a pioneering resort whose philosophy continues to strive to provide a place in which guests can 'Shine on!' ●●●●●

#### EUROPEAN AYURVEDA RESORT SONNHOF, AUSTRIA

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**Owner:** The Mauracher family **Architect:** Peter Urban **Designer:** Brigitte Urban **Spa consultant:** Claudia Reichenberger, Marketing Deluxe **Shamanic healer:** Gabrielle Scharnitzky [www.heal-your-soul.com](http://www.heal-your-soul.com)  
**Spa team:** 25 **Treatment rooms:** 15 **Product partners:** Pharmos Natur, Thalgo, Alpienne, Pañpuri, Lakshmi, Midgard's Kalari Ayurvedic oils, Doskar, Ortho Therapie, Amla Natur, European Ayurveda brand tea and spices  
**Spa design and supply:** KLAFS My Sauna and Spa, Nautilus gym equipment, Physiotherm, Roth Sauna, Stimularium



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