

spa business



INTERVIEW

MIA KYRICOS & JEREMY McCARTHY

Leading Starwood's spa roll outs

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OLIVIA NEWTON-JOHN & GREGG CAVE

The best friends behind Australia's Gaia Retreat & Spa



Vital vitality



The centre was inspired by the heritage of Jurmala, which included mud treatments

We take a look at the International Wellness Centre in Latvia, where the approach is all about holistic wellness

Located in the beachside town of Jurmala, a short drive from the Latvian capital city of Riga, the Balans International Wellness Centre has been fully open for just over a year following the launch of its boutique hotel in June 2009.

The story of the family-owned operation began in 1998 when ex-table tennis champion Vadim Sokolov acquired a property which encompassed a bowling alley, a gym and a café as well as a public bathhouse dating back to the 1960s.

The first phase of the redevelopment was a revamp of the bathhouse. Carried out in 2001, the result was a Russian-style banya – a tradition deeply established as a weekly

ritual in the Russian psyche, with single-sex areas offering a hot room and plunge pool supervised by a specialist ‘steam maker’, treatments such as body wraps and detox massages and relaxation areas.

Then, in 2005, Sokolov bought the gym/café and bowling alley businesses, which had operated independently, and his daughter Alla Sokolova – who is a co-founder, stakeholder and board member – helped establish the Balans International Wellness Centre concept and brand, which would later also include a hotel, spa and restaurant. But there was, as she explains, “no unity between the various elements of the offering”.

It was to the heritage of Jurmala that the Sokolovs turned as a potential source of this unity. Created in 1959 by the merging of seaside resort Rigas-Jurmala and hydro-therapeutic spa resort Kemeru, what is now known simply as Jurmala, had long enjoyed a reputation as a health destination. Indeed, archaeological findings suggest that Kemeru’s sulphur springs were already being used for medicinal purposes in the 16th century, and by the early 19th century Russian tsar Nicholas I had granted funds for the creation of bathing areas. The resort’s popularity continued to grow, even throughout the Soviet

HAND-PICKED PRODUCTS

THE BALANS INTERNATIONAL WELLNESS CENTRE USES TWO SPA LINES PICKED FOR THEIR LUXURIOUSNESS, EXCLUSIVITY AND FITTING INGREDIENTS:

■ Created in Switzerland and packaged by Helena Rubinstein, Elier (Elier Unique) skincare products are nevertheless produced in Latvia, using mud and other ingredients sourced

locally. There are now plans to create signature Elier treatments and bedroom amenities.

■ The brainchild of Russian model Julia Lemigova, Russie Blanche is a lux-

ury line used to enhance the ‘banya’ experience. It comprises creams, masks, essential oils and scrubs, which are produced in France, but based on traditional Siberian recipes.



Facilities include a boutique hotel (left), a bowling alley, a restaurant, a gym, a spa (above) and a refurbished 1960s bathhouse



The spa menu includes the usual range of à la carte treatments and day spa packages, but the main offering includes locally-influenced treatments such as hydrotherapy, body wraps and amber stone massages



era when it was used as a training base for professional athletes and as a reward for top-performing citizens.

“We decided to draw on this heritage, delivering treatments that this area has long been famous for – mud cures, sulphur water bathing and so on – but with a modern feel and in a more luxurious environment,” explains Alla, who is now general manager.

Holistic approach

With an overall investment of €6m (US\$7.5m, £4.9m), Amber Spa boutique hotel is certainly that. The 21-room property, designed by Zakman Design Studios, adopts a gentle, amber-influenced décor throughout. Meanwhile the spa – originally built in 2005 and refurbished in early 2009 – offers 15 attractive treatment rooms, a consultation room, a relaxation area, a pedicure/manicure area, sunbeds and a hair salon. Grouped together, the spa, banya, fitness facility and a swimming pool form the Balans Club.

The treatment menu includes the usual range of à la carte treatments and day spa packages available. However, the main purpose of the spa is to complement the rest of the Balans International Wellness Centre offering, with locally-influenced treatments such as hydrotherapy, body wraps and amber

A DIAGNOSTIC APPROACH

INITIAL CONSULTATIONS AT THE BALANS INTERNATIONAL WELLNESS CENTRE CONSIST OF SIX TESTS:

- **Applied Kinesiology:** uses manual muscle testing to examine how a person's body is functioning.
- **Prime Test:** blood tests for food intolerances, ensures the patient doesn't choose food that will harm their white blood cells.
- **Rhythm Express:** similar to a cardiogram, this monitors the body's energy reserves, using heart patterns to assess levels of stress/environmental influences on a person's nervous system and organs.
- **Bach analysis:** kinesiology tests carried out on muscles are used to find the right essence to balance the emotions.
- **Musculoskeletal assessment:** The Paul Chek method assesses areas of strength, weakness and imbalance in the body.
- **F-Scan:** uses resonating frequencies to detect the presence of different bacteria, viruses and parasites, then zaps them at a precise frequency.

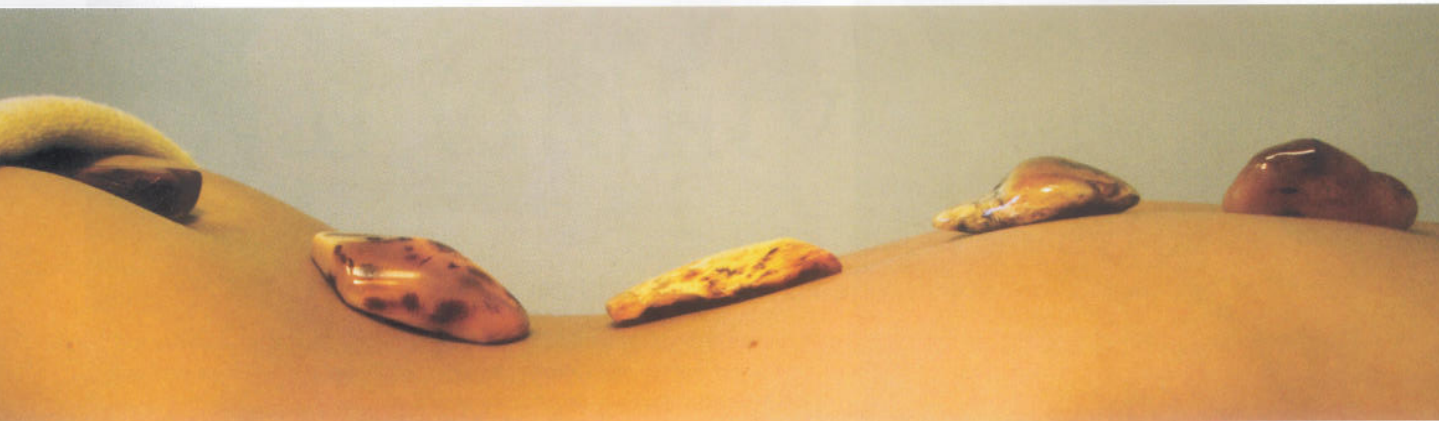
stone massages integrated into the centre's broader wellness programmes.

“Spa is too narrow a word and doesn't really reflect what we do here,” says Alla. “What we're about is a wellness lifestyle.”

It's in this area that all the pieces of the jigsaw start to come together, in a holistic approach to wellness and vitality that encompasses fitness (in the Balans Club gym), nutrition (including personalised menus in the MyLife restaurant, which opened in June 2008) and relaxation (in the spa and Russian banya).

All Balans wellness programmes begin with a consultation with a doctor and a personal trainer, comprising six diagnostic tests (see information box, above). From there, a bespoke six-week 'vitality' programme of fitness, nutrition and relaxation is put together for each client, working with the expert in-house team – including GPs, acupuncturists, kinesiologists, physiotherapists and nutritionists.

The first week consists of the diagnostics and a chance to practise the recommendations under expert supervision, with at least



two or three hours of spa treatments each day, one or two personal training sessions, and individually tailored meals.

The remaining five weeks of the programme can either be undertaken on-site or at home: recommendations are designed to be sustainable in real life, so clients don't simply slip back into their old ways. "We teach you to listen to your body so you make the right decisions, but redressing the body's vitality also makes it more capable of rebalancing itself if you occasionally make the wrong decision," says Alla.

"At the end of those five weeks, you either come back to us to repeat the diagnostics, or we follow up by Skype or email. The maintenance phase should be a lifelong thing."

Widening the net

"Some of our guests come to us specifically for the full Balans programme, but we realise that the 'International Wellness Centre' brand might not immediately appeal to as many people as some of the individual elements of our offering, such as the banya or the restaurant," she continues.

"We therefore view our business as having four different entry points. The membership-based Balans Club is our core business locally. We have about 550 members and three different membership packages (see information box, p57), all of which include the initial diagnostics, with basic recommendations on exercise, relaxation and nutrition. Members can then trade up to the full Balans programme if they have something specific they want to achieve.

"On top of that, every hotel guest is automatically a member of the club, with an opportunity to meet with the doctor and personal trainer for an initial consultation, as well as to enjoy all the facilities. They also receive a 10 per cent discount in the spa.

"And, finally, we have the restaurant and the bowling club, which gives us access to people who might not naturally come to us



The full six-week programme, including a week at the spa and hotel (full board) costs €1,500

BALANS INTERNATIONAL WELLNESS CENTRE BY NUMBERS

- Average hotel occupancy is 55 per cent
- An average hotel stay is seven days
- Nightly hotel range from 35 Latvia lats or LVL (US\$62, €50, £40) to LVL210 (US\$373, €296, £246)
- A 90-minute amber stone massage costs LVL38 (US\$67, €53, £44)
- Balans member packages range from LVL399 to LVL2,000 (US\$710, €563, £470 to US\$3,550, €2,800 to £2,350)

for wellness, allowing us to introduce them to the rest of our 'healthy living' offering.

"Every department has to be profitable in its own right. However, having so many access points broadens our reach."

Currently around 40 per cent of clients come for the full six-week wellness programme, often as a result of a word-of-mouth recommendation, but the objective now is to build on this, further developing the international client base to encourage more visitors from countries such as Scandinavia, Germany and the UK – at present almost half of all hotel guests come from Russia. "At just €1,500 (US\$1,900, £1,250) for the full six-week programme, including full board at the hotel and spa treatments for a

week, the offering is very good value compared to western Europe," says Alla.

"Our vision is to create an internationally recognised concept and brand here in Latvia, which we could then potentially roll out elsewhere. We're already being asked to build Russian banyas in Moscow, St Petersburg and Paris, and in the longer term we could consider franchising that part of the business out.

"It's been very tough launching the business in a recession. But I just felt we were on the right track and we now hope to break even by autumn 2010. The wellness industry is often considered to be young, but right here in Jurmala we have centuries of heritage. And now we're at a really exciting point." ●