



Clockwise from left: the Infinity Deck has panoramic views of the valley below; SHA cuisine is based on macrobiotic principles; billowing calico during an outdoor treatment



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Eat fit

Behind the billowing calico and designer decking of this Mediterranean retreat, hard work keeps SHA Wellness at the forefront of a macrobiotic revolution.

[Report by Sophie Bengé]

There's a raft of reasons behind SHA Wellness' reputation as a top European holiday choice for lifestyle change. As a destination spa, it champions the growing trend for putting nutrition at the heart of the experience. It consults with a wide-ranging community of experts to establish a truly authentic offering; it blends Eastern and Western approaches with real understanding; and it wraps it all up in superb design and five-star allure. That ticks a lot of boxes.

SHA Wellness has become firmly linked with the concept of macrobiotic living, a discipline that literally saved the life of spa owner Alfredo Bataller Parletti following a stomach tumour and became his inspiration to create the retreat and share his experience. SHA is also respected for the high calibre of its natural therapy programmes and, after just two years, is the only Spanish spa destination to hold seven high-ranking industry awards.

Service standards

Argentinian owners the Bataller family have now engaged hospitality company Spatality to drive standards in service and staff training. "We bring our hospitality background and operational know-how to support the ownership," says Thomas Wurtzinger, Spatality's recent director at SHA. "If you've come to lose weight you want support. We aim to build relationships with our guests. This way I swear your weight loss becomes easier."

So many of us are keen to change our living habits until we touch the edge of our comfort zone, when all of a sudden it can become too hard. No bread, no alcohol, no dairy, no meat plus two hour's daily exercise... it can seem daunting. Until you come to SHA, that is, where the support that Wurtzinger talks about is readily on offer. Every member of staff has a smile, but no one is sycophantic. Customer service, to a near-perfect level, is now a strong hallmark here.

While it's known that wellbeing holidays are a growth market, and that diet now plays a pivotal part in the offering, SHA is on the crest of a new wave to make holistic activities equally integral to the guest experience. It's no longer enough to have everything done for us. We want to take an active and ongoing role in our lifestyle change. On top of every guest's personalised agenda and post-stay coaching service, each day offers a complimentary programme of at least five activities: talks, demonstrations and classes from 6am to 10pm, be it yoga at dawn, Nordic walking before breakfast or dancing before bed; laughter therapy; movies; and even learning to make your own tuna tataki – macrobiotically – with SHA's master chef Pablo Montoro Fernandez. After perfecting culinary nirvana at the world famous El Bulli restaurant in Catalonia, Fernandez now champions what he calls 'healthy gastronomy' at SHA, shared with guests during afternoon cooking lessons fired with showmanship.

SOPHIE BENGÉ



Sophie Bengé has been in the spa industry for 12 years as author of *The Tropical Spa*, a journalist, consultant, agent for Ila and Shan Rahimkhan and is now setting up her own business 'hungarymud' with her partner, Nicola Ellis, this month. See Menu, p54. +44 (0) 79510 56609 www.hungarymud.com



Life transformation

Ingo Schweder, CEO, Spatality
 "Spatality is particularly proud to work with SHA Wellness due to shared personal experience. This always makes for a strong working relationship. Both Alfredo Bataller Parietti and myself transformed our lives and overcame cancer with a macrobiotic diet, so when we met two years ago we felt firmly aligned. I respected Alfredo's vision to dedicate his life to this field of learning and to offer it to others. What Spatality offers to SHA is our operational and training expertise to ensure the property runs to five-star standards.
 "During the last year we have placed a GM, Spa Director and Executive Housekeeper and we collaborate with our shared PR company, PRCO, to spread word of the unique and elegant offering that is SHA. We're also offering our strategic know-how, working closely as a team in response to the many approaches for creating further SHAs around the world. This will be the future of SHA Wellness."

"Teaching guests skills to continue their journey has to be an investment on the part of the hotel," says Victoria McClelland of Wellbeing Escapes, the wellness holiday company that sends significant guest numbers to SHA. She praises it for being one of the few places to understand the importance of offering guests more by teaching them take-home skills – an area that she believes still has room for improvement across the industry at large.

"These programmes don't offer an immediate return on investment," she says. "There are bottom-line costs in paying teachers and managing the logistics of activity programmes but, by offering them, guests are more tied in. This is how you build a name in the field."

Aqua therapies

All too often a huge investment in wet treatment facilities is left under-utilised. A cursory introduction to the pool area and a vague invitation to use it can leave guests under-inspired to the extent that they overlook the opportunity. But in keeping with its commitment to doing things properly with real expertise – witness a medically proven series of 23 jets, baths, Kneipp, sauna and steam experiences – SHA employs a dedicated

Clockwise from left: spa cuisine by Pablo Montoro Fernandez; nutritional consultation outside SHA Wellness; swan jets in the spa pool; one of the 16 treatment rooms

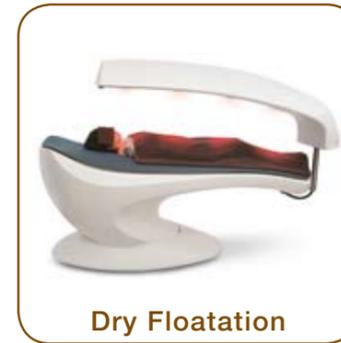
aqua therapist in Pablo Olabe. A young professor in the field, Olabe also teaches at the nearby Catholic University of Saint Anthony in Murcia.

Olabe's passion for this ancient and holistic therapy is palpable. "We come from water, we are water in a high percentage and in water we feel freedom, so we experience a wide range of feelings," he says. His specialism is one-on-one sessions in Ai Chi, which he terms "an active, aquatic relaxation technique", akin to Tai Chi with its choreography of breath and movement but in water up to shoulder height. In water, joint tension is lower and the range of motion greater. He also has his own versions of aquatic massage in 'Aquarelax', liberating tension in the lower back and cervical regions, and 'Flotarium SHA' – a similar therapy offered in the saline flotarium pool. The wonders of water are properly embraced at SHA.

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Escape to wellness

Victoria McClelland, Spa & Wellness Director, Wellbeing Escapes

"As experts in wellbeing holidays, we're constantly on the lookout for the most exciting offerings in the field. Most recent initiatives have been coming out of Asia, so imagine our enthusiasm to learn of this pioneering wellness clinic closer to home in Spain. We're delighted to have been chosen as the preferred partner ever since its inception, working side by side to position SHA Wellness as one of Europe's leading integrated health retreats.

"We're fussy at Wellbeing Escapes, and our 'spa detectives' dig deep to check authenticity, quality of delivery and the effectiveness of the experience. SHA excels, as its concept is deeply rooted in a fusion of Eastern wisdom and advanced Western techniques while providing nutritious macrobiotic cuisine, exercise and a focus on education – plus the most comfortable beds I've come across."

Treating the individual

This is absolutely one of the joys of staying here: the 'discovery' of your potential for living optimally and ageing healthily. First time or short-stay guests may book the Discovery Programme; many opt for more specific programmes for weight loss, detox, sleeping, smoking cessation or even the treatment of fibromyalgia. The SHA website (www.shawellnessclinic.com) has details.

Yet thanks again to the personal approach and expertise that characterises SHA, each guest ends up with a bespoke programme after tailoring their needs with a variety of medical, nutritional and therapeutic consultants. A unique timetable is prepared for their stay, ideally for two weeks: our biological rhythms enter into a phase of profound adjustment during the second week.

It seems to be paying off. Even at a minimum cost of €3,000 for a week's weight loss programme, the SHA team has seen guest numbers increase regularly year on year.

Macrobiotic living

Be it a weekend or a fortnight, most guests have a macrobiotic consultation. This guides the guest to

an individual nutritional protocol, right down to the choice of afternoon tea: azuki bean for tired kidney symptoms; lotus root for bronchial issues; or shitake for fat release. In fact, people can expect to lose three to four kilograms per week at SHA. This level of detail hints at the precision of the spa's approach to macrobiotics.

More simply, a macrobiotic diet uses seasonal produce that is grown locally, with a recommendation that 50%-60% of the daily diet comes from whole grains for their slow-releasing carbohydrates, while 25%-30% comes from land vegetables and 5%-10% from sea vegetables and beans. Animal proteins are kept back solely for the odd occasion within the regime.

Senior Nutritional Consultant Ken Prange explains the theory to each of his guests by way of a food pyramid chart, pouring forth nuggets of nutritional wisdom as he goes. "Sea vegetables are high in calcium with a rich mineral content that cleanses and alkalis the body," he says. "Pickles contain a strong probiotic from their fermenting process. We should have roughly two kilos of healthy bacteria in the body. A macrobiotic diet is high fibre, complex carbs and low fat, in a nutshell,

but there are no absolute no-nos and everybody is different. Just remember that your body is a gift: use it wisely, live in harmony with your environment and, as Hippocrates believed, let food be your medicine."

And so from down in the clinic to the sun-filled dining room with sea views, where lunch and dinner is served in dainty portions of millet, pickled daikon and raw vegetables, all beautifully prepared, seasoned with miso and gomashio and finished off with the house kukicha tea. It's the kind of menu that has earned SHA Wellness Spain's 'Best Gastronomy' award for 2010.

Pioneering wellness

While diet and holistic practice form the cornerstone for ageing healthily, SHA is also seeing growing interest in cosmetics and genetics. In line with the integrated approach, Alfredo Bataller, son of the founder, has gathered a team of doctors offering healthy ageing diagnostics, aesthetic medicine and the most complete genetic profiling in the world. A saliva test is sent for analysis in labs across Europe under the guidance of Dr Helena Baranova, Professor in Health Genetics and

Clockwise left to right: hydrotherapy treatment; the sauna; the rooftop pool and terrace; one of the suites with outstanding views of the area; a healthy cooking class

SPA STATISTICS

SHA Wellness Clinic
+34 902 995 335
www.shawellnessclinic.com

Chairman and founder: Alfredo Bataller Parietti
CEO: Alfredo Bataller Pineda
Chief Development & Communications Officer: Alejandro Bataller Pineda

Management company: Spatality www.spatality.com
General Manager: Thomas Wurtzinger
Director and Head of Natural Therapies: Michio Kushi, Lino Stanchich
Director of Anti-ageing & Internal Medicine Divisions: Dr Vincente Mera
Director of Aesthetic Medicine: Dr Larissa Perezhogina
Director of Genetics: Dr Helena Baranova
Senior Macrobiotic Counsellor: Kenneth Prange

Head chef: Pablo Montoro Fernandez
Spa Director: Gabriel Halmaggyj
Aquatic Therapist: Pablo Olabe

Architecture and design: Carlos Gilardi, Elvira Blanco Montenegro
Suites: 93 designer suites with terraces
Whole property: 25,000sqm
Wellness facilities: 1,300sqm including 16 treatment rooms, tea and relaxation room, specialist consultation rooms, retail, gym equipped by Technogym
Aqualab: 23-station wet spa zone and florarium designed by Gunitec Pool Spa and PS Pool Equipment
Treatment menu: over 100 treatments, including the popular Sha Massage

Product partners: Aromatherapy Associates, Maria Galland