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The Fast Road to a Healthier Holiday

Less means more in the resorts where liquid-only diets offer spiritual and physical renewal

By RHEA WESSEL

Each year, Ralf Wiedemann, a free-lance creative director based near Hanover, Germany, takes a week off from storyboards and brand strategies to get his creative juices flowing again: The 52-year old joins together with a small number of like-minded people to perform a therapeutic liquid fast at a wellness hotel. "My fasting vacation is an important time each year for pause, reflection and a mental inventory," he says.



Niklas Görke

The Buchinger Clinic at Lake Constance, Germany

Most recently, Mr. Wiedemann enjoyed a bowl of carrot fennel soup with a group that had come together at the Landhaus Schiffmann hotel in Mülheim in Germany's Mosel Valley to begin a self-imposed eight-day liquid fasting regime of only 250 calories per day.

Sitting together at a long table in a sunny atrium, many of the participants sipped the soup with child-like wonder, commenting frequently about its depth of flavor, texture and thickness. Each was then served a glass of watered-down juice, fresh pressed from bananas and oranges. Instead of drinking from the glass, however, participants spooned every sip of the juice into their mouths. The method of drinking is popular among fasting guests who have

discovered that sipping juice with a spoon allows for much slower consumption.



Landhaus Schiffman

Fasting attendees at the Landhaus Schiffmann hotel out for a group walk.

In Germany, the popularity is growing of such mainstream fasting vacations that are unassociated with a particular religion. From the North Sea island of Sylt to Lake Constance on the Swiss border, an increasing number of guests are spending their vacations abstaining from food at wellness hotels that offer a fasting program. Such vacations provide people the benefits of fasting while allowing guests to define the spiritual element for themselves.

Historically, fasting was used as a survival strategy. People fasted periodically when food was scarce and stored up energy in the form of fat when it was plentiful. Today, people fast voluntarily for a variety of reasons: the spiritual, the physical and even the political.

People who fast often seek to re-instate a sense of self-discipline and control over their lives. They may also aim to boost their self-esteem by proving to themselves that they are capable of abstaining from food, or they may face a life-changing decision, such as whether to marry, divorce or change careers, says Dr. Françoise Wilhelmi de Toledo, a

medical doctor who together with her husband, the grandson of Otto Buchinger, leads the Buchinger Clinic, one of Europe's largest fasting organizations, on Lake Constance in Germany. Still others may aim to fill an inner void. "In daily life, the hunger of the soul is often confused with the need to eat," she says.

The Buchinger Clinic uses a fasting method designed by its founder Dr. Otto Buchinger in the 1930s after he suffered from acute inflammatory joint disease. The so-called Buchinger Therapeutic Fasting Method, which features a diet of organic low-calorie soup and juice, with a bit of honey thrown in to help maintain blood-sugar levels, is used widely throughout Germany at clinics and hotels that offer attended fasts. It shouldn't be confused with self-imposed starvation: The liquid fasts help the body live off its own fat reserves.

Where to Fast

Germany

Buchinger Bodensee: Fasting clinic on Lake Constance, offering packages from €198 daily.
www.buchinger.com
 Tel: +49-7551-807-0

Landhaus Schiffmann: Small hotel in the Mosel Valley with a fasting program, offering five- to 14-day retreats from €70 daily.
www.landhaus-schiffmann.de
 Tel: +49-6534-9394-0

Schloss Warnsdorf: Fasting clinic near Lübeck, from €115 per day.
www.schlosswarnsdorf.de
 Tel: +49-4502-8400

Fasten-Sylt Program: Program with weeklong fasting and hike-fasting programs on Sylt Island. The program costs €295 and hotel rates start at €265.
www.fasten-sylt.de
 Tel: +49-4651-927-456

Portugal

Moinhos Velhos: Juice fasting and detoxification retreat in Lagos. One- to two-week programs from €1,375 per week.
www.moinhos-velhos.com
 Tel: +351-282-687-147

receive a so-called liver wrap, a sack of warm hay placed on the abdomen which increases circulation in the liver, draws out toxins and kick-starts the metabolism.

The second day of fasting is more of the same minus the solid foods—for a total consumption of 250 calories. On this day, fasters are strongly advised to ingest a portion of Glauber's salt, a sodium-sulfate solution that acts as a cathartic.

A typical diet for the day is herbal teas and water in the morning, the specially prepared fasting soup and watered-down juice at midday and the same in the evening. While the soups are little more than pureed and frothed vegetables, with very little spice, each is wholesome, hot and fulfilling.

Doctors say one of the benefits of fasting is giving your intestinal track a break from its daily duties. "Traditional knowledge shows that emptying the bowels from the rests of the last meals induces well-being and prevents some symptoms which might appear in the first two to three days of fasting: headache, light nausea or tiredness," Dr. Wilhelmi de Toledo says.

At Landhaus Schiffmann, guests are welcomed to their fasting vacations with a special "cocktail" of sodium sulfate, warm water and pressed lemon juice to begin the body's cleansing process.

Organizations that provide fasting vacations typically put a strong emphasis on creating an environment where people can rejuvenate physically, mentally and spiritually. Yet the atmosphere and services offered can be distinct: Some hotels have doctors only on request and at an extra charge, while others have doctors on staff. Some hotels are even offering vacationers the chance to fast and hike simultaneously.

Prices for stays at fasting organizations vary. Landhaus Schiffmann starts from €70 a day, while the Buchinger Clinic can cost up to €425.

Clinic or hotel, whichever route you choose for a fasting vacation, the fast should be done in consultation with your own doctor or attended by someone experienced in fasting, at least for the uninitiated, says Jens Schiffmann, the owner of Landhaus Schiffmann and the former head of the German Fasting Academy, which trains people to attend fasts. The attendant will explain the stages of the fast, including the build-up, the actual fast, the breaking of the fast and how to maximize the benefits of the fast by incorporating better habits into daily life, such as eating ample fruits and vegetables, and reducing meats, caffeine, alcohol and the size of portions, Mr. Schiffmann says.

Upon arrival, a typical Buchinger fast features an easing-in day with a maximum intake of 800 calories. Participants will likely eat a mono-diet of rice, fruit or potatoes, with a small portion of vegetables while drinking an abundance of water and herbal tea. In the afternoon, they

Not everyone at the Landhaus Schiffmann comes to fast. Some arrive for the Mosel Valley scenery or wellness treatments but continue to order full meals from the menu and to dine in a separate wing.

Back at the table for fasting guests, Mr. Wiedemann and other experienced fasters told stories to first-timers about the fasting "bliss" that would soon set in when the neuro-transmitter serotonin, which enhances the harmonization of the mood, began to be released.

By the second or third day, many participants say they experience a heightened ability to be fully concentrated and present in the moment, a rejuvenated sense of taste and smell and bursts of creativity and energy. Mr. Wiedemann, for instance, says he returned to his room during the fast and wrote 15 pages on a novel that had been stalled for four months. "I suddenly had the strength and inspiration to continue on the book. Many people say fasting makes them more creative. For me, that creativity got expressed through my book."

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