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TRAVEL on Sunday

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Germany

My five steps to fasting fulfilment

At a crossroads in her life, Tracey Woodward checked into a German wellness clinic for three whole weeks – and kept a detailed journal

DAYS 1 – 4
Beginning the fast

It's surreal to enter another country in the midst of a pandemic, but I'm relieved to have made it to the Buchinger Wilhelmi clinic in Germany, high above Lake Constance near the border with Switzerland. I'm approaching 55, and I'm here to give myself space, time and wellness after a tough couple of years – even before the pandemic wrought its chaos, my marriage ended after 17 years with a text: "don't email me, text me or call me ever again". It enforced a house move, and the subsequent loss of half my business clients.

It's not easy to begin again at my age. Disappointment can be a killer, and I need to take control of my health, make myself my priority and start afresh – that's exactly what I've come here to do.

Experts will coach me through my three week therapeutic fast which will, they say, build my immune system, manage my stress and start cell revitalisation. My stay will include exercise and relaxation, physical therapy treatments, nutrition and dietetics advice, inspiration and spirituality. My new routine will be a daily visit to the nurse to check my blood pressure, a meditation class, a stretch session, a liver pack at midday and a walk in the countryside. There will be juice and tea during the day and evenings will entail 20 minutes on the rowing machine and a 20-minute swim, followed by a bowl of soup. In the first five days I can expect to lose a kilo a day, but I am here more for the longevity of wellness and self-care education.

Morning group meditation takes



Take it in your stride: a walk in the Baden-Württemberg countryside



Although I am not with my children or friends, I feel safe and nurtured.

DAYS 18 – 23
Bright-eye stage

I meet with nutritionist Bridget, who explains my meal plan for the last days. I am moved on to a ketogenic diet – less than 800 calories a day, which now feels a multitude. My first meal is almonds and a courgette mousse, and in the evening a small portion of vegetables. The spinach and chard are delicious and it takes me about 30 minutes to eat, savouring every tiny mouthful.

The routine of self-care is coming to an end. I've been locked away in a glorious bubble of attentive kindness, and I've learnt things I wish I'd known 20 years ago. I sense they'll take me forward into the next 20 with a zest for life. This evening, I eat spinach wilted with a delicate tomato sauce and enjoy a

Remains of the day: a sunset swim at the clinic



place with Mr Lutz, an alternative health practitioner: an upright meditation with chanting at the end as the sun rises. It's beautiful, and I feel my energy lift.

Today I am to prepare my body for fasting, with fruit for breakfast, spinach, chard and potato for lunch. The thought of not eating for another three weeks is scary, but I try to savour these final meals, feeling confident. My first blood test shows I have low-level inflammation and some of my markers are higher than ideal cholesterol – I could have the early onset of gout – but my vitamin D is perfect and bone density is good.

On day four, I have my first Chi Nei Tsang treatment, an intense tummy massage that releases grief, trauma and anxiety, along with any food particles I have packed into myself over the past year. While it's not exactly enjoyable, the human touch is almost comforting.

DAY 5 – 10
Sleep!

My fifth fasting day is Christmas. After speaking with friends and family – and swooning over everyone's Christmas feasts – this is the hardest part so far. It's the first time I have ever missed a family Christmas, and I feel the full weight of loneliness after my divorce. I miss my children. I busy myself with exercise classes, swimming and meditating, and begin to feel more present. I read a whole book! There is a sweet gift giving with other guests. By the end of the



I feel fabulous and confident: Tracey Woodward discovered a new sense of calm

Tea is served during the day

day I feel less lonely, more empowered.

Each day I meditate and go for my weigh-in. Some days call for a walk in the Kneipp therapy pool: it's -1C outside and the water is like ice but makes me feel awake. I'm shaky at times, but not hungry. I nap with a liver pack most days: a warm cloth and hot water compressed to my liver, designed to help it release toxins. I also have an enema every other day (the off days are a joy).

On day eight I see a personal trainer. Building muscle is the aim and he works me until I'm shattered, but buzzing! I also do a six-mile walk on the treadmill with weights and a breathing workshop, then manage to sleep from 11pm to 7am – almost unheard of this year.

I have found my sleep has gradually improved over these five days – I'm

waking feeling refreshed, not sluggish. I sleep particularly well after lymphatic drainage, a therapeutic massage with very light, gentle rhythmic strokes to increase the flow of lymph, a clear, slightly yellow fluid. Afterwards I drink extra water to help push it all out.

On my 10th day, however, I wake feeling very dizzy and achy. After a visit to the doctor, I am told that I'm salt deficient. At dinner, I get my own salt pot to add to my daily broth. Absolute bliss.

DAYS 11 – 14
Reset

To bring my blood pressure back up to normal, I have three portions of salty soup a day and keep exercise low-impact. It's as if my body is telling me to slow down. I'm offered the opportunity to stop my fast but I decline: I have been visualising my cells – full of cortisol, adrenalin, sugar and fat – dispersing.

I try Myoreflex, a system of applying neuro-muscular pressure point stimulation, similar to acupressure, that targets health problems and pains related to muscles and joints. I enjoy breath therapy with Mrs Lang, a therapist who tells me to lie on my back and full belly breathe. This treatment is to improve lung capacity, flex the diaphragm, helping it back to its normal state; it can tense and drop, so it's a reminder of the importance of posture and breath.

I am starting to feel connected to my body in a way I don't think I ever have

before, apart from when I had my two children. The fasting is making me listen to it, to put it first – and, in return, I feel my body is saying thank you.

DAYS 15 – 17
Energy

On my 15th day I feel a new energy. I wake at 5am with clarity of thought and start madly taking notes on my new year action plan. On the top of my list is to hold on to this moment. The routine hasn't changed – nurse, meditate, stretch, swim, juice, liver pack, sleep, apple tea, walk, soup, lecture, read, sleep – but combined with my everyday rituals of a body and face brush, a cold shower and tongue scraping, it now feels indulgent rather than a duty.

I am excited to see the renowned osteopath Kaiser-Schroppe. He starts the session with gentle pressure, warmth and kindness, pointing out tension and "blockages" – correctly, he identifies where I have pain. It feels almost miraculous. I walk out of the treatment room feeling two inches taller. My sense of smell and taste are bouncing today, the melon juice is a joyful experience for my tastebuds.

Day 17 is my 55th birthday. Historically, at this age my female predecessors have been ill, and simply making it to this point in life brings me so much gratitude. I toast myself with a cup of salty soup and fresh orange juice.

I've been locked away in a glorious bubble of attentive kindness

reflexology treatment, a type of massage that applies pressure to the feet, hands and ears. My therapist tells me that apart from a little fluid there is no tension or stress in my body. This is a first.

As I finish fasting, a strange phenomenon occurs – I am actually mourning not eating, and the mental freedom it has brought me. I vow to be more consistent and considerate of what I put into my mouth. They say it takes 21 days to break a habit and 42 to create one – I feel that I am closer to building better food choices and self-care habits than I have ever been before.

On my last day, I begin again: wiser, nurtured, full of self-respect and self-esteem, and with a new sense of calm. I wonder if it's just fasting that has released the anxiety, grief, trauma and toxins that have taken years to build up, or the care I have received here. I guess it's an expert mixture of the two. I feel lifted and light. As I look in the mirror I notice that my eyes, normally a dull blue, are turquoise, my skin is radiant. I feel fabulous and confident.

Buchinger Wilhelmi (0049 7551 8070; buchinger-wilhelmi.com) offers 10-day fasting stays from £2,340 per person. The price includes two consultations with a doctor, daily nurse checkups, food/drink, fasting provisions and daily activities. Shorter, non-fasting stays are also available from £218 per night. Overseas holidays are currently subject to restrictions.