HAUTE ANXIETY

I checked into the world's most expensive rehab – but I never expected it would break me down

in this way

I ponder how I've turned out compared with the boy at Eton aged 16, having failed the annual exams - and I sob

By William Sitwell

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My answer to the frequent question 'Where do you like eating?' is, in truth, that, well, I don't like sitting down and I'm scared of food. Lower-back pain and acid reflux are now rendering me nervous at the prospect of eating out, uncomfortable doing it, in pain writing about it, and in fear at the physical consequence of it.

At the age of 51, I find this worrying. A restaurant critic's spoilt moan in an age of uncertainty?

The offer of help comes not a moment too soon. There's a clinic in Zurich. Paracelsus Recovery promises a 'safe haven', with 'individualised treatment programmes that are designed to address a client's unique set of needs.'

I'm dispatched by *The Telegraph*, which is fortunate because regular clients at Paracelsus are high-profile, high-net-worth individuals, and the price tag for a week's admission is £75,000.

Before the flight, Swiss Air business, of course (although since many take a private jet, you could say I was slumming it), I research the place and its modus operandi, examine the schedule prepared for me and have a couple of conversations with the clinic's founder and CEO, Jan Gerber.

'We'll give you your own apartment with views over Lake Zurich. You'll have a housekeeper who will cook and clean for you as well as a team of 10 of us caring for you,' he tells me. 'We'll conduct an array of assessments: physical, emotional and biochemical. We'll identify areas of concern or ones to watch, and with treatments, therapy, yoga and massage we'll implement a programme. Our aim is to add quality years to your life.'

'These are first-world problems, right?' I say. 'That may be true,' he replies, 'and we work with a lot of financially privileged people, but that doesn't mean they don't experience very real emotional or physical pain. What we do here is super complex. Are you willing and able to help us open your can of worms? Don't worry, our responsibility is not to go to places where we leave the doors open.'

Many enter a three-month programme; I agree to three days. And while the usual issues are alcohol or drug addiction, my relationship with food – I really love to eat and also hate it – gives me a little wind in my sails. I am worthy of a brief visit. Paracelsus, here I come.

There's no sign with my name at Zurich arrivals, but I'm greeted by a smartly dressed German called Pawel Mowlik, managing partner of Paracelsus, and the driver.

In the psychiatrist's chair | CREDIT: @mauricehaas

Whisked out of the airport and into the clinic's Bentley Flying Spur, we are soon in the city centre and turning into a nondescript car park behind an apartment block.

Luggage taken care of, doors held open, we go through an entrance with no signage. 'This place is very discreet and highly confidential,' says Mowlik. 'We have the very famous – the richest people, heads of state – and no one needs to know that they are here.’

'I chatted about my late, wonderful father, his lunchtime drinking, my brutal prep school and terrible record' | CREDIT: ©mauricehaas.ch

My apartment is airy and light, with lake views, a large bedroom, comfortable sitting room, kitchen and dining area and my own therapy room. Behind the kitchen is another bedroom and bathroom. ‘That’s for a therapist to stay,’ says Mowlik. ‘We can provide that 24/7 if need be. We sent a therapist back to the Middle East with one client,’ he adds, ‘and they stayed out there for five years.’

The housekeeper, Elizabeth, is there to unpack my things. And Gerber is also there to greet me. We sit down to discuss my schedule. Across three days I'll have an intense programme of clinical, psychiatric, fitness, lifestyle and nutritional assessments as well as yoga, psychotherapy, physical training, intravenous therapy, something called bioresonance and then a presentation of results by the team.

'Every piece of data we see tells us that the mental health crisis that had emerged has worsened since Covid,' Gerber tells me. He's a tall, slim, tender man, and his mother, Christine Merzeder, is the senior clinical coordinator. She will chaperone me from meeting to meeting. Mowlik, it turns out, will chaperone me for anything else. I mention a swim in the lake. 'A lovely idea, we can go tomorrow at 8am,' he says.

'I might go for a walk before dinner,' I venture. ‘Perfect, we can leave at 6.30.’

I note that the physical assessment and training are at a private gym. ‘Is it far to walk?’ I ask. ‘It’s a simple route,’ says Mowlik. ‘I will show you… and then bring you home.’

The super rich need a crafty chaperone, and this one knows how they think. By his early 20s Mowlik, working for a Zurich-based hedge fund, was earning up to £2 million a month. He began splashing it on private jets, alcohol, drugs… he checked into Paracelsus and liked the place so much he later became a partner. Clients can relate to him, and he’s quite handy at finding new recruits, too.

‘Being famous and wealthy can be a very lonely place,’ says Mowlik. ‘You can’t trust anyone, you find yourself exploited and that can be a vicious circle that brings separation from people. Which can lead to depression and medication with substances. We exist because such a person can't go to an average rehab.'

'Did you know that the incidences of addiction among the wealthy are much higher – maybe five-fold – than the average?' states Gerber. 'And it is relative. Pain is very real for the person who feels the pain. In fact it can be
harder for someone who is famous and very wealthy to find empathy. Emotionally we are all human, we all need love and social interaction.'

Gerber also argues it is vital the rich and powerful can get confidential help. They can have a lot to lose if the public learns of their difficulties.

‘If a head of state or famous entertainer is unwell, that can have a very large effect on their family network or across their business empire: a head of state with a nation in crisis, a lead actor in a major production…’ he explains. ‘So what we do here is a big lever to heal the world.’

'My apartment is airy and light, with lake views' | CREDIT:

He adds that his therapists need to understand the reality of being rich. ‘We call it affluent neglect,’ he says. ‘There are children brought up
by nannies and sent to boarding school.’

The day passes in a haze of presentations and tests. I hear words and phrases such as body composition, epigenetics, heart-rate variability, personalised nutrition, infusions, silent inflammation, metabolic health, microbiota-gut-brain-axis dysfunction, gut biology, stool transplantation, leaky gut progression and wearable technology. I’m wired up to a Metatron, which scans my body for inflammation, I have a portable heart monitor attached to my chest, a live-monitoring glucose implant on my upper left arm, they take blood from my veins, blood from my fingertips, I have strict timetables to deliver urine and stool samples.

And I have therapy. Consultant psychiatrist Dr Thilo Beck draws me out on my recent past: divorce, children, marriage, relationships, anxiety… he teaches me the fascinating concept of the observing self, watching the theatre of life as it progresses. ‘The next time you feel angry, pause for a second and consider the idea that you’re noticing yourself becoming angry… You are the driver of your bus; your anxiety and fears, the parts you don’t like, are parts of you. They are your passengers, stroke them, soothe them, be proud of your bus and drive towards your values.’

There’s Nicole Züllig, too, psychotherapist. ‘I specialise in trauma,' she tells me. 'I have discovered that most people have unresolved trauma.' It sounds like Prince Harry's been in this chair, I think to myself, recollecting his habit in the press, for example, of describing partying antics in his 30s as not 'fun', but 'unresolved trauma'.

'Where is that trauma, that loss?' she asks. 'I look for that very deep loss. We have a tendency to put it away in anger, to deep-freeze it, we must get it out of the freezer, thaw it and deal with it…

'So tell me about your relationship with your mother.'

William Sitwell with his mother

Really? I think. We need to go there? So, with a little reluctance, I talk about her. I describe an indefatigable woman, a major presence in our lives, a determined woman, an occasionally complicated person, and a remarkable and extremely well preserved one.

‘What is the feeling you have when you speak of her?’ asks Züllig ‘Guilt,’ I say. ‘Really?’ she responds. ‘Interesting. Tell me more.’

‘Guilt,’ I continue, ‘because she’d be furious at the idea of me talking about her behind her back to a complete stranger.’

I chat about my late, wonderful father, his lunchtime drinking, my brutal prep school, boarding aged seven, my terrible school record, my appalling reports, my slipperings and beatings for laziness. As I talk, I laugh at various moments. ‘Why are you laughing?’ she asks, appalled.

‘Because I think it’s funny,’ I reply.

‘Funny?’ she exclaims. ‘You think this is funny? It is not funny. It is tragic. You were abandoned. This is trauma. You must take this trauma, understand it and thaw it. You must not laugh to avoid it.’

‘Whatever,’ I mutter. Soon I’m chatting about my more recent work; a few big awards, books, television… I ponder how I’ve turned out compared with the boy at Eton aged 16, having failed the annual exams, officially labelled in front of 600 of my peers as a General Total Failure.

And I sob. Züllig has done her work and is on hand, brandishing tissues. ‘How does this make you feel?’ she asks. ‘Exhausted,’ I reply.

Next up is Susann Heimgartner, yoga instructor: ‘Today we will work with your physical body to get to the wisdom body to access deeper layers of awareness.’

Please, no, no, not more of this! I recoil.

She senses I’m a little overloaded so makes me lie on the floor and practise some loosening of the hamstrings. She holds my ankles and I fall asleep.

As well as rigorous deep massage by René Galatti, who aims to hydrate my spine, there’s some physical training at the Dolder Grand spa, in the city’s grandest hotel. Mowlik lurks outside to prevent any attempt at escape. Later, as I lie on a sunbed for a moment, I look to the plunge pool to my right – and jump with fright as Mowlik emerges from the water.

Then it's back in the Bentley to the clinic for my results. Dr Manuel Riegner has the scores from the heart-rate variability monitor: 'You have good genes and your body is well trained by your Peloton,' he says, speaking of my secret home exercise addiction. 'You have a biological age of 29.' Result! I think. Can I go home now? Then comes the rest. I have high levels of mercury and uric acid, low levels of zinc, and a very concerning, almost negligible, level of iron. 'No wonder you feel fatigued,' he says.

As for food, I have allergies to cereal, milk, soy, garlic, rye, wheat and mustard, and my back pain is largely caused by tight hamstrings and glutes.

Nutritionist Priscilla Sanchez tells me I have ‘a mildly obese outer appearance’ (charming!), I must stop eating carbohydrates at night – no pasta, no potatoes – have only a fistful of carbs at lunch, quit cereals and milk at breakfast, drink a lot less alcohol (two glasses per night) and try intermittent fasting for three months (no breakfast every other weekday.)

'Across three days I had an intense programme of psychiatric, fitness and nutritional assessments'

Then I'm strapped to an intravenous drip, fed amino acids, vitamin C and a detoxmix, given two weeks' worth of supplements, and told I must have an infusion of iron back in the UK, urgently.

I have a last swim in Lake Zurich, the water and distant sight of the Alps soothing my mind. 'Time to leave,' says Mowlik, coming up for air beside me.

He doesn't leave my side until I'm through departures at the airport. Back home and I've avoided pasta for dinner, skipped my first breakfast and am gearing up to stretch those hamstrings to help my lower back that I haven't felt a niggle from in a few days...

Three days of gratuitous self-reflection and I realise I'm so lucky to have the family I have, the wife, the kids, the home, the friends, the most utterly fabulous job writing about my most favourite subject. Speaking of which, I need to try again to book a table at a restaurant that insists I use only an online booking system. Is that anger I notice appearing? Get to the back of the bus before I pop you in the freezer...

William Sitwell's stay and flights were care of Paracelsus Recovery