

The Search for Harmony Healing or Wellness?

Musia Heike Bus in conversation with Marion Schneider, manager of the Hotel an der Therme

How does a historian become the manager of a successful wellness hotel? Marion Schneider is an entrepreneur who studied history, German studies and ethnology and originally wanted to become a freelance writer and researcher. But then the family business called. What began as an interim solution became an ever more responsible position and kindled an increasing ambition in her. At the beginning of the nineties together with her husband Klaus-Dieter Böhm she opened the Klinikzentrum Bad Sulza and since 1999 they also run the Toskana Therme thermal baths. The Hotel an der Therme was opened at the same time.

What appealed to you to open a hotel and then to take over its running as the manager? Marion

Schneider: After I completed my studies my life was more or less the performance of duty and as was initially the founding of the hotel. After the decline in rehabilitation cures as a result of the health reform, half of our capacity at the clinic was vacant. It seemed obvious to turn part of the accommodation into a hotel. Thankfully we had made our preparations early enough and we were able to open the Hotel before the Toskana Therme had been completed. However it quickly became clear that only with the help of the Therme could we operate to capacity. Of course, the guests didn't suddenly appear out of nowhere, we had to use all strategic and tactical possibilities to publicise our hotel services. Initially most of our guests came through tour organisers but once the Therme opened our hotel quickly filled with guests.

The Hotel offers more than just overnight accommodation. With the Hotel's "Wellness à la Carte" offerings the guests are spoilt for choice: they can pamper themselves with beauty care or massages, make new experiences with yoga, shiatsu, clinical hypnosis and NLP, Light-Fields colour counselling, the sound lounge, ayurveda, Hawaiian Bodywork and Aqua Wellness. For many guests much is often very new and they almost need a little courage to try them out. Why did you choose such a selection of therapy and wellness offerings?

I have been active in the health sector since 1981. To begin with it was saunas and solarium, then rehabilitation cure medicine and all its aspects, and not least natural medicine. I studied the therapeutic effects of light, with water and warmth and their effects on our health. I was not prepared to sell things whose effect I did not know personally. In the clinic we decided upon the use of certain natural therapies in conjunction with traditional medicine. I examined different methods of relaxation and psychology – in the meantime it has become widely accepted that relaxed people are more able to deal with and cope with their illness. Different forms of relaxation were important for us and is also the reason why we decided to install Liquid-Sound in the Klinikzentrum. In addition the area of complementary medicine was of particular interest to me. It is important to me to find out all means in which a patient's pain can be soothed whether these be conventional or unconventional. I had been aware of such offerings for a while and knew what was generally recognised and what was possibly dubious. Together with our doctors and therapists we analysed different forms of therapy and their suitability, and this experience became the backbone for a sensible and complementary wellness programme.

The average hotel guest is not necessarily a patient who comes for therapy in the clinic. He or she would like to feel comfortable, to make new experiences and to relax. How would you differentiate between wellness and healing?

Guests don't come through prescription for treatment, they are looking to relax and be pampered. Our wellness offerings are aimed at relaxing, feeling comfortable, improving the quality of life and finding harmony. Patients on the other hand come because they are suffering pain or illness, they are suffering a disharmony. Many patients have become so accustomed to this disharmony that they do not know it any other way. Beginning to actively searching for ways of soothing pain and finding harmony is for many already part of the healing process. Wellness strives to achieve harmony, to achieve a positive experience. The motivation to strive for harmony may have its roots in an underlying disharmony but not in pain. Guests are looking to improve a *joie de vivre* that they already know.

We have learnt to accommodate patients and guests in different areas without banning them to particular corners. Both kinds of visitors are here, the patients in the clinic and the guests in the hotel. And yet both are here in the same place and can freely mingle and get to know one another as they see fit.

One doesn't want to be reminded of one's disharmonies ...

And some patients feel uncomfortable with too much laughing and happiness, they are so used to dealing with the wearisome. But in general the mingling of the two is healthy for both groups. The Hotel, the Therme and the Klinikzentrum share a common motto "Health and Happiness" and in the Hotel this is augmented with "Well-being and Relaxation". All our guests would like to experience that feeling of well-being and relax and our secret lies in our staff who communicate this message to our guests.

A message of happiness...

When our staff are stressed or feeling down then they cannot communicate an atmosphere of happiness. Our personnel training is of central importance. Our guests expect, quite rightly, that everything will work as expected. Things have to be as they have been made to expect from the outset. We pay attention to how we describe our services and offerings so that our guests have a good idea of what awaits them upon arrival.

You work together with many freelance therapist who are highly qualified in their fields. What do the guests expect and what is booked most?

Most guests would like to feel good and it is massages, classic massages and foot reflex-zone massages as well as beauty treatments that are most popular. A smaller group want to experience something new, new therapies such as sound therapy or psychological experiences such as self-hypnosis or ayurveda. A major highlight is Aqua Wellness for which we are famous throughout Germany. Many people contact us directly because of Aqua Wellness because they have heard that we offer this. We seek the soothing relaxation in water, which is why Liquid-Sound is so appealing, and with Aqua Wellness the experience is so much deeper and can be a really moving experience. Hawaiian Bodywork is also a wonderful offering: it is fantastic to see how the guests move through the hotel after a session – they seem so delighted.

What is still on your personal wish list?

What I have been planning for several years and would very much like to introduce is genealogy therapy. Genealogy therapy is much more than determining the family tree in order to clarify one's own personal

history. Ethnological aspects, health aspects and entrepreneurial aspects can be integral to this. I think this would be a sensible and necessary therapy and would like to be able to offer this regularly. Like any effective treatment this has to be conducted by excellent and very experienced therapists. I will only start offering it when I know that the highest standards can be ensured.

Does that mean you have personally experienced most of what the Hotel has to offer yourself?

Yes, I have experienced them all and take the time to get to know the therapists myself. It is a responsible service we offer and relaxation should be taken as seriously and professionally as healing treatments. Even a straightforward massage can be administered incorrectly, and so we only have experienced people with a sound training on our staff.

That begins with appropriate advice for your guests requiring knowledge, experience and not least a little diplomacy.

Sometimes we have guests would like to book as much as possible and who we then feel we should advise to concentrate on less diversity but with more depth. That is not always that easy but it is a learning experience to discover just how much wellness one can take in a day. Our staff are put to the test regularly.

So to speak “as much wellness as possible is particularly good”...

Yes, but it is easy to understand. With so little time, the guests feel that they should devote as much time as possible to their body and well-being as possible. One forgets that the deeper the experience the longer it takes to fully integrate. With a second treatment or therapy hot on its heels the desired effect can end up being negated. However, when the treatments and therapies are balanced with one another the combined effect can be greater and equally the value of relaxation. Relaxation should not be stressful. That is what is so wonderful about a cure, there is time enough for this age-old recipe to unfold fully. Goethe used to spend months at a stretch enjoying leisurely his cures in the Bohemian thermal baths. Nowadays the time factor has become incredibly important: How do I achieve maximum relaxation in one weekend? However I think we will rediscover the benefit and importance of taking ones time for certain regenerative processes.

Nonetheless, you do offer wonderful packages for short breaks which quickly transport guests into a new world and moreover have a positive effect...

Yes, for example we offer a 4-nights programme with only two main applications as a short-stay taster. There are so many other things one can do to relax whilst here: guests can visit the Toskana Therme, enjoy a concert, sauna, stroll in the countryside, inhale saline air in the thorn-building – many things similar in character to a cure. On their next visit guests are more able to choose something specific from what is on offer. And there is plenty to do in the surroundings: there is an active riding stable, mini golf, horse-and-carriage trips, we can hire out bicycles, we will shortly even have a tandem and there are cultural activities on throughout the region in Auerstedt and Apolda and in the Goethe Gartenhaus 2.

You have given me the cue to something else: It will soon be possible to marry at the Hotel an der Therme, and there is a special room loving couples?

As Goethe's Gartenhaus 2 was next to the Therme, we were immediately asked whether it would be possible to marry there. We would like to be able offer this location for marriages so that we can offer an all-round special marriage experience in conjunction with the Hotel and Therme. The room for loving couples is just the beginning...

The Hotel is already well-booked. Does it need to develop still more?

Oh absolutely. We can enrich the experience still more, for example in terms of nutritional culinary offerings. We pay special attention to healthy cooking, we use regionally grown produce and also offer vegetarian food. In the future we will offer a slimming programme and more active movement offerings: weekly hikes, jogging and hiking routes and water gymnastics. And there are regular seminars or lectures on wellness or health topics. The direct connection bridge to the Therme will be open shortly and that will improve comfort for our guests considerably.

Tell me, do you have a personal recipe for success as manager of the Hotel?

Most of our guests now come as a result of recommendation. That means that those who have already stayed with us have enjoyed it so much that they have recommended it to their friends and acquaintances.

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