The Times Spa Guide: Regena Health Resort & Spa, Bad Brückenau, Germany

In a nutshell
Regena is rather more of a health resort than a spa. Although it does offer facials and massages, the clinic's goal is not pampering, but delaying the onset of the symptoms of old age. It used to be a clinic for what the Germans call a Kur, or cure — a trip to a health farm that a doctor could prescribe to tackle stress and chronic disease — but it is now targeting the spa market. If you don't like the generic spa experience of a trickling water soundtrack and lolling around on a daybed, this could be the place for you.

An hour and a quarter's drive east of Frankfurt airport, it just squeaks into the northern end of Bavaria, which is all rolling hills and valleys rather than mountains. The resort is in Bad Brückenau, a spa town favoured by King Ludwig I, who renovated its elegant avenue of 18th-century spa buildings.

In the ground-floor Heinek Therme spa has a huge pool.

What's it like?
As hard as Regena is trying to shake off its clinic past, it's not quite there yet — there is a definite air of the sanatorium about the place, not least when it comes to the daily rest period (1pm-3pm) and mealtimes. Lunch is served at noon and dinner at 6pm-7.30pm. By 8.15pm the staff have prepared the restaurant for breakfast and most people have retired for the night.

The 80 rooms are in a nine-storey block built in 1974. Refurbishment is under way to replace the wall-to-wall carpet with wooden floors, and yellowy cream paintwork with off-white and shades of grey.
It is very German. Not many of the staff speak English, but they are keen to help. None of the signage is translated, which can be a challenge. When I pushed a button beside the loo marked “Spül-WC” to find out what it did, a jet of water shot straight at my backside. Which wakes you up far quicker than a double macchiatto, I can tell you.

The ground-floor Helena Therme spa has a large gym, pool, salt room, floatarium, tepktarium (with heated beds), tanning bed and outdoor saltwater whirlpool. There is also a sauna suite, which includes menthol and rose petal steam rooms, an ice fountain and multisensory showers. This being Germany, everyone in the sauna, male and female, is starkers, a fact confirmed when the lighting in the wooden cubicle cycled through its pre-sets, from a very dim blue light when I entered, to a bright yellow bulb that illuminated everyone in all their (waxed) glory. Not awkward at all.

The treatments

There are a range of medical diagnostic options, from ECGs and dementia testing to gluten intolerance and colon cancer screening, and a very long list of therapies and treatments, including acupuncture, chiropractic, homoeopathy, colonic irrigation, physiotherapy, oxygen infusion therapy, electrotherapy, osteopathy, Kneipp hydrotherapy and reflexology. In addition to traditional and Ayurvedic massages, there are facials, body wraps and pedicures, plus personal training and group fitness sessions and talks, such as sleep seminars. Again, these are likely to be in German — I attended a 15-minute breathing class and had no idea what was going on. There are also one and two-week programmes to tackle problems such as weight loss and stress.

My treatments kicked off with a session in the floatarium (€29), essentially a waterbed on which you are wrapped in a vinyl duvet. It promises a power nap from which you will emerge re-energised, and is also supposed to be beneficial for those with joint problems or arthritis. While it’s a pleasure to lie down for 20 minutes, cocooned in warmth, in truth it wasn’t as transformative as I had hoped — the lights being left on and some sub-Jean-Michel Jarre music made it impossible to nod off.

A Pilates class (€15) was enjoyable, as was a Nordic walking session through the forest and parkland that surround Regena. I had a competent massage (€30 for 20 minutes), but if you have any kind of muscular or back issues, you’ll need longer to address them.

One treatment that left me nonplussed was the hay flower bag (€15), essentially a warm compress applied to your abdomen for 30 minutes to increase the blood flow to the liver. The treatment was meant to entail me leaving my key in the lock outside my room, then lying down and waiting for a gentleman called Herr Pflaum to let himself in and appear at my bedside to apply the compress. The concept made me so uncomfortable that I decided simply to let him knock on the door and then answer it. The compress consisted of a bag of hot hay that had been steamed for two hours. I won’t be forgetting that farmyard smell of damp vegetation any time soon.

Who goes?

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What are the rooms like?
My (unrefurbished) junior suite was big and airy, with a roomy living area containing a leatherette suite and mini fridge, masses of storage, a bath and shower in a newly fitted suite, and a 6ft-wide bed (consisting of joined singles). All of the rooms have balconies, and the woodland that surrounds Regina makes for very restful views. Once I'd managed to turn down the heating, it was very comfortable.

What about the food?
We were following Regena's alkaline diet, which essentially means you are limited to vegetables, salad leaves, herbs, fruit, some nuts, seeds, herbal teas and water. The list of exclusions is long: meat, poultry, eggs, most dairy, fish, most grains, caffeine, processed foods, refined sugar, soy, chocolate and alcohol. The spa's medical director, Herr Dr Dirk Wiedbrauck, told me that the diet was meant to help the body to maintain the blood's healthy pH of 7.35-7.45, and that “85 per cent of people are too acidic”. (This is a controversial notion: the British Dietetic Association says that diet has no effect on the blood's pH value, and your body is perfectly capable of regulating pH itself thanks to the kidneys).

That said, the diet is low-fat and low-calorie — on the one-week alkaline diet package, guests typically lose 2kg — and the dishes are excellent. One day's menu comprised a bowl of mango and kiwi, with a spoonful of bircher muesli, for breakfast; avocado cream with a crispbread made from seeds, and a delicious spicy carrot and parsley fritter, with Savoy cabbage and roasted pumpkin seeds at lunchtime; and then a creamy cauliflower soup, followed by a plate of romesco with beet spaghetti, for dinner. We were, admittedly, constantly ravenous so raised the buffet that the other guests were enjoying, which was all fresh and tempting, with a particularly good salad bar. I'd give the breakfast sauerkraut juice a miss, though, unless cabbagey vinegar is your cup of tea.

The lowdown
Amanda Linfoot was a guest of Regena Health Resort & Spa (regena.de). Full board starts at €149pp, based on two people sharing a double room, including full spa access and group talks and classes. A seven-night alkaline diet package, including full board, three sessions with a nutritionist, one massage, three hay bag treatments, three alkaline baths and Bad Brückenau spa water and herbal teas, is €1,129pp, based on two sharing a double room.