



Buchinger Wilhelm, on the shores of Lake Constance in southern Germany, has a steaming outdoor pool heated to 30C

Want to ease pain and lose weight in style? Think fast

A feast of things to do and a calorie-restricted diet at this luxury ‘fasting’ clinic in Germany leave **Sophie Pither** on a high

Back in my twenties I would shed half a stone on holiday through a whirlwind of dancing, late nights and little food. Today, nearing 50, trips abroad have the opposite effect. Keen for drastic action to shift my middle-aged midriff, I book into Buchinger Wilhelm, a therapeutic fasting clinic by Lake Constance in southern Germany.

The clinic, described by its owners as “part hotel, part monastery, part hospital”, is a clean-lined late-1950s modernist building with low-slung furniture and big 20th-century artworks. The hospital vibe is forefront as I’m swept off for Covid tests, but my neutral-toned room is more hotel, overlooking misty Lake Constance, the Alps a faint backdrop.

The place was set up by Otto Buchinger, a military medic in a wheelchair by 40 with rheumatism. He tried fasting and found that 19 days without food gave him full mobility. Today, weight-loss is the big draw, but reduction of muscle and joint pain also attracts people. High blood pressure, diabetes and even depression can be eased. Buchinger is researching the effects of fasting on long Covid.

Day one is a digestive rest day, eating only organic veg. A dull-sounding “potato plate” is surprisingly delicious cloud-fluffy mash with spinach. A doctor checks me over, taking blood, noting my weight, waist size, blood-pressure and medical history, and hands over soluble minerals to consume while fasting. Caffeine and alcohol are *verboten*, although it’s a free-for-all on herbal tea and mineral water. Later, I join the daily group walk, hiking up to a vineyard and down via chocolate-box pretty towns.

Day two is my first fast day. For the next five days I will be on 200 calories per day. I start with “Glauber’s salt drink”, which true to whispers among fellow fastees brings on a sudden evacuation of, well, everything. Later, in the faster’s salon I have a thin pumpkin soup. Soft swivel chairs and coffee tables encourage sociability. There’s a highbrow air, with art books and a chap tinkling a Bösendorfer grand. We converse quietly



and gaze over the vast lake, the sun dipping into the water while we slurp.

Day three starts – like every day – with a weigh-in and nurse check-up. Soon after, a spoonful of honey arrives in my room with sweet apple-tea, homemade from local fruit. Then it’s just the soups to look forward to. At midday the nurse brings a hot-water bottle to stimulate blood flow in the liver and orders relaxation. Exercise is encouraged, but the 12 till 2 rest is sacrosanct.

By now I understand why the owners dub the clinic “part monastery”. Fasting is like a quasi-religious awakening, stimulating euphoric dreams. A friend predicted I’d be lying in a heap for ten days, but the opposite is true. I have abundant energy and clarity of thought. I feel invincible.

While there is a lack of food, a feast of activities is included with your stay. A steaming 30C outdoor pool is perfect for slow laps, a workout room is stacked with machines. I try yoga led by multilingual instructors. There’s an entire handbook of treatments, from osteopathy to a vigorous scrubbing with bristly loofahs until you’re buzzing all over. Evening events range from classical music recitals to healthy cooking demos.

By day four I’m an old hand. Without the tyranny of eating, and without hunger, which miraculously disappears, you feel free. People stroll into the nearby town, tick off therapies and socialise.

Lovely Belgian Franz is here to lose weight after a back operation. English doctor Eve is here to monitor her microbiome. She tells me that half of 50-year-olds in the UK have two chronic conditions and that fasting may well help them. Retired Italians Lisa and Martin come annually to ease stiff joints.

“People come for many reasons,” says Leonard Wilhelm, the owner-manager. “We have one 92-year-old who has been 96 times. For many, it’s a life-changing experience.” Most come for about two weeks. Some stay for a biblical 40 days.

On day six it’s time to reintroduce solid food. I’m genuinely sad to stop the fast. I’ve dropped 2.5 kilos and would like to lose more. But it’s also exciting. I eat my apple puree, four nuts and yoghurt mindfully. The novelty isn’t as good as the fasting.

On my final “re-feeding” days, eating 800 perfectly delicious calories, I miss the zing of fasting. In non-pandemic times 70 per cent of Buchinger guests were repeat customers. I can see why. I’m already planning my return. But was it as good as partying holidays in my twenties? Hell yes.

Need to know

Sophie Pither was a guest of Buchinger Wilhelm (ten-day fasting breaks from £2,340pp, full-board; buchinger-wilhelmi.com). Fly direct to Zurich from Edinburgh from £183 return (swiss.com)