Bentley rides, grand pianos and a live-in therapist in your penthouse suite: *Siân Boyle* checks in to the world's most exclusive mental health clinic



Paracelsus Recovery's CEO and founder, Jan Gerber, in his clinic in Zurich

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JON ATTENBOROUGH

THE MAN THE ULTRA-RICH CALL WHEN THEY WANT TO BUY HAPPINESS



ON

the early morning flight from London City to Zurich, business class is home to the usual pinstriped executives, dosing up on caffeine and poring over spreadsheets. But today there's an anomalous passenger among them: a woman in Converse trainers carrying an old rucksack.

At the foot of the aeroplane steps on the tarmac in Zurich, a VIP attendant holds a sign with her name on it. The regular fliers look on as they're shepherded on to a shuttle bus while she's ushered into a blacked-out Mercedes.

The woman in the Mercedes is me, and this is the beginning of my journey into the secret world of psychiatric care for the ultra-high-net-worth elite. For the next 48 hours I'll be experiencing life inside a rehab for millionaires.

Obsequious staff whisk me from the airstrip via VIP passport and security checks to the arrivals pickup, where another uniformed driver presents me with a bouquet of flowers and opens the door of a £175,000 Bentley Flying Spur. I'm chauffeured through Zurich, past church spires and neat houses, before the Bentley slows to a halt outside the entrance to the world's most exclusive mental health and addiction clinic.

Paracelsus Recovery is in an unassuming former residential building overlooking Lake Zurich. Inside are treatment rooms and luxury apartments for up to three clients, though schedules are strictly vetted to make sure no two clients ever meet. This is because they are some of the wealthiest, most powerful and most recognised people in the world. Aristocrats and executives, celebrities and royalty, heads of state and Arab sheikhs seek out this facility when they've hit rock bottom, paying about £100,000 a week to be treated here.

I've followed in their footsteps to the doorstep of Jan Gerber, Paracelsus's chief executive and founder. The one per cent want things done a certain way, he tells me. As their go-to mental health rehabilitator, Gerber, 42, understands that to help his millionaires get better, he needs to cater to their nonsensical whims as well as providing cutting-edge medical care. With white walls and echoey stairwells, the clinic might evoke an old psychiatric hospital, but clients are treated in private, serviced apartments. Before they check in, they are offered a brochure of floristry and art to choose from, though some still bring in their own interior designers to re-wallpaper their rooms. Several Middle Eastern clients have set up Bedouin tents on the roof terrace of the penthouse. None of which fazes Gerber.



The airport transfer to Paracelsus — in a Bentley, of course. Below: a view of Lake Zurich from a clinical room in the centre

"IF SOMEONE ASKS, 'SHOULD WE STOP THEM TAKING DRUGS ON THE PLANE?' I SAY, 'NO, NO, WE'LL WORRY ABOUT IT WHEN THEY GET HERE'"



"They live in a different reality," he tells me with a wry chuckle. "They didn't lose touch with reality, they just happen to live in a very different reality." He oscillates between good-natured bemusement at the exceptionalist beliefs of his clients and deep solemnity when discussing their torments.

Forget business class: most clients arrive by private jet. At least two, Gerber tells me, emerged on the steps of the jet looking "homeless" — they hadn't washed or eaten in days and were barely able to walk.

He frequently receives requests for same-day admissions, "someone who says, 'We are in the air now and we are diverting the plane to land in Zurich. We'll be there in two or three hours, can you take us?'" There have been distressing, fraught calls from such jets, from family members worried about their relative's erratic behaviour on the flight. Others query whether they should stop them from boozing and snorting lines at 30,000 feet. "If someone asks, 'Should he not take any drugs, or should we keep her from drinking on the plane?' it's, like, 'No, no! We'll worry about it when he or she gets here.'"

Inside the main clinical room an IV drip of bespoke vitamins, fresh from the fridge, is waiting to be inserted into the arm of an ultra-high-net-worth individual. There are machines that analyse electromagnetism, blast oxygen and scan hearts in 3D. Beyond the futuristic machines, Gerber employs some of the world's leading doctors, and a Nobel prizewinner in physiology/medicine sits on its advisory board. Even the chefs here work with nutritionists to "biochemically restore" clients.

While Paracelsus is polished it is not super-luxe: it's something of downgrade from the clients' homes. So why do the uberwealthy choose to come here? My hypothesis is that, as well as the top doctors and 15:1 staff client ratio, it offers the apex of specialist rehabilitation in the form of the 24/7 live-in therapists who put their entire lives on hold for their clients — watching television with them, talking to them at 3am when they can't sleep, sharing every meal.

The average length of an intensive stay here is six weeks and the longest was six months. When the clients check out, their therapist sometimes returns with them to their home country, relocating to live ➤

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as a member of the household staff as an "insurance policy" for weeks, months or even years.

"I exist in that relationship, sort of, as two people," says a British Paracelsus therapist, speaking on condition of anonymity. "One is someone who is hanging out, having fun, it's not too intense, but there's another part of me listening very intently to what the client is saying, how the client is behaving."

It's a unique vocation that couldn't be further from the weekly 50-minute talking sessions familiar to many. The therapist tells me he has had three stints in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, where he lived in a compound and accompanied his client to the desert, visiting camel farms and an oasis. His longest job was 18 months, in Switzerland. He has lived for four weeks in a luxury apartment in Mayfair with an alcoholic client, who'd rented it out for them.

In London, where listed companies are headed by CEOs whose imminent mental collapses have the potential to move markets, boards have sanctioned undercover therapists to shadow them at work.

Staff at one firm in the financial sector believed a new face was an analyst for a potential investor, present among them to observe the firm. In fact she was the CEO's therapist, "shadowing" him to check on him at intervals throughout the day. Other therapists have worked undercover as biographers and PR consultants.

The British therapist refutes that "live-in" work creates co-dependency with clients. "They understand there is an ending," he says. "They also want the end to come because they want to go back to their lives."

Some referrals to the clinic come from the clients' personal assistants — often without the knowledge of their spouses. "We've seen boardroom interventions," Gerber says. "The board gets together and makes an intervention from the top."





Paracelsus's main clinical room. Left: carefully chosen art and a baby grand piano furnish the "intensive stay" penthouse

A week's programme is almost £90,000. The executive version is £105,000. Most clients book in for eight weeks, which is a hefty bill. But in the instant-gratification world of the uberwealthy, many are in denial about the fact that they're on their way to a mental health facility. "Until the moment they arrive in treatment, they don't want to think about the treatment," Gerber says. "They live on an ad hoc basis."

Occasionally arrivals are met on the airstrip by a stretcher and driven to the nearest emergency hospital.

Gerber has the unique position of peering into the psyches of the world's most successful people at their lowest ebb. He says he didn't set out to target the ultra-rich, "it just happened". His bank balance is probably thanking him every day.

As a single child in a middle-class home in Schaffhausen, northern Switzerland, he used to listen to the dinner table discussions of his father, a psychiatrist, and his mother, a clinical nurse specialist, but swore he would never go into healthcare. He graduated from the London School of Economics with a degree in accounting and finance and worked as a management consultant. He founded several companies in Switzerland, which is where the idea for Paracelsus germinated.

A friend of a friend needed help for alcoholism. But as a high-profile executive of a listed company, his care "absolutely had to be kept under the lid". Jan and his family curated his treatment, sourcing him a butler and a yoga teacher. "That's how we decided that it was a feasible niche from a business perspective," he says.

He founded Paracelsus 11 years ago, naming it after a 16th-century Swiss physician who experimented with techniques that went against conventional wisdom with great success. Gerber — who runs the business but doesn't treat clients himself — emulates Paracelsus's non-dogmatic attitude, pointing out that therapies such as acupuncture, which were previously dismissed as "hocus pocus", are now widely offered on health insurance policies. Away from the lab machines and AI-assisted diagnostics, the clinic offers acupuncture, breathwork, horse riding, art and dog therapy.

Reputation spread by word of mouth and Gerber becomes earnest when he says that advocating for the compassionate treatment of mental illness — regardless of wealth or status — is "a message close to my heart". The depths of empathy he possesses for society's most fortunate are perhaps strengthened by his own mental breakdown last year.

Like many of his clients, his was years in the making but came to a head during the pandemic, which punctured his business. His relationship was struggling and his child was having a tough time at school. Panic attacks started, followed by "depressive episodes where I couldn't get from underneath the blanket".

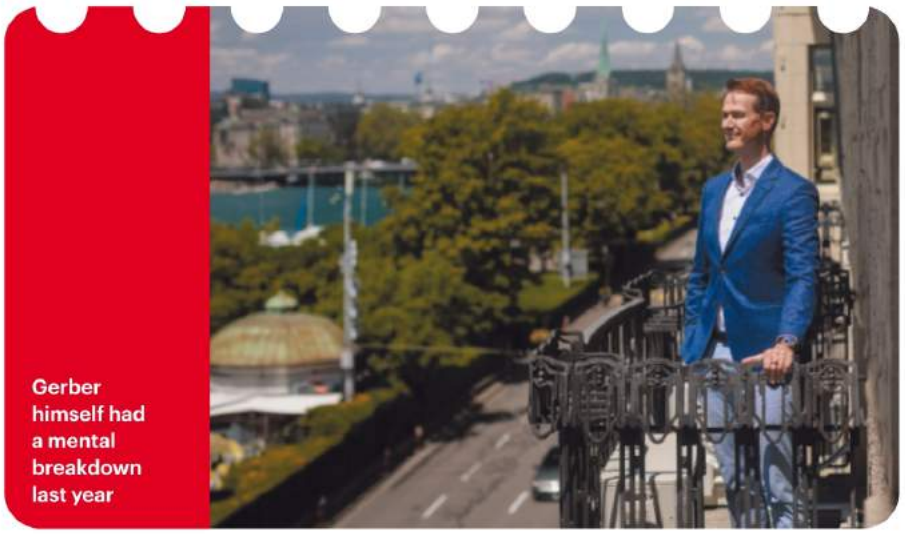
Soon afterwards he was on the flip side — no longer espousing theory on mental health but living it in practice, staring up at the ward ceiling of a rival Zurich clinic as doctors with clipboards gathered around his bed. When I ask why he couldn't have just checked himself into his own rehab, he replies that it wouldn't have been "therapeutic" to do so. ➤

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"It was quite interesting because I have all this knowledge about mental health," he says. "But it still completely blindsided me. Which is a humbling experience."

Reputation is everything, and many who seek out Gerber are ostensibly at the top of their game. The main facility is in Zurich, but for London's high-fliers Paracelsus operates a roving clinic, dispatching its team to private homes in Belgravia and Chelsea and sprawling mansions in the home counties.

These UK clients, especially CEOs, are "often highly functioning — until they're not," Gerber says, explaining that something minuscule is often the crack in the windscreen.



Gerber himself had a mental breakdown last year

The City is rife with people whose breakdowns are bubbling beneath the surface. Referrals for CEOs have skyrocketed, according to Gerber, who believes he is seeing a crisis in the boardroom. In 2020 referrals for CEOs increased by 500 per cent over the previous seven years, and last year his team saw referral rates for CEOs double again on the previous two years. "They work a lot of hours and are also all over the place travelling. That takes a toll physically," he explains. These high achievers also often ignore psychological issues, overcome by pressure to keep going — it's no wonder they suddenly "crash and burn". But he adds that "burn-outs from CEOs are often down to substance issues, coping with stress that way".

The CEO is the job that attracts the most psychopaths and narcissists, and Gerber says they're chronically drawn to dopamine-related substances, most commonly cocaine. Sometimes, he says, "snorting cocaine doesn't work any more" — either because the high has faded or the nose is ravaged — "so at some point you start injecting it." I'm incredulous. So there are instances of people in London offices secretly injecting drugs at work? "Yes. Big-shot people," Gerber replies gravely.

In which industries?

"Commodities. Financials." Psychopathic CEOs, he adds, "will come to us when appearances, their façades, start to crumble. That's often the reason or the moment they will seek treatment, and not before."

Some are forced to make carefully co-ordinated international dashes between the seclusion of the Zurich facility and the glare of the public eye while in the throes of acute mental health crises. One client commuted weekly between the clinic and a London television studio.

Gerber has treated professional athletes forced to check in "after a scandal" or who've dosed themselves up on too many prescription drugs while attempting to power through an injury. He has treated entertainers who've checked in mid-tour and at least one Hollywood A-lister whose staff refused to discuss so much as their identity over the phone.

"MONEY CAN'T BUY HAPPINESS — IT'S THE OPPOSITE. IT DOESN'T MATTER HOW MUCH MONEY YOU HAVE OR WHAT YOUR LAST NAME IS — PAIN IS REAL"

He has also worked with politicians — including Westminster's — and heads of state from other countries. For one foreign political leader "we had cabinet meetings and press appearances kept down to a minimum. And there were cover stories that the person wasn't well — you know, cold, flu — because if you're head of state you don't really have an excuse for not appearing. There is no way you would get re-elected with that stigma.

"When someone is in an acute phase, normally the recommendation is, 'Leave everything, take care of yourself,'" he says. But for the people he treats "it could mean throwing away everything you've ever worked for… you potentially have a lot to lose if the news breaks".

In Zurich I checked into one of the "intensive stay" apartments: a penthouse set over two floors with a piano, candelabra and a bath to rival the lake. A room for my round-the-clock therapist is next to the master bedroom. There's also an in-house counselling room, all ready to go with two chairs and tissues.

Gerber sees a lot of what he terms "*Succession* syndrome" — where the scions of powerful families are competing or striving to appease patriarchs with impossible expectations. If these walls could talk they would tell of mighty family showdowns. Clients stay here indefinitely, receiving bespoke treatment from doctors, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, nutritional experts, masseuses and yoga instructors until they feel ready to return to their lives.

It feels gauche to lavish sympathy on the people who, in theory, have it all. There's a cost of living crisis and months-long waiting lists for NHS mental healthcare. Why do these people deserve sympathy?

"Money can't buy happiness — it's quite the opposite," Gerber argues. "It doesn't matter how much money you have or what your last name is. Pain is real. The probability that you are having a fulfilled life as a billionaire is actually a fraction [of what it might be] if you were a member of the average population." It boils down to a lack of purpose and the boredom, miasma and lack of self-esteem that set in with it.

Some people do give up their wealth, he adds, but the majority are institutionalised in the gilded cages they were born into, and helpless outside of them.

Being born into wealth can afflict psychological development to such a degree that Gerber describes it as "affluent neglect". Sending children to elite boarding schools and raising them via a team of tutors and nannies, he says, impairs the parent-child bond, creating a traumatic "absence".

"'How does it work with laundry? How does it work with groceries? I can't cook. Insurance — what's that? That's overwhelming," Gerber says. "Ideally we can muster empathy for that, because it's a horrible place to be." ■

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