



Hermès camel hair overcoat, \$7,700; hermes.com. Chanel Watches ceramic and steel watch, \$5,700; 800-550-0005.

HAIR BY PHILIPPE THOLIMET AT SAINT LUKE USING ORIBE. MAKEUP BY CLARE READ AT CAREN USING MAC COSMETICS. MODEL: DEMY DE VRIES AT DNA

This side of paradise

DAPHNE MERKIN checks in to Switzerland's fabled *CLINIQUE LA PRAIRIE* and finds that the ultimate approach to well-being is a combination of restriction and indulgence.

photographs by JAI ODELL

styled by MELISSA VENTOSA MARTIN

WE ALL CARRY WITHIN US, buried beneath the demands and expectations of our ordinary lives, a vision of absolute luxury, someplace on earth (or perhaps elsewhere) where our basic needs will be met and our every extravagant whim attended to. It is nothing less than a utopian dream of well-being, one that some people seek through recreational drugs, others through the thrill of a new love affair, and yet others through high-end resorts with an unlimited supply of fluffy white towels and sunshine.

I found myself musing on this subject for the entire six days I spent at the renowned Clinique La Prairie, nestled between Lake Geneva and the Alps in the peaceful tourist town of Montreux, Switzerland (population less than 30,000). Montreux is famous for its jazz festival in July, its casino, and a bevy of hospitality-management schools. It is blessed as well with a microclimate that gives it a warmer temperature than the rest of the region, and spectacular views. Freddie Mercury, who worked and resided here for the last years of his life, is honored with a statue on the six-mile lakeside promenade that stretches from the town of Vevey to Vevytau. Nearby, on the grounds of Le Montreux Palace there is a statue of Nabokov, who lived in the hotel for almost two decades.

From the moment I walked out of the Zurich Airport and was met by Felix, the clinic's cheerful driver, who took my over-packed luggage off my hands and whisked me away in a gray Mercedes, I had an inkling that I had arrived at the essence of *luxe, calme, et volupté*. This wasn't the first time a

person holding up a sign with my name on it had greeted me at an airport, but there was something different about this occasion: Maybe it was the bracing Swiss air, or the clarity of the light, or, as was more likely, the clinic's long-standing reputation as a super-private getaway for people who found it hard to escape their public personae—Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Winston Churchill, and Cary Grant, to name just a few. I, a journalist who had no public persona to escape, felt all the same how easy it would be to lose myself—and, hopefully, a few pounds—in the posh pampering regimen I assumed was waiting for me.

How right I was. And then again, how wrong. There was, indeed, pampering galore to be had. For one thing, there was the moneyed hush of the place itself, which featured exquisite flower arrangements and brass sculptures everywhere one looked; it was decorated in an understated and airy style in shades of yellow, white, and green. Then there was the gracious but never obsequious staff (at a ratio of six employees to every one guest), who appeared on cat's feet to pour a cup of tea or arrange for a car to go into town. The spa treatments included hydrafacials, Thai massages, and thermal mud wraps, and were conducted in softly lit rooms. For an additional charge, more cutting-edge services, such as CoolSculpting, "Hollywood" peels, and mesotherapy (a revitalizing cocktail for skin), were available. (The company sold its skincare line, La Prairie, to German conglomerate Beiersdorf in the 1980s and no longer retains any affiliation with the products that share its name.)

A sense of having arrived somewhere exclusive, almost clubby, was underscored by the fact that



Versace swimsuit, \$850; versace.com.
Below: **Loro Piana** cashmere sweater, \$1,900; loropiana.com. **Brunello Cucinelli** turtleneck, \$1,395; brunellocucinelli.com. Stylist's own headband.

there was a slightly ghostly, *Last Year at Marienbad* quality to the clinic; one could pass an entire day in splendid isolation, without glimpsing another soul. Except, say, someone who looked like a deposed potentate even in his terry robe, or an exceedingly thin elderly woman who was wearing platform heels and a different fur jacket every time I saw her in the restaurant—although there, too, I saw but a scattering of guests. (Apparently over half the clients choose to eat in their rooms.) The restaurant, whose tables are set with Bernardaud china, Christofle silverware, and fine-spun cotton napery, fronts the largest and most gleaming kitchen I have ever seen. It is peopled by a staff of 27 who are capable of making virtually any healthy dish to order in addition to the array of Continental, international, and vegan delicacies on the elaborate menu. All this for a population of 50 clients in high season (May to October), going down to 25 or so in low season (November to February).

Still, as I very quickly discovered, there was another side to the clinic, one that consisted of a rigorous, medical approach to improving one's health. This aspect manifested itself within minutes of my arrival, when a uniformed registered nurse appeared even before I had settled into my junior suite in the Château (guests are also housed in a second, charming, but less modernized building called the Résidence, as well as several suites in the Medical Center). After gently sticking me, the nurse





Right: **Bottega Veneta** cotton and satin coat, \$4,250; 800-845-6790. **Chanel** jersey dress, \$1,300; 800-550-0005. **Calvin Klein** aluminum sunglasses, \$495; calvinklein.us. *Opposite:* **Brunello Cucinelli** cashmere cardigan, \$3,450; brunellocucinelli.com. **Khaite** cotton bra, \$290; khaite.com. **Araks** polyamide shorts, \$160; araks.com. **The Row** mesh slipper, \$490; 212-755-2017.



took about 12 vials of blood for tests, the results of which would be explained to me several days later by Dr. Magali Flot, the young practitioner to whom I had been assigned, an expert in the fields of nutrition, obesity, and “*troubles alimentaires*” (anorexia, bulimia, etc.). I was rushed over to the first of several meetings with Dr. Flot: a lengthy interview in which she asked the usual questions about how much alcohol I consumed and whether I had ever smoked, and during which I regaled her with the details of my various infirmities, from a chronically painful back to diabetes. She then took samples of saliva from each side of my mouth, listened to my chest, and (after asking if I minded) palpated my breasts.

Dr. Flot, whose manner was gentle and receptive, is part of a battalion of medical specialists (numbering about 50 in all) who work in the Medical Center, a building with hospital floors and labs that is accessible from the clinic’s main structure by an underground passageway. (Patients come to this clinic both from Montreux and farther afield to have everything from knee replacements to facelifts.) Dr. Flot would eventually determine from my blood results that I had a dangerously high level of mercury in my body (she suggested replacing my silver fillings with ceramic



Chanel wool and mohair tweed jacket, \$7,200; 800-550-0005. **Bottega Veneta** cotton and satin skirt, \$990; 800-845-6790. **Loewe** calf-leather bag, \$1,800; loewe.com. **Sensi Studio** straw hat, \$204; sensistudio.com.

ones) and a low iron count; I was prescribed a daily liquid iron supplement, and one afternoon received an IV infusion of iron for good measure. Genetic testing was also part of my medical workup, the better to establish my inherent propensities and vulnerabilities. I was given the results on my second to last day, when I would discover that I suffered from lactose intolerance, which I had never suspected, and that tragically, but not surprisingly, an inclination to obesity ran in my family.

Before I arrived it had been decided that I would be placed on the Master Detox, one of many individually tailored holistic programs that focus on issues such as cleaning toxins, reducing stress, and strengthening internal defenses. My seven-day plan consisted primarily of a diet in which I was put on a visually appealing (but to my mind intolerably minimal) menu featuring an ingenious lemon carpaccio, various soy concoctions, beet or carrot soup, steamed micro-vegetables, and a small slice or two of gluten- and sugar-free bread. The breakfast buffet, with its cheeses, cured meats, marbled tea eggs, and (mostly glucose- and lactose-free) pastries, was off-limits; after a few mornings of studying it wistfully, I decided to stop torturing myself and avoided it altogether. Coffee was prohibited, as were wine and my beloved diet soda. When I complained of hunger pangs (as I frequently did) to Olga Donica, the glamorous nutritionist whose enormous gray doe eyes put me in mind of a light-haired Audrey Hepburn, a few tablespoons of an apple or pear purée were added to my breakfast as a special treat.

Afternoon snacks consisted of dried fruit, nuts, or—wonder of wonders—carrot and cucumber sticks. No animal proteins were allowed during the first three days, after which point one could order eggs at breakfast (my soft-boiled eggs came with

white napkin “hats”) as well as stingy portions of chicken or fish at dinner. I was also given a shot of a detoxifying extract to drink in the late afternoon, as well as regular servings of cleanse-approved tea. Although I was assured that I would eventually adapt to the sparse amount of food on offer, I didn’t, and took to reading the menus with great intensity, the better to envision what gustatory delights I might enjoy again once my detox nibbling was over. (One is, of course, meant to follow the clinic’s extremely healthy if deprivational way of eating after leaving, to which end Olga frequently offered advice as to what seeds and plants would be worthy of ingesting going forward. I admit that I dutifully played the part of eager student whenever we conversed about proper nutrition, both because I craved Olga’s approval and because a tiny part of me allowed that there might be some real benefit to changing my sugar-addicted ways.)

Since its founding in the 1930s by professor Paul Niehans, the clinic’s *pièce de résistance*—and the reason it has been sought out by those in the know ever since—is its Revitalization program, which consists of a form of cellular therapy that initially involved the injection of fetal ovine cells and these days is characterized by the twice-weekly consumption of scientifically advanced extracts derived from the livers of young lambs. Although I tried to inquire into the details of this procedure more closely—and in fact tried to avail myself of the treatment itself—it seemed shrouded in mystery, and was declared to be out-of-bounds for journalists. Adrian Heini, the somewhat irritable internist who oversees this program, stated firmly that the practitioners at the clinic “don’t do miracles,” but that the Revitalization program is able to stimulate cell regeneration and strengthen one’s immune (CONTINUED ON P. 122) →

defenses. This elixir of youth is the most sought-after program at the clinic, and is also among the most expensive, coming in at \$40,000 for a seven-day stay, compared with the Master Detox program in a standard room, which costs \$15,000 for the same length of time. (This kind of Swiss expertise mixed with the hyper-attenuated, almost exotic level of devoted personal attention from a caring staff—think Canyon Ranch meets the Mayo Clinic meets Thomas Mann’s *Magic Mountain*—doesn’t come cheap.) The clinic, which has until very recently thrived mostly on word of mouth, has a 70 percent return rate among its clients, the largest part of whom are from Asia and Europe, with others coming from the Middle East and the Americas.

The clinic has, at least to my mind, a slightly exaggerated notion of privacy, as though all its guests are celebrities looking for a sanctuary away from both the spotlight and other citizens. I will admit that I walked around for the first few days feeling rather lonely—so much so that I spent my entire facial appointment and “visceral therapy” (in which one’s organs are manipulated) chirping away to a shy and beautiful aesthetician from Cap Vert with whom, so eager was I for companionship, I discussed the possibility of arranging a visit to her family’s home in nearby Vevey. Then, lo and behold, midway through the week, I was introduced to Gregor and Nina Mattli and found myself in good company.

The young, vegan, and refreshingly down-to-earth couple—he sports a little bun on the top of his head and his rangy wife has long *Alice in Wonderland* hair—own the Clinique La Prairie and happened to be visiting while I was there. I enjoyed two dinners with them, in which we discovered many mutual interests, ranging from movies to literary writers. Listening to them discuss their philosophy of service, I came to credit them with imparting a genuine feeling of family to

what is, after all, a business, and one with its eye discreetly on the bottom line.

As the week passed, I began to get used to keeping my own company and started looking back on my life in New York as an endless round of pointless chatter. You might say that there was an almost existential shift in my consciousness, brought on by the tranquility and the invigorating walks I took alone by the lake, knowing all along that there were people around who were concerned about every inch of me. I felt less frazzled, more focused on the here and now—clearer-headed, as though a grainy film had been removed from my eyes and now I could see clearly. And then there were the more tangible improvements: By the middle of my stay, my permanently swollen ankles, which of late always look as if I’ve just stepped off a long plane ride, had miraculously returned to their former shapeliness, and I could tell that I had lost a few pounds, even though I hadn’t weighed myself after the first medical exam. My skin had more of that elusive glow, there was an energetic bounce to my step, and for the first time in ages, I found myself falling asleep on my own, without the help of medication.

Beyond the facilities, there is the ravishing quality of Montreux itself, which was, when I visited, still ablaze with the yellows, oranges, and reds of fall foliage and peopled with unanxious-seeming residents who take walks or use scooters on the promenade overlooking the transparent lake. The shopping

district is filled with jewelry stores selling fabulously expensive watches, dingy little boutiques offering overpriced Swiss lingerie, and superb pharmacies. My most interesting afternoon was spent at the Charlie Chaplin museum, which is housed on his former estate in Corsier-sur-Vevey. Its exhibits are meticulous and include reconstructed film sets from Chaplin’s movies; one can roam around the furnished rooms, peeking in on the cultured lifestyle he and his wife, Oona (O’Neill), created for themselves and their eight children.

On a late Sunday morning, after an excellent, strong massage, I reclined on a cushioned wicker chair on a terrace outside the dazzlingly white indoor pool, which overlooks a precise French garden, breathing in the crystalline air. Thinking of snowbound Manhattan, where I was going to return the next day, I felt uncharacteristically sated, as though there were nothing I was hankering after—besides the manicure I was attempting to schedule later that afternoon before my departure. How easy it was to get attached to this small oasis where the only sound is the dim swoosh of passing cars and an occasional bird cawing! The place looks even less inhabited on a Sunday, when new guests check in, than it does during the week, and it was easy to feel as if I had the premises to myself and was insulated from the furies and demons of the larger world. If this was luxury, I wanted more of it. Welcome to some sort of paradise. cliniquelaprairie.com 

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