

Take two very frazzled working mothers, a sudden bereavement, the wettest summer on record and an imminent recession. By the time my friend Grainne and I got to winter, we were both more than ready to sign up for a stint at a spa. In fact, we nearly needed to be airlifted there. So, on one very grey and wet Saturday, we packed our swimsuits and our high heels and headed down the Galway road to Temple Country Retreat and Spa in Co Westmeath.

Magically, the moment you turn off the road at the tiny village of Horseleap and start following the signs to the Spa, your breathing slows and your brain stops racing. Perhaps it's the lush, green countryside, or maybe it's that Temple is located on the site of an abbey. Whatever it is, the place excludes a Zen calm.

Established in 1992 by Declan and Bernadette Fagan, the Spa was originally run from their family home. A couple of years ago, they added a modern wing, which comprises the treatment rooms, spa facilities and bedrooms, all arranged round a serene internal garden. The bedrooms are spacious and pleasantly appointed, with soothing vistas over the verdant Westmeath countryside. Our balcony overlooked rolling emerald hills where bunny rabbits frolicked, and one of the most rewarding aspects of our stay was enjoying that view.

Some people have used Temple as a convalescent home after surgery. I can think of no better place to go to heal body, mind or spirit, or all three. Two things about Temple put it above all other health farms I have visited — the first is the calm and peace it affords, and the second is the cuisine.

Over a couple of days, we feasted on salmon, avocado and mango terrine — as Elysian as it sounds — beautiful bouillabaisse, and seared sea bass served atop a Spanish citrus salad. A vegetarian tikka masala — well, we were trying to be good — was fragrant and delicious. Tempura of fish and vegetable was light with a subtle hint of spice. We ate perfect scallops and a

STOP THE MADNESS

Lush countryside, a Zen atmosphere and glorious food along with fantastic treatments make Temple Country Retreat and Spa a frazzled working mum's paradise, says **Madeleine Keane**



gorgeous chicken-liver parfait, smoked-salmon consommé and garden-lavender crème brûlée.

There's an array of classes in which to work off all this gorgeous food, including yoga, Pilates, t'ai chi and a walking workout. The latter was taken with Declan. All my life I've loved walking, but I never realised that I was doing it the wrong way. Through country lanes lined with hedgerows we marched, heel to toe, eyes fixed on the middle distance, and it's amazing how well we all felt at the end.

We also whiled away a couple of hours in the spa area — there's a sauna, a steam room, a generously sized jacuzzi pool and showers which offer ice-cold streams or tropical rainforest water. I have to admit, we partook more of the latter.

I'm long a devotee of massage and Daryl gave one of the best I've ever had. For starters, it was the most personalised massage, in that he listened to my woes: my aching shoulders are the legacy of too much time spent in front of a computer.



And when the blissful hour of being pummelled and kneaded back into something resembling a human ended, he gave me some very good tips to keep my back relatively free from strain and pain.

I also had a stunning Yonka facial, after which my skin lost its dry, tight feeling and, I'm told, looked radiant for days.

However, the point about Temple is that it's much more than a beauty stop: this place isn't about having your toenails

Health benefits: 9/10
Mind, body and soul are soothed and revitalised.
Food: 10/10
Imaginative, innovative, international.
Pampering style: 9/10
You are totally spoilt in a very understated way.
Highlight: Being there

Painted, although I did have a lovely pedicure. It's more about slowing down your pace, taking time and stock.

The Fagans believe there is a secret to living healthily and happily: we all need to MESS. Yes, MESS. That's Move, Eat, Sleep and Smile. For the cynical among you, I suggest you try it; you'll be surprised by how good it makes you feel. Truly, this is a temple with all that name suggests, and the combination of peace and pampering is addictive.

Declan and Bernadette are among the most calm, most serene people I've ever met — as a divorced mother of two who works in the newspaper industry, calmness and serenity don't exactly feature hugely in my life. But a weekend spent in the company of the Fagans and their delightful staff sent me home refreshed and a calmer person. I had had a summer of pain, rain, intense grief and shock, and visiting Temple restored some of my soul. For that alone, it's my spa of the year. ■

Two nights bed and breakfast with one dinner costs from €175 per person sharing at Temple Country Retreat and Spa, Horseleap, Moate, Co Westmeath, tel: (057) 933-5118, or see www.templespa.ie

WIN A LUXURY SPA WEEKEND FOR YOU AND A FRIEND

LIFE magazine, in association with Temple Country Retreat and Spa, is delighted to offer one lucky reader a fabulous prize of two nights bed and breakfast, with dinner both nights, for two people along with a treatment each.

When asked if there's anything they dislike about Temple Spa, such is the power of this immensely tranquil place, most people simply answer: "Leaving it."

The Westmeath retreat offers ambrosial food and superb treatments, as well as a Zen calm that you cannot help but absorb.

Now you too can experience the peace.

To be in with a chance of winning, simply answer this question:

Where is Temple Spa located?

Is it: A. Westmeath or B. West Cork?

To enter, simply text SPA along with your answer and name (eg, SPA A Mary Ryan) to 53305, or tel: (1513) 778-089.

Terms and conditions: Competition closes at midnight tomorrow; winner will be notified by Friday. Texts cost 30c each, while calls cost 60c each. SP Phonovation, PO Box 6, Dun Laoghaire, Co Dublin. Helpline: (081) 821-7100.

The winner of the luxury weekend in Inchydoney Island Lodge and Spa was Cathy Murphy, Rochestown, Cork.

