

Spa Vilnius, Druskininkai, Lithuania

Claire Gervat visits a Lithuanian spa that's more glam than glum and very light on the wallet.

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MISSION To recharge my batteries without thoroughly depleting my wallet.

USP Oh, the prices! The treatment list is enticing: honey massages, red-grape baths and more, but at a quarter of what you'd pay in the UK.

AMBIENCE Banish preconceptions about spas in former Iron Curtain countries with the charm of a prewar sanatorium staffed by former shot-putters. Spa Vilnius – a hotel-with-wellness-centre in the low-key Lithuanian resort of Druskininkai – may be an eight-storey concrete block left over from Soviet times, but a total refurbishment has left it more glam than glum (but without an ounce of pretentiousness). In the reception areas and bar it's all early-Bond lighting and furry or shiny white, red and grey seating while the bedrooms are plain and the treatment rooms homely rather than swish.

Druskininkai itself became a fashionable spa in the 19th century thanks to the discovery of thermal springs, something the Soviets later appreciated, too. The result is an architectural split personality, with grand villas and painted wooden cottages interspersed with unforgiving lumps of concrete. Add a few restaurants and cafés, shops and a tiny Russian Orthodox church – and nothing but forest around it for miles and miles – and that's about it.

QUALITY OF EXPERIENCE The therapists were kind, calm and deeply professional. Most spoke only a few words of English, having been made to learn Russian at school, but I never felt awkward because of it. And at least it left me free to enjoy the treatments in peace, with just a gentle soundtrack of jazz, birdsong or classical music. As for the treatments, I sighed with pleasure through

a soothing aromatherapy massage that left my face, neck and bust altogether perkier, a chocolate-scented exfoliation session that rendered me almost unconscious with relaxation, and a miraculous capillary-strengthening facial that had my skin glowing with good health. As for the mud bath, more accurately a peat bath, a local speciality with apparently miraculous properties, I had a lovely time trying to identify the various bits of ancient plantlife floating in the hot water and clinging to my skin. Products included Phytomer, Sothys and Oligodermie for facials; local peat and thermal waters; aromatherapy products from the Czech Republic; and lots of potions and lotions in plain bottles.

IN CROWD A glorious mix: Lithuanians, Poles, Russians and Belarussians; singles, couples, families and groups of friends; all ages and every degree of loveliness.

FOOD The buffet lunch and dinner were pretty ordinary. Stick to the bar next to the spa, which serves such as roasted halibut with steamed vegetables.

WALLET WATCH A three-night B&B package with specialist operator Baltic Holidays (0845 070 5711; www.balticholidays.com) costs from £299, including return flights, transfers from Vilnius and accommodation; spa packages can be tailored to your requirements. Prices for treatments range from £3 for a mud bath for limbs to £28 for a 90-minute full-body aromatherapy massage. Facials start at £14.