



## A CURE FOR STRESS ON THE SPANISH COAST

As burnout reaches epidemic proportions, travelers are increasingly looking for a little peace of mind. At Sha Wellness Clinic, south of Valencia, **SARAH BRUNING** explores the intersection of cutting-edge brain science and old-fashioned R&R.

**P**ERCHED ON A HILL overlooking the Balearic Sea, the Sha Wellness Clinic's all-white, Modernist building stands in stark contrast to the rows of terra-cotta-roofed houses that surround it. Its simplicity could almost register as severe, were it not for the lush Mediterranean shrubs spilling over its terraces and the towering palms swaying near the doorway. This is a place that combines the trappings of a traditional resort (coastal setting, nice pool) with state-of-the-art wellness facilities, and once you step through the bright, marble-lined lobby, you realize what all the cool simplicity is about: it's meant to offer you a clean slate.

Modern-day workers' feeling of being in perpetual survival mode is one reason wellness

tourism has grown into a \$639.4 billion industry. According to the American Psychological Association, 45 percent of adults report lying awake at night because of stress. As a sufferer myself, I became intrigued by purported remedies offered at Sha, which has been at the vanguard of wellness for more than a decade. The integrated-health experts there recently debuted photobiomodulation, a high-tech brain treatment developed to treat anxiety and improve mental health.

Over the past few years, I'd started to feel fatigued. Even basic tasks on my to-do list required Herculean mental and emotional effort. My short-term memory rivaled that of *Finding Nemo's* beloved Dory, and restorative sleep was a totally foreign concept. Specialists at home had resorted to the decades-old solution of prescribing heavy-duty pharmaceuticals, but they hadn't done much to help me build a sustainable routine. Frustration led me to El Albir, Spain, a quiet seaside town about 90 minutes south of Valencia, in the hopes that a stay at Sha could help me course-correct out of burnout through a blend of innovative Western medicine and natural Eastern therapies. If celebrities and Russian billionaires could find rejuvenation at the mother of all destination spas, surely I could, too.

Most programs last at least a week and target a specific need, such as losing weight or quitting smoking. I opted to build the therapy into the four-day Discovery program—a gentle, introductory boot camp of sorts designed to assess my general well-being and introduce healthier habits. My appointments began on the airy, light-filled medical floor, where a nurse logged my vitals and patient history before introducing me to Rosario García, M.D. Her expertise lies in healing the body on a cellular level. “Nutrition is crucial to combating stress,” she explained. “What’s your diet like?” I cringed. “I eat everything,” I told her, “and then some.”

▲ Sha's outdoor pool deck.

As she listened to me describe my typically American diet (too many simple carbs, not enough veggies), García nodded knowingly. The clinic's Mediterranean- and Asian-inspired macrobiotic menu relies on grains, fresh and pickled vegetables, legumes, and seaweed. "Healthy and delicious," García remarked, before assigning a combination of Sha's two less-restrictive meal plans. I didn't believe her until I sat down at the on-site restaurant, Shamadi, for a three-course meal of potato-leek soup, monkfish on a bed of millet, and an apple tart with turmeric ice cream.

Next I met José Ramon Sanders, M.D., a general practitioner who advised me to take magnesium and tryptophan supplements and to see an endocrinologist to monitor my sleep-wake hormones. My appointment with Bruno Ribeiro, M.D., who leads the neurocognitive-development unit, was even more enlightening. Listening to guided meditations on my phone in the evenings could be revving up my brain waves when they should be winding down. And wearing a health tracker to bed might be messing with my circadian rhythm, because of

the electronic frequencies required to monitor my sleep. Instead, he told me to ditch the wrist piece at night and use my mindfulness app in the morning.

As I left Ribeiro's sunny office, I stuffed the device in my bag, already feeling relieved that I wouldn't need to keep logging every move. But that night, as I laid my head on a cushy feather pillow, concerns flooded my mind. *I should research which brands make the most reputable supplements. Toss. Did I schedule my credit card payments?* Turn. If I couldn't get a solid eight in this spacious guest suite—with blackout curtains, a sea view, and four audio channels of nature sounds at my disposal—the doctors sure did have their work cut out for them.

The next 48 hours consisted of fitness sessions designed to increase my energy and wellness treatments meant to quiet my neuroses. After an early morning walk along the beach, I exercised with a personal trainer, then



▲ Bruno Ribeiro, a neurocognitive specialist, leads Sha's brain-stimulating treatments.

◀ The clinic's menus emphasize a macrobiotic pescatarian diet.

## Mind Matters

Three more destinations where cognitive wellness treatments help travelers de-stress.

### LAKE AUSTIN SPA RESORT, AUSTIN, TEXAS

As part of this spa's aquatic craniosacral therapy, a practitioner applies gentle, targeted pressure along your spine while you float in a pool to induce tension relief and relaxation. *lakeaustin.com; doubles from \$1,050, all-inclusive.*

### CAL-A-VIE, SAN DIEGO

The health spa provides guests with a headband equipped with EEG sensors to monitor brain activity levels during meditation. An audio soundscape trains you to refocus with each spike in sound. *cal-a-vie.com; three-night stays from \$4,550 per person, all-inclusive.*

### HOTEL SALZBURGERHOF, AUSTRIA

The property's in-house "mental trainer" measures stress tolerance, along with heart and lung activity, to tailor burnout coaching to your needs. *salzburgerhof.at; doubles from \$388, all-inclusive.*





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 Many of Sha's wellness programs incorporate aquatic therapies and water-based exercise.

headed to a hydrotherapy circuit that incorporated an aromatherapy bath and a warm mud wrap. That afternoon, I mingled with other guests—two American expats, a Russian, and two Kazakhs—during a cooking class, where we learned breakfast recipes that would fuel us during busy days. An acupuncture consultation with a lovely Zimbabwean practitioner named Philippa homed in on my apparent liver issues—in Chinese medicine, waking up at 2 a.m. and 4 a.m. signals an imbalance—while a mindfulness workshop reinforced the kinds of lessons easily forgotten in the daily grind. “You cannot control everything in life, especially your brain,” our instructor said. “Just as your heart was made to pump blood, your brain was made to think thoughts.”

By my last day, I felt even more eager to try two of Sha's newest medical treatments. First, I reconnected with García for cellular bioanalysis, which entails scrutinizing a few drops of a patient's blood under a high-powered microscope. She spotted acidic deposits and misshapen blood cells moving at a glacial pace—yet more signs that my liver could be underperforming. Improving my diet and sleep should help, García reassured me.

Later, I had my second visit with Ribeiro for 45 minutes of photobiomodulation. Developed in partnership with researchers at Harvard University and NASA, the treatment uses diodes positioned at various points on a helmet to direct infrared light to points in the brain. The procedure is intended to oxygenate neurons and stimulate mitochondria (cells' “powerhouses”) to repair themselves more rapidly. As a result, patients experience an energy boost and a more positive state of mind. It's thought to be an effective treatment for mental-health conditions such as depression and anxiety.

Ribeiro told me that afterward I could expect an easing of my persistent rumination cycles.

He then sat me in a cushy leather recliner, covered me with a light blanket, fixed an oxygen stimulator to my right nostril, and secured the futuristic headpiece in place. As the diodes warmed up, Ribeiro lowered the blinds and dimmed the lights. I closed my eyes. The more I focused on gently inhaling and exhaling, the more I felt myself slip into a calmer headspace. After about 10 minutes, my jaw, which I hadn't realized I'd been clenching, began to loosen. After 20 minutes, my toes and shoulders relaxed too. At the 30-minute mark, errant thoughts started creeping in, but I had an easier time letting them go.

Since returning home, I've woven several pieces of the Sha specialists' advice into my routine. I prep a big batch of curry-infused scrambled tofu on Sundays to ensure I have effortless, healthy breakfasts at my fingertips, and I've carved out time for Pilates or cycling at least three times a week. And washing down a magnesium supplement before bed seems to curb my body's impulse to awaken at all hours, putting me one step closer to finally achieving a good night's rest. ●

*shawellnessclinic.com; four-day Discovery program from \$1,683.*



A-LIST  
 ADVICE

### How do you make the most of a spa visit?

**BETH JENKINS**  
 WASHINGTON,  
 CENTRAL & SOUTH  
 AMERICA SPECIAL-  
 IST AT MCCABE  
 WORLD TRAVEL:

“I always arrive at least 30 minutes early. This helps to set the mood so I can fully relax into my spa treatment. If there is a local specialty—either a treatment style or natural products indigenous to the destination—I make a point of trying it.” *mccabe world.com.*