

SUZANNE MORPHET takes in a lot of hot air and recharges her batteries in the mountains

A man wearing only a goatee and a loincloth stands before me. He's holding a towel and raises it overhead before flinging it towards me. With a loud snap it retracts in his hands and a burst of hot, fragrant air follows in its wake. It hits me in the face with such force that I gasp to breathe.

I'm in the Alps at one of Austria's top hotels — the expanded and newly rebranded Alpin Resort Sacher in the village of Seefeld, about 30km west of Innsbruck.

This is the third hotel in the Sacher family but it attracts a different clientele from its urban counterparts. People who come here aren't on business. Neither are they here to sightsee.

"They want to recreate, to load up the batteries, to do something for their health, to have more energy," says Elisabeth Gurtler, arguably the queen of Austrian hospitality.

Gurtler single-handedly managed the iconic Sacher hotels in Vienna and Salzburg for 24 years after their owner — her first husband — died in 1990.

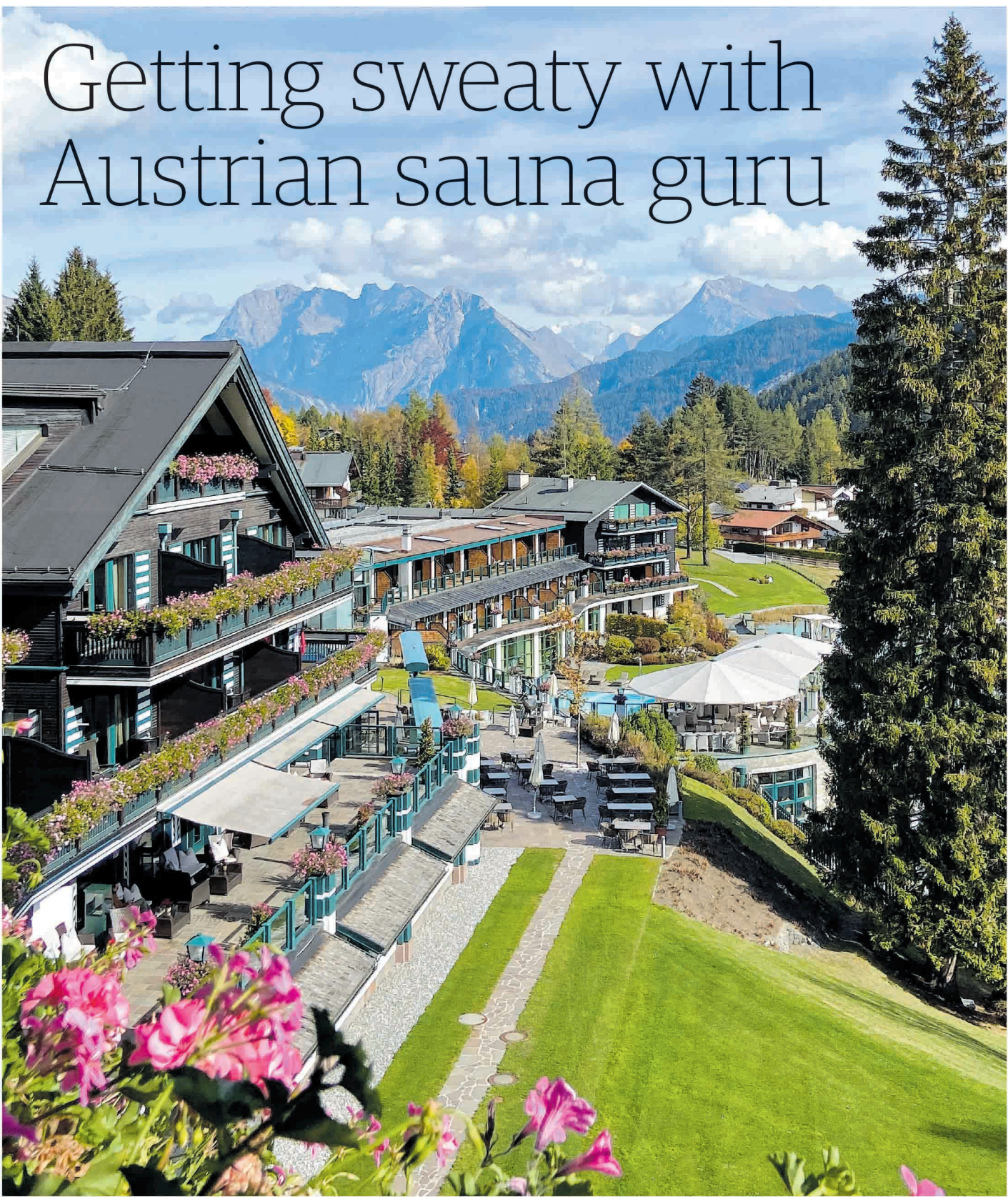
In 2014, after handing over responsibility to her adult children, Gurtler decided it was time to bring the Astoria Seefeld Resort into the Sacher fold. Her father had bought it in 1950 as "a hobby" and Gurtler spent her holidays here; learning to ski, swim and ride horses.

By September 2022 the "cute little hotel" from her childhood had been transformed into a chic, five-star resort with lots of wooden beams and floors, faux fur cushions, and gorgeous mountain views. Elegant dining rooms and intimate lounges beckon you to sit, eat and drink. The restaurant Der Max is the highest-ranked restaurant in Seefeld by the French restaurant guide Gault&Millau.

The resort also offers guided activities such as hiking and e-cycling to take advantage of its altitude at 1200m in the mountainous Tyrol region.

"There are studies about the benefits of spending time in an altitude between 1000 and 1500m," Gurtler says when she stops me in the hallway one day to chat.

At 73, Gurtler is still very much in charge and enjoys interacting



The Alpin Resort Sacher is at 1200m in the town of Seefeld in the Tyrolean Alps. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet

with guests, often with her Jack Russell terrier, Ella, by her side. As another aside, dogs are not just allowed at this resort, but welcomed.

"If there's less oxygen in the air," Gurtler continues, "you have to haul more air into your lungs. This widens your lungs and enlarges your red cells . . . (which) is good for resistance."

This emphasis on health carries over into the resort's enormous spa. On two levels, indoors and out, and occupying almost 5000sqm, the spa is a sanctuary for

worshippers of wellness. From my balcony I can see an outdoor lap pool, a saltwater whirlpool and a natural swimming pond that could pass for an alpine lake.

Inside, the spa is divided into two sections — the nude zone and the textile zone. I wander into the first without realising there's a choice, and that's where I meet the man with the towel, whom I learn is the sauna master.

After showing me where to undress, he directs me into a large, cedar-lined sauna where six others, men and women, have already gathered. Unbeknown to me, a wellness ritual that's hundreds, maybe thousands of years old, is about to begin.

The sauna master ladles water infused with essential oil on to the hot rocks. Then he takes a towel and like a cowboy with a lasso, twirls it over his head. At first, it seems just for show, but soon the air becomes alive. It moves, changes direction, speeds up, surprises me with its searing heat. He directs blasts at each of us in turn.

Just when I think I can't take it any longer, he opens the door and ushers us all outside to cool down with buckets of ice.

Still bewildered by what we just experienced, I ask a short stocky woman standing beside me, "What was that?"

"Aufguss," she replies in heavily accented English, meaning "infusion" and it's practised



Elisabeth Gurtler with her Jack Russell terrier Ella.

throughout Europe where winters are cold. "It's one of the best ways and natural ways to build up your immune system," she tells me authoritatively.

Then she says there's another one starting in 45 minutes. "Are you going to it too?" I ask. "Of course," she says in that direct but not unfriendly German manner.



The Alpin Resort Sacher's elegant dining area.