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# SOMEWHERE FOR THE WEEKEND?



Hard-hitting but not scary, Portugal's newest and most talked-about, serious destination spa trumps other retreats by being both nurturing and ground-breaking, says **E Jane Dickson**. Photographs by **Line Klein**

**T**HE ANCIENT CORK OAKS of Monchique are an inspiration. Stripped of their gnarly, grey husk, harvested trees flaunt the slim, brown midriff of a teenage beach bunny.

The cork harvest happens once every 10 years (roughly the interval at which I consider addressing my own thickening trunk), so I'm inclined to take it as sign. And the Serra de Monchique, a 20-minute drive from the Algarve's throbbing coast, feels like a good place for new beginnings. Mountain breezes are heady with pine and eucalyptus, and the atmosphere at Longevity, Portugal's most progressive spa and wellness centre, is no less invigorating.

As you approach the complex, the plate-glass monolith has the brutal glamour of a Bond villain's lair. The minute you're through the doors, however, swirly spa music and huge, amoeba-shaped sofas suggest an eco-chic haven where nothing bad can happen. You are met by Teresa Malheiro, the world's least

*Opposite, from top left: a bedroom at Longevity; the reception area; the restaurant; couscous at the brunch buffet*

daunting medical spa director, who sits you down with a herbal tea and talks you through the various pathways to health and happiness.

Longevity is at the sharp end of the wellness spectrum – more wheatgrass and weight training than caviar pedicures. But the level of engagement is up to you. If you're there simply to rest and recuperate in glorious sylvan surroundings, no one will prod you into poolside aerobics. However, most guests take advantage of a roster of fitness, detox, stress-management and weight-loss programmes. There are group-friendly boot camps and a hardcore 15-day Fast Slimming and Detox plan. But as the name suggests, Longevity's USP is its thorough anti-ageing regime.

The resort is the brainchild of Nazir Sacoor, a former actuary who, in the course of calculating the 'longevity risk' of insured parties, came to identify the factors conducive to a long and healthy life. There are few surprises here – no

sci-fi breakthroughs involving nano-cells or cryogenically frozen body parts – but if you're going to embrace a life-changing regime of exercise and optimum nutrition, Longevity offers an effective kick-start. A fleet of doctors, nutritionists and fitness trainers is at your disposal, and individually tailored programmes make generous allowance for personal fitness levels and, in my case, personal prejudice.

Being of an age and background where 'wellness' means 'not being ill', I am not much disposed to consider my long-term health. So Longevity's nowhere-to-hide biophysical evaluation is a shock.

Wired up to a machine that measures fat mass, muscle mass, non-fat mass, etc, I discover that my muscle mass is fine. The rest, shall we say, needs work. Most appallingly, I learn that my biological age has a good 10 years' march on my birth certificate.

The biomedical evaluation is more heartening. The spa's



## Short break



► clinical director, Dr Manuela Figini, takes me through a questionnaire on everything from sleep patterns to sexual satisfaction, and runs exhaustive blood tests and endocrine profiling. Results confirm there's nothing much the matter with me that can't be sorted out with nutritional supplements. Rather thrillingly, however, I am prescribed intravenous vitamins (beloved of A-list decadents and Simon Cowell) and a session of ozonotherapy, a hi-tech procedure purporting to oxygenate the blood. Dr Figini, who previously worked as a maxillofacial surgeon, is also in charge of aesthetic medicine. The usual range of non-surgical fixes and fillers is available, but when I present my face for appraisal, I am informed, kindly enough, that 'without an eye-lift, there is really no point'.

**A**T LEAST, I THINK, as I slope off to the nutritionist, my collapsed face matches my prematurely aged body. I wouldn't be entirely surprised if I were to be handed a diet sheet for the soon-to-be toothless, but Ana Rita likes to accentuate the positive. She listens gravely to my dietary confession and pronounces my daily intake

Above, pumpkin soup and the Wellness Bar

healthy and balanced. The weight gain is indeed mysterious, but an exciting new eating plan will put me to rights. Encouragingly, Longevity insists on five meals a day and emphasises food combining. Fruit, I learn, should always be eaten with a small amount of protein or carbohydrate to stabilise blood-sugar levels. To optimise digestion, cold food should be followed by hot, and water must be drunk at room temperature. It all makes

### My dinner arrives and the mystery of the excess poundage is solved: I've been eating enough for three

sense. How hard, for God's sake, can this weight-loss business be?

Buoyed up with science and good intentions, I skip off to my table for one at the serene white-on-white restaurant. Quite a few of the guests are single women of a certain age, variously fit or fat. There are also families in fleeces and complicated walking shoes, and a table of city types starting a run on the wine (Longevity doesn't serve spirits, but there's a well-edited wine list if you ask). Most intriguing is a couple feeding each other carrot-and-cumin amuse-bouches. They

have elected, I learn, for a detox honeymoon and I have to concentrate hard on not imagining a candlelit colon cleanse. When my dinner, ordered by Rita, arrives, the mystery of the excess poundage is immediately solved. My diet may be balanced, but clearly I have been eating enough for three people. The artistry on my plate, however, takes my mind off portion size. Beetroot soup, Schiaparelli-pink, looks like it has been art directed by Diana Vreeland. Endive and coriander make a small altar for celestial seared scallops. I'm not officially down for dessert, but – in the interests of research – I choose an espresso mousse, densely flavoured, light as a cloud, from the tempting à-la-carte list which comes with indications for gluten-free, low-carb and low-calorie options.

By most European standards, Longevity's restaurants (as well as the formal dining room there is a fabulous pool-side grill and salad bar) are exceptionally well-priced. And the breakfast buffet has enough spelt and spirulina to satisfy the faddiest eater.

In view of longer than average stays (some guests check in for a month), each of the 135 suites has generous facilities for self-catering. The kitchens have long, sociable tables and sufficient crockery to entertain. Bedrooms are minimal verging on clinical, but there is a comfortable sitting room, and separate bath and shower rooms. Out on the lavender-planted patio, oversize linen hammocks are heaped with cushions. You could happily spend your days drinking a papaya-and-mint smoothie, padding between treatments, hammock and the infinity pool, from where you can look clear across the gilded tree canopy to the broad, blue streak of the Mediterranean.

Or you can strike out and explore. Monchique is known, with good reason, as the garden of the Algarve. Pomegranate branches are hung with blood-bright fruits, like trees pictured in a Book of Hours. A seven-minute walk down cobbled lanes from Longevity brings you to Caldas de Monchique, a belle-époque-fantasy village (like a Portuguese Portmeirion) where ►



## Short break



➤ ferny mountain springs feed a renowned thermal spa. You can take the waters at the municipal pool, where local matrons swim like geese in stately lines. Or try the somewhat retro treatments. Pressotherapy, where you are clamped into a plastic sarcophagus and blasted by alternating jets of hot and freezing water, feels like something designed to calm lunatics in a Victorian asylum. Afterwards, though, your legs feel lighter.

Good walking paths adapted from fire breaks (the legacy of a forest blaze in 2003) lead to Fóia; at 900 metres, it's the highest point on the Algarve. A 40-minute drive to the Atlantic coast takes you through white villages, palm-planted Moorish outposts and red, wind-warped dunes that look like the Mountains of Mars. Cabo de São Vicente is a spectacular finale, the south-westernmost tip of Portugal, where, viewed from 75-metre cliffs, dolphins sew white seams in an indigo-denim sea.

**B**ACK AT LONGEVITY, on the advice of my various consultants, a programme of treatments has been planned for me, and I am a little surprised to discover how much I am enjoying being the focus of so many experts,

Above, Longevity's lobby and pool area, and a chicken dish at the restaurant

all sweetly bent on my wellness. A session with head osteopath Ricardo Rosa tips me into born-again fervour. He is a genius with the hands of God and the sensitivity of a safe-cracker. I am tapped and pressed at various points until something (I'm not sure what) gives and I feel like an unstrung puppet. Rosa thinks the chronic stiffness in my right leg is the result of having been a forceps delivery.

### The Puritan part of me is thinking 'Oh, God, no. Not rebirthing' when I realise I've been fixed

The last Puritan part of me is thinking 'Oh, God, no. Please. Not rebirthing' when I realise that I have been fixed. For the first time in years, one leg is as good as the other.

A little spaced out, I head off for a vitamin infusion. Hooked up to what looks like a bag of Lucozade, I am ready, in my post-Rosa euphoria, to believe that this decadent cocktail of oligo-elements, minerals and vitamins will effect 'a chemical

reaction at cellular level' and help my body repair itself faster than oral supplements.

Ozonotherapy, the star turn of the anti-ageing programme, is rather more dramatic. A syringe-full of my blood is withdrawn and mixed with ozone, or active oxygen, then reintroduced to my system via a drip. The technique has been known since World War I, when it was used by German army doctors to hasten healing in wounded soldiers, but it has only recently hit the spa circuit. Some Longevity clients come to the resort purely for this treatment and swear by its rejuvenating properties. (Health benefits listed in the brochure include the regeneration of red blood cells, destruction of fats, improved metabolism and elimination of bacteria, viruses and fungi.) The effect of my one-off treatment is not immediate.

By now, I'm looking for miracles, and the mechanical peeling I choose from the aesthetic medicine list comes close. Longevity's treatment rooms are unusually dark and womb-like, which adds to the sense of the big reveal when a diamond-tipped microdermabrasion tool (it looks like a miniature paint-stripper and does pretty much the same job) removes the top layer of skin from my face and is followed by ultrasonic exfoliation to stimulate circulation and collagen production. It is possibly the only facial I have ever had where I (and others) could see an immediate and lasting effect. For weeks afterwards, my skin is smoother and brighter, and fine lines appear to have been sloughed away.

Which is not to say the Longevity effect is skin-deep. I am not, at the end of my stay, a shadow of my former self. But, for the first time, I think that I know what to do about it. I have learned that wholegrains are not the nubby work of the devil. I feel lighter, and I'm sleeping like a baby. I'm limber and looser, and have the undignified urge to skip. Could this be 'wellness'? Pass the finger cymbals. I'm onboard. 🎯

*A three-night Body Rebalance Break costs from £1,115 per person, including accommodation, meals, consultation, treatments and transfers (+351 282 240 100; [www.longevitywellnessresort.com](http://www.longevitywellnessresort.com))*