



Travelling light: Elaine checks in at her first stop, a spa hotel



Spa bliss: Elaine memorises the massage technique to teach her partner later!

One for the road

Could 3 days, £300 and an unplanned solo break bring happiness?

When Elaine Kingett needed a break she didn't choose long haul, she just jumped in her car...

I'd worked hard, played hard and moved in with my new partner and his grown-up daughter. Now I had three free days, £300 in the kitty and I needed to escape mentally, if not geographically, so I took off in my car, and headed where the fancy took me.

Day 1

Planning my escape, the biggest logistical problem had been who would look after my dog, now I lived miles from anywhere. I posted a plea on www.networkcornwall.net and, quick as a flash, back came various offers, one of which fitted the bill perfectly. Later that

morning, after passing him over to his vetted foster mum, I wiped away a pathetic tear and concentrated on studying the local map. A friend had told me about the St Moritz Hotel in Polzeath, a two-hour drive away, which was on the beach and had a spa. It was obviously a smarty-pants place but didn't seem at all pretentious. I had booked a Special Spa Break, which at £99 fitted my budget and included B&B, evening dinner, one spa treatment (manicure, pedicure, back massage or facial) and use of the sauna, steam room, pool and gym. When I checked in I wasn't disappointed. My swish, modern room had a vast bed, sea view, plus free goodies from the Cowshed range, of Babington House fame

— wasn't that the cool hotel in Somerset where Kate Moss and her mates went? Gosh, I felt very rock 'n' roll. Giggling, I rang the spa and decided to pay a bit on top of my package deal to book the most expensive massage, the St Moritz Sun & Sea Signature Treatment, as if I did that sort of thing all the time.

Grabbing my flip-flops, I then tripped off to the beach. On my own. But despite the warm afternoon sun, the wind whipping in from the sea was bracingly British and I soon raced back up the cliff path, eager to start some serious self-indulgence.

The treatment didn't disappoint. I was brushed down, rubbed with sea salt, covered in peppermint slime, wrapped in clingfilm, then cocooned in vast honey-coloured towels — which felt like being cuddled by teddies — and given a hypnotic, gentle facial. I floated back to my room with skin so smooth and sexy I began to think it was a shame I was on my own. I planned to eat in the restaurant. This was what I was most nervous about. The public table for one.

I went armed with a couple of magazines to give me something to stare at between courses. Sure enough, I was surrounded by couples, but my table wasn't next to the toilets and the waiting staff were attentive. Best of all, even though I'd chosen the one-night package, I could eat anything from the menu — local scallops with asparagus, samphire with crayfish, and pigeon with rabbit. I had one glass of wine to show I was sociable but not alcoholic, and feeling surprisingly relaxed, returned happily to my room. I phoned Martin to reassure him I missed him but, in truth, being on my own was so liberating. I fell asleep wondering if the dog had eaten his Chappie.



Day 2

At the awfully civilised hour of 8.30am, proper fresh fruit salad that wasn't just apple, two naughty local organic full-cream yogurts, lots of thick-cut wholemeal toast, tons of butter, yummy jams, freshly squeezed orange juice and excellent coffee was delivered to my room on a tray the size of Greater London with the morning paper. What luxury. Normally, I'd have been up, out with the dog and back home by

7.30am at the latest, wondering why we didn't have any milk. But I was determined to sample every aspect of the hotel's delights and get my money's worth so, wrapping myself in the hotel's wonderful Italian towelling robe, I toddled off to the spa to expose my body and try to remember how to swim. The pool was quietly auditioning for a Busby Berkeley film set — blue mosaic tiles glittered invitingly and



"And if I do this every day, it'll cost me..."

Seascape: barefoot on the beach, Elaine feels the sand between her toes

going it alone

"I was most nervous about the public table for one"

gentle steps curved down to the crystal-clear warm water. There wasn't a soul in sight, certainly no splashy kids or floating verruca plasters. Where was my Martini and why didn't I do this more often? I performed a few reasonable lengths, in case anyone was watching, flopped into the jacuzzi, sweated buckets in the steam room and then sliced off those notorious toxins in the shower. I'd never been so clean.

After all that sea, spa and grand design, I wanted the next bit of my trip to be a contrast. I fancied somewhere bjou, not too expensive and in the heart of a city. Before leaving, I

searched www.tripadvisor.co.uk for a B&B in Exeter, less than a couple of hours drive away. Since moving to the sticks, I'd learnt that it was the nearest place to go if I needed some serious retail therapy. A friend had recommended the Hotel Barcelona but all the site reviews

raved about another place, which was inexpensive, very central, had parking and apparently, comfy rooms and a decent breakfast menu. Perfect. I'd been right, first time, why not the next? As soon as I hit the suburbs, I realised the difficulty of driving and navigating solo in unknown territory. Especially without my glasses. I got totally lost and arrived at the B&B hot, bothered and decidedly bad-tempered. At this point I realised I'd made a mistake. The narrow entrance hall smelt of stale fat and when the role model for Mrs Overall from Acom Antiques wobbled past me out of the door, my heart sunk. Why hadn't I been braver and gone for Hotel Barcelona? The truth was that while I'd thought it looked fantastic I'd also thought it was a bit posh and trendy for me. Ha! I'd forgotten that was me!

I decided to spend as little time as possible in my wrong choice B&B and fortunately, >>

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