

TREE OF LIFE

Lisa Starr goes in search of the ultimate nature spa and discovers two European retreats which base their wellbeing concepts on forests



Consumer research over the last few years consistently shows that wellness travellers prioritise being outdoors when looking for destinations (see www.spabusiness.com/wta2022). On top of this, numerous studies highlight the multitude of benefits of forest bathing and just spending time in nature.

Recently, I was fortunate enough to visit two properties which base their entire concept on trees and nature – waldSpa at Nature Hotel Forsthofgut in central Austria and Forestis in the Italian Dolomites. Two excellent, well-thought-out hospitality and spa experiences, yet seeing them both within the same week highlighted their very different approaches.

My main point of investigation? Are the spas doing enough to satisfy those who value being in the fresh air surrounded by gardens, woods, lakes and streams? How much of what they offer, in terms of facilities and programming, is outside? How extensively do they incorporate nature inside and does this reap similar benefits? ▶

WALDSPA

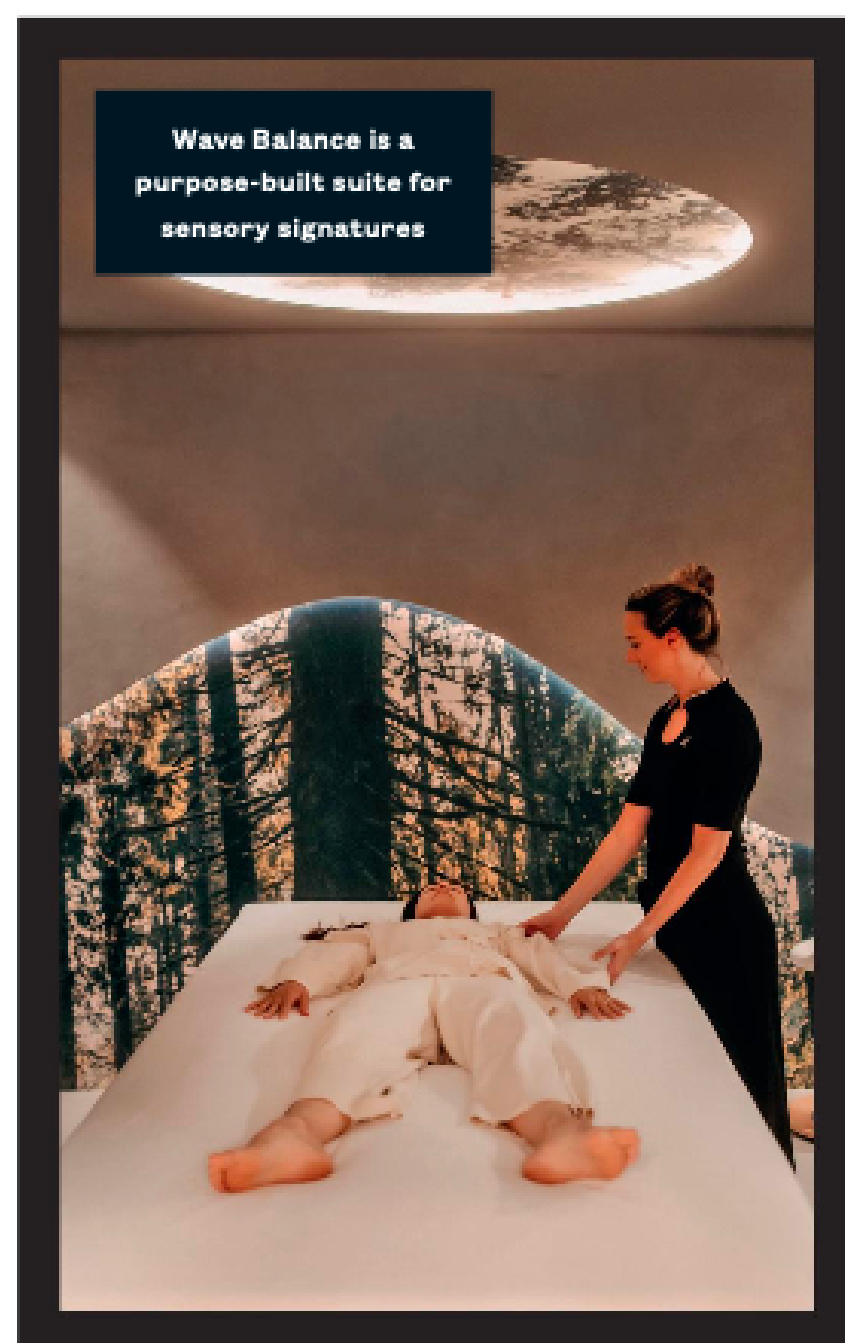
400-YEAR LEGACY

The timber-clad Forstthofgut hotel, built around a 30,000sq m bathing lake and garden, sits at the base of Asitz Mountain on the perimeter of the town of Leogang, a popular ski and hiking/biking destination. With the arrival of wellness resorts Puradies and Krallerhof just months ago, the locale is also gaining recognition in the spa and wellbeing arena.

The farming and forestry property, managed by the Schmuck family for more than 400 years, began its hospitality life by offering two guestrooms in 1960. Multiple expansions have brought the current number to 105 – with prices starting at €210 (US\$222, £183) and including meals – along with a spa that opened in 2013 and was expanded in 2016 and 2021. In total, there are 10 treatment rooms and multiple heat experiences, pools, fitness spaces and relaxation lounges spread over 5,700sq m.

SENSORY SIGNATURES

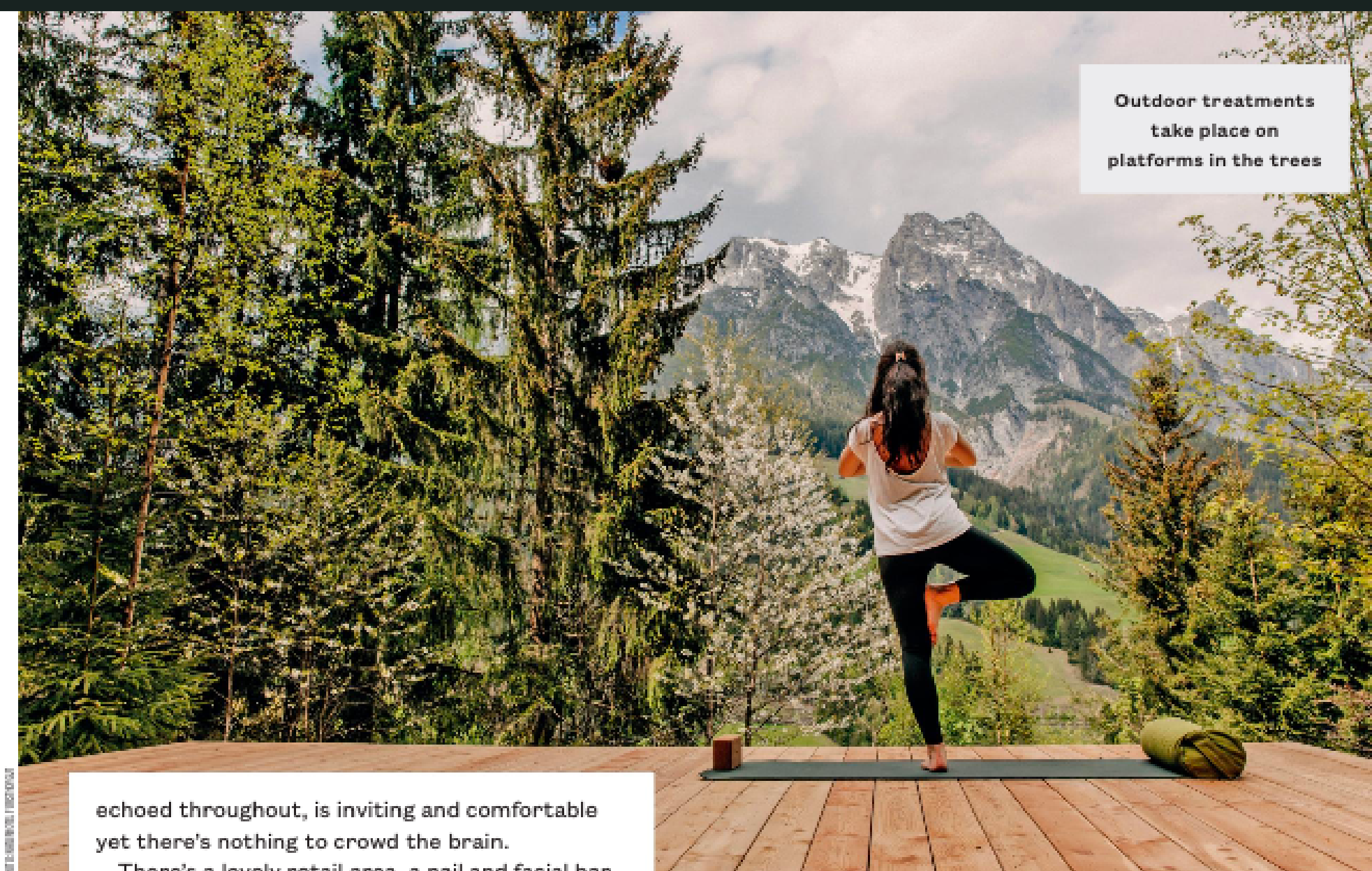
Walking into the main spa reception, I feel instantly calmed by the soothing muted colour palette and the abundance of wood – local knotty pine is plentiful and takes centre stage. The style,



Wave Balance is a purpose-built suite for sensory signatures



The facilities take full advantage of the setting



Outdoor treatments take place on platforms in the trees

echoed throughout, is inviting and comfortable yet there's nothing to crowd the brain.

There's a lovely retail area, a nail and facial bar, therapy rooms and Wave Balance – a purpose-built suite for signature treatments – being a particular highlight. Its creative forest decor and large soft-pack table set the scene for rituals combining touch, acoustics, vibrations and water with a proprietary skincare brand formulated from natural ingredients such as pennywort, ivy and botanical hyaluronic acid. Ranging from 50-80 minutes and €105-170 (US\$111-180, £92-148), the therapies have been "inspired by the image of a strong tree" and are designed to leave guests feeling strong, balanced and re-energised.

EMBRACING NATURE

The newer adults-only spa resides in a three-storey wellness paradise where floor-to-ceiling windows flood the rooms with natural light and showcase the panoramic mountain views. It took great willpower not to just sit and take it all in for hours. In fact, interiors throughout the whole resort – featuring natural materials, textiles and colours – make you feel like you're outside. It's a free-flowing modern space with a large sauna area and communal changing spaces as opposed to dedicated gender-specific locker rooms.

I'm struck by how the facilities take advantage of the setting. You can breathe the fresh mountain air while relaxing in a whirlpool or swim laps in the 25m heated sports pool. There's a 40sq m outdoor sauna which I imagine to be especially enjoyable on a snowy afternoon. Then, accessed through an underground passage, the waldSpa Lakehouse provides an enormous relaxation lounge with 50 recliners and waterbeds, access to the swimming lake

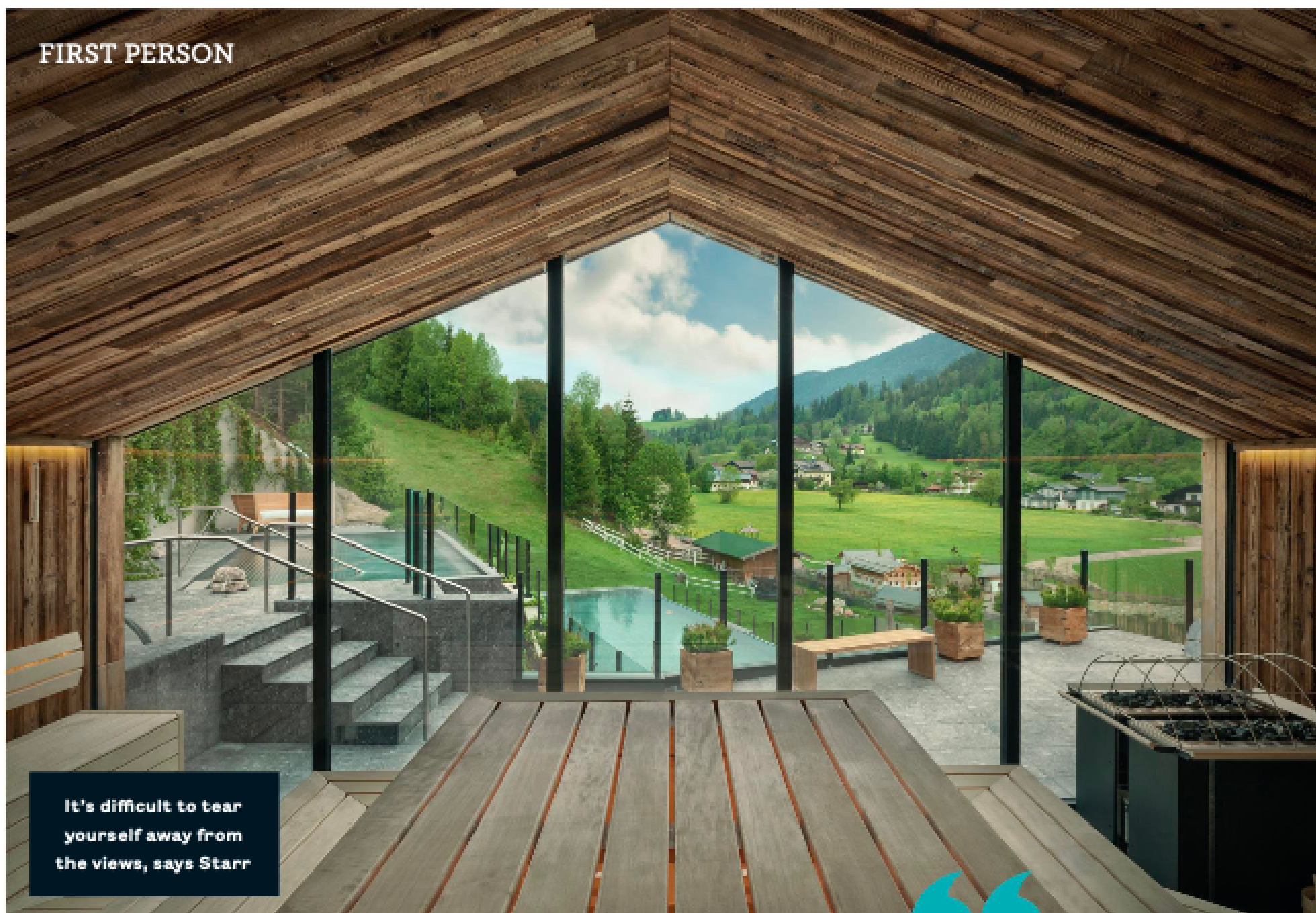
“

I'm instantly calmed by the muted colours and abundance of wood



The family-centric resort offers many child-friendly facilities and activities

FIRST PERSON



It's difficult to tear yourself away from the views, says Starr



The style is inviting and comfortable yet there's nothing to crowd the brain

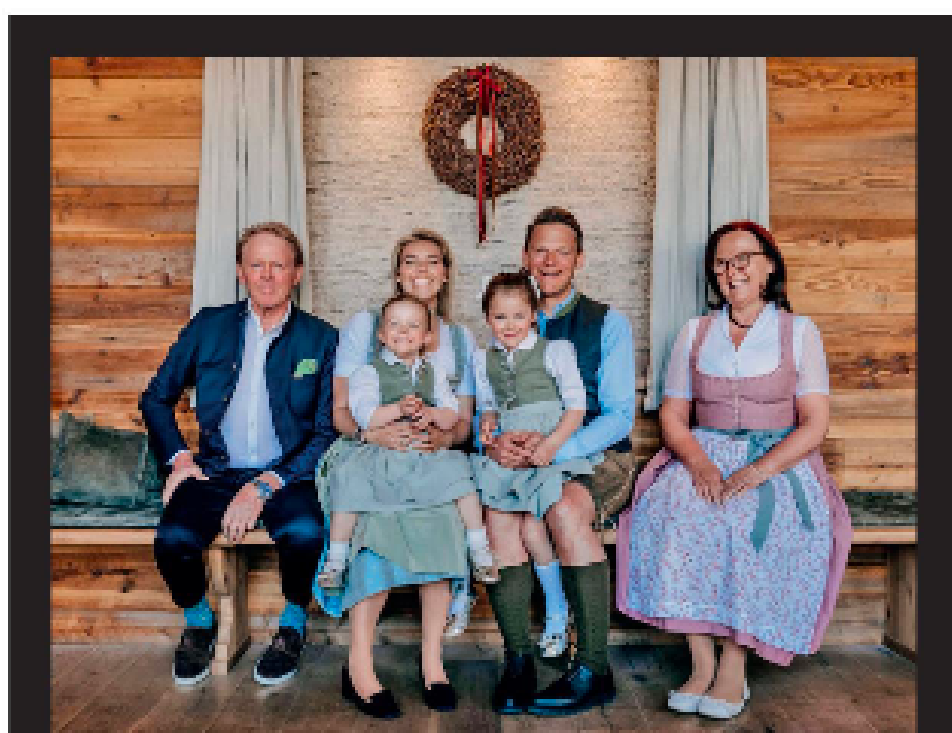
► and a floating Finnish sauna where birch branches are offered for self-administered rituals.

In the warmer months, treatments and yoga are taken outside and hiking is a popular pastime. While in winter, skiing is to hand and spa therapies help soothe aches and pains from a day on the slopes. This is a resort which makes the most of its setting and ties in the indoor/outdoor connection well.

FAMILY WELLNESS

A dedicated two-level family spa nestles in the centre of the resort. It's a fun area where pine and textile saunas are child-friendly and a kid's water world boasts pools, slides and an aqua play zone full of fountains, geysers and waterfalls. Parents and children could easily spend hours here. And that's important because this resort and spa totally caters to families – when I first arrived at the hotel, it was to a lobby with shoes strewn about, dogs sitting with their owners and children happily playing: a steady bustle of activity. There's even a children's petting farm onsite, a dedicated teen chillout room, a kid's art studio and free childcare.

In summary, Nature Hotel Forstthofgut is an ideal destination for a family escape, to engage in activities that embrace nature and the outdoors and then return to the resort to enjoy healthy food and a variety of invigorating and relaxing spa experiences.



The Schmucks have managed the property for over 400 years



BELTRAMI®
designing textile experiences
MADE IN ITALY

+39 035 716315 • export@beltrami.it • www.beltrami.it

► FIRST PERSON



Forestis was originally built as a sanatorium for European royalty

FORESTIS

ROYAL CONNECTION

Around 115km further south in Italy, you can reach Forestis via a windy route up into the Italian mountains. Here the slopes, dense with trees, give way to a woodland hideaway. At 1,800m above sea level, I'm immediately wowed by the view of the UNESCO World Heritage Dolomites and beyond.

The original building was erected in 1912 by the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, who intended to use it as a sanatorium to take advantage of



If I was to write a book, this is the place I would visit

the mountain air, mild climate, above average number of sunny days and light spring waters. It fell into disuse after the war until discovered by hotelier Alois Hinteregger on a walk one day. He opened the building as a hotel in 2010 and it was reimagined by his son as a truly unique five-star retreat 10 years later.

As well as the listed manor-house-like building, Forestis boasts three towers with wooden facades which rise into the sky like trees. In total, there are 46 spacious suites which cost upwards of €530 (US\$560, £462) a night, along with a 2,000sq m spa and a restaurant. Because it's set on a steep slope, guests are always at eye level with the trees and the mountains and the vistas of the wood, rock, sun and sky really are the stars of the show.

CONTEMPORARY, MINIMALIST LUXURY

The stylised resort exudes contemporary, minimalist luxury. The two-level spa, located beneath the towers, features thoughtful design touches. It lives and breathes simplicity and relies on natural, local materials to create the



Seats in the restaurant all face out to the stunning mountain vistas

atmosphere. Fabric for the carpet, chairs and cushions comes from a weaving mill in Trentino. Ground dolomite stone gives a stylish finish to the walls and pool. The stark sparseness might sound cold and uninviting, but it's not – the use of natural materials adds a soft edge to what is a very calming setting.

The spa entrance leads straight to a 20m indoor pool, which flows into an outdoor pool of a similar size and there's a traditional wooden Tyrolean hut housing a small sauna.

Everything is geared towards relaxation and wellness. A huge terraced seating area around the indoor pool features daybed hideaways and a serene Tea Lounge with a bijou library offers a comfy retreat. If I was to write a book, this is the place I would visit.

To declutter the mind, there's a dark and cosy Silent Room with a central fireplace, inviting loungers and a star-covered wall. To unwind in a more active way, there's a brine steamroom, three indoor saunas – which radiate the scent of the wood they're made from in the heat – and a cold plunge.

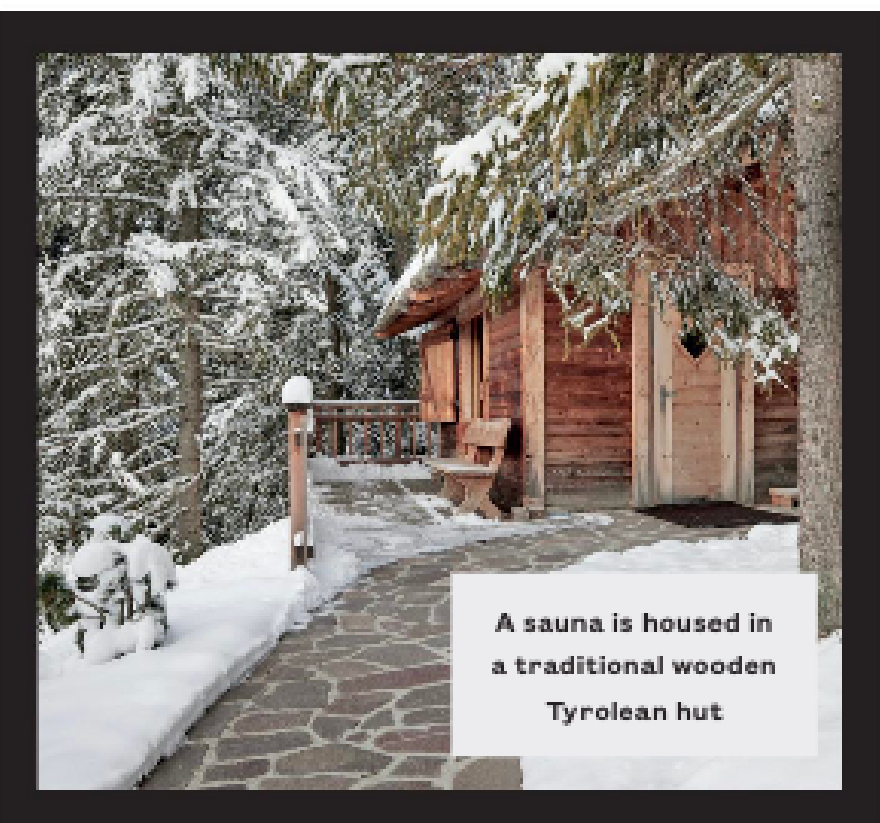
Treatment rooms, seven in total, are located on the first floor as well as another relaxation area, gym and a wyda room with mountain views. Wyda, a form of yoga and meditation, dates back to the nature-centric spiritually elite druids and is designed to promote inner harmony.

TREE TREATMENTS

Staying true to the forest and nature connection, all of the treatments at Forestis are based on the four indigenous trees: mountain pine, spruce, larch and Swiss stone pine. Recognising



Natural materials create a soft edge (above); local wood and healing stones are used in rituals (below)



A sauna is housed in a traditional wooden Tyrolean hut

FIRST PERSON

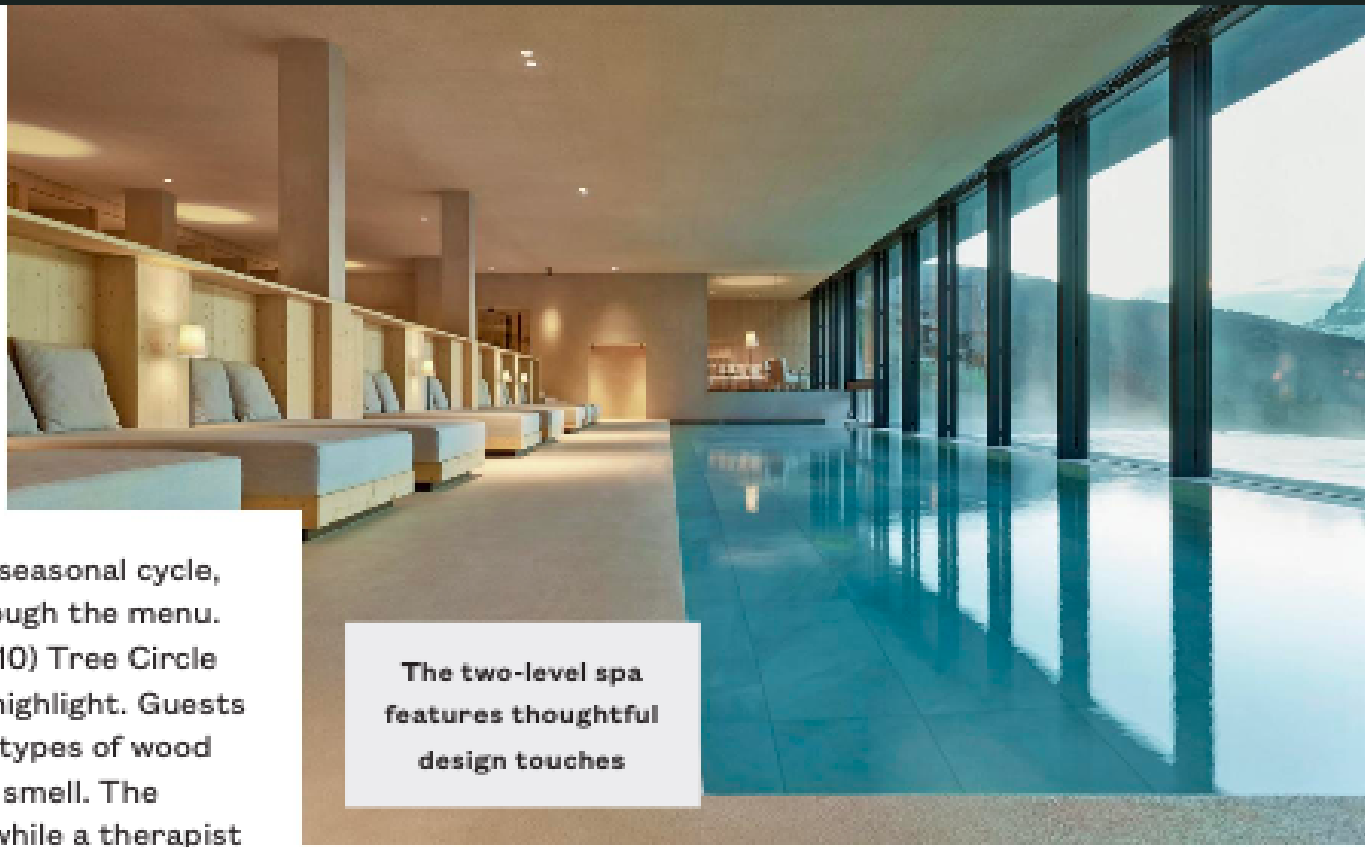
that trees, like humans, follow a seasonal cycle, these parallels are explored through the menu.

The 3-hour, €470 (US\$497, £410) Tree Circle Ceremony is without doubt the highlight. Guests intuitively select one of the four types of wood based on how they look, feel and smell. The chosen scent is then circulated while a therapist gets to work wrapping, scrubbing, moisturising and massaging you. Pine, spruce or larch sticks and healing stones are used to release blockages and create harmony, along with vibrations which match the frequencies of the respective trees. It's a very detailed and unique therapy, but expertly performed to induce a deep state of relaxation and at no point did it feel rote. It's an incredibly indulgent experience – I mean how often do you get 3 hours of someone dedicated to working on your body in the name of wellness?

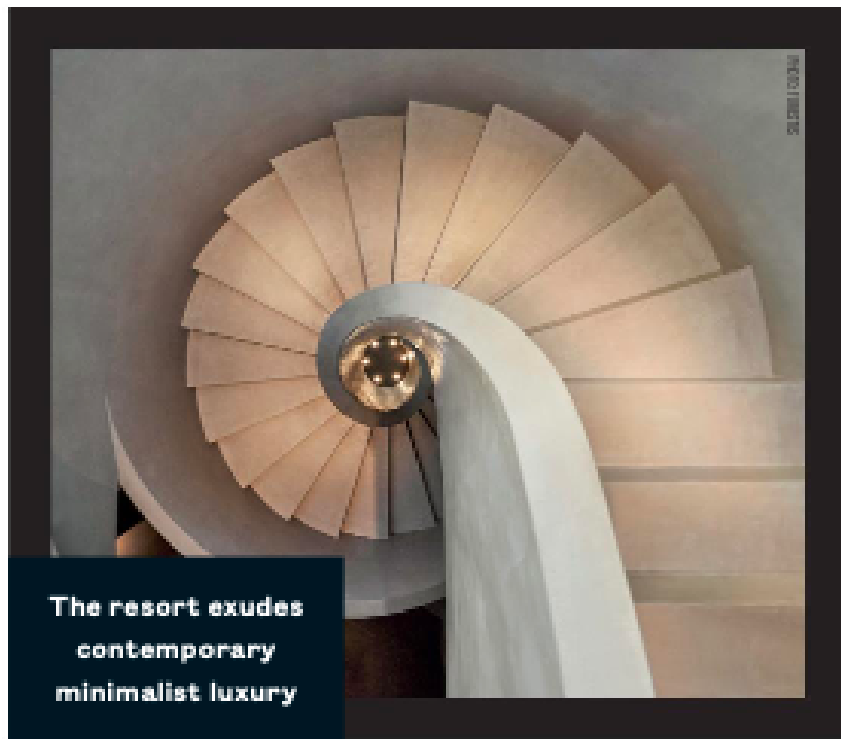
Adding another nature-inspired layer, the products have been custom-developed. Used in treatments and amenities, they're plant-based, rich in vitamins and minerals and contain active ingredients from the four local trees. They're available for sale in the spa retail boutique, which also showcases a highly-curated collection of comfy locally-made textiles that make you want to relax just looking at them!

HIGH-ALTITUDE MEDICINE
But does the resort capitalise on its wellness-centric setting? Yes, in a resounding way, with a number of outdoor activities designed to make the most of its 'high-altitude medicine'.

“
The 3-hour Tree Circle Ceremony is without doubt a highlight ... it's incredibly indulgent



The two-level spa features thoughtful design touches



The resort exudes contemporary minimalist luxury

Wyda sessions take place in the forest, along streams or mountain rocks if weather permits, while all-year-round guided hikes explore the dense woods or neighbouring Puez-Odle Nature Park. In addition, there are four bike routes and 45km of slopes for this ski-in, ski-out resort.

Retreats are offered and custom-designed based on the notion that strength can be drawn from nature for both physical and spiritual regeneration.

And it would be remiss not to mention the cuisine at Forestis. Dinners are a seven-course delight in a stadium seating style setting which offers unobstructed views of the trees and mountains. Mushrooms, berries, herbs, nuts, flowers and other local and natural ingredients are featured on menus that change every day. The imaginative and beautifully presented options never leave you feeling overfull and left me feeling better every time.

In short, Forestis is an ideal destination in which to spend extended time, either alone or with a loved one, in reflection and contemplation, moving slowly and purposefully towards wellness goals and feeling recharged upon departure. ●



PREMIUM FLOATING TANKS PERFECT RELAXATION

EXCLUDE THE OUTSIDE WORLD AND FLOAT WEIGHTLESSLY ON BODY-TEMPERATURE, MAGNESIUM-ENRICHED SALT WATER



MAXIMUM HYGIENE LEVELS • 4+1 FILTRATION STEPS • 100% SELF-DRAINING POOL WITH WATER RESERVOIR • SOUND-, LIGHT-AND AROMATHERAPY

float SPA®

In 30+ countries, since 2009.

the premium floating tank manufacturer

More info: www.floatspa.com