

'I tried the health clinic that changed Rebel Wilson's life'

When the actress confirmed that she kicked off her 'year of health' at the Austrian alpine health clinic Vivamayr, *Women's Health* Editor-in-Chief **Claire Sanderson** was on the next flight. This is what happened next



If it's good enough for Rebel Wilson, it's good enough for me.

The headline of Rebel's 'year of health' was her five-and-a-half-stone weight loss. I don't consider myself to be overweight, but I've slowly gained excess fat over recent years, becoming increasingly uncomfortable in my own body. I'm also more aware than ever of how precarious one's general health can be. My immediate family is riddled with chronic disease (cancer, diabetes and dementia) and I have several late female relatives who were morbidly obese. Genetics may mean I'm more likely to develop any or all of these diseases so I want to give myself a fighting chance of living to a ripe old age, as healthily as possible.

With all that in mind, and Rebel as my inspiration, I flew to Austria and Vivamayr's Altaussee clinic in October 2021 to kick-start my very own year of health.

DAY 01 The building feels more clinical than luxurious - minimalist decor, spotlessly clean and unnervingly quiet when I arrive at 4pm.

I'm promptly escorted to the medical centre for a Covid test, before being shown to my small deluxe double room with a balcony and breathtaking mountain views.

I'd read every review available beforehand so, when told I should head over to dinner at 5pm, I feel prepared. The rules of dining the Vivamayr way? No or minimal talking while eating, and no distractions such as looking at your phone. The thinking is that if you concentrate on your meal you'll eat more slowly, encouraging your digestive enzymes to do their magic. You'll also realise at what point your stomach is full, and stop eating. Drinking (water, as this is a strictly booze-free week) with your meal is also banned; it dilutes digestive juices and disrupts the digestive process. Then there's the chewing - 40 to 60 times for each mouthful. Why? You guessed it - to encourage those enzymes.

I'm expecting my first meal to be colourful and super-healthy. Instead, I'm served the clinic's famous alkaline broth in a white teapot with a tiny, seemingly stale bread roll, plus linseed oil (also known as flaxseed oil).

The broth is actually very tasty, but the bread, called a chewing trainer, is less so. I try to chew it 40 to 60 times, but fail miserably.

After a long bath, I'm tucked up in bed by 9pm, excited about what the morning will bring.

DAY 02 Breakfast is the main event at Vivamayr.

I'd been warned that I should savour it, as the amount of food on offer decreases with each meal as the day goes on.

Full after sheep's milk yoghurt, three rice cakes (my chosen chewing trainer, because I figured they wouldn't be stale) and avocado mousse, I head to the medical centre for my first appointment with my doctor, Dr Friederike Jandl.

Having completed a medical questionnaire, it's time to explain my goals; to lose weight, improve overall health and increase energy. Dr Jandl talks me through the tests and treatments she thinks I need, as well as the daily morning routine.

Guests are to mix two spoonfuls of Epsom salts with water and down it to perform 'a bowel cleanse' (in layman's terms, it gives you the runs). Oil pulling is next; you swill a unique oil mix around your mouth, sucking it between your teeth for up to 20 minutes.

Then there's the shower drill. After some body brushing, you alternate between hot and cold water for as long as you can stand it. It all sounds rather grim, but my enthusiasm for all things Vivamayr isn't dented.

I visit the laboratory for the first of many blood tests, then I'm booked in for hypoxi training, a form of oxygen therapy for the cells. Oxygen-poor and oxygen-rich air is alternately released through a mask for a few minutes at a time. The change between the two triggers biochemical processes,

activating cells and their functions. This process is said to help increase performance, promote cell metabolism, stimulate fat burning, improve blood circulation and reduce inflammation. Sitting in a reclining chair wearing an oxygen mask, I find the sensation of getting more or less oxygen noticeable but not uncomfortable. Afterwards, I feel light-headed, relaxed and like a fogginess has been lifted.

Next it's time for my body impedance analysis. Unlike other hi-tech scales, which you stand on, sometimes holding on to handles, these require me to lie down while attachments are stuck to my body. At 5ft 7in and 11st 10lb, I'm told my muscle mass is well above average (good) but that my fat mass is above average also (not so good). That I'm carrying the fat on my legs and trunk isn't news to me; I've always been a pear shape with a leaner torso. The sports scientist

tells me to aim to preserve my muscle mass but ideally drop about 5% body fat through good nutrition and low-intensity exercise.

After a lunch of broccoli soup and corn thins, along with a serving of linseed oil (packed with omegas, thought to be anti-inflammatory and recommended with every meal),

the rest of my day is spent having an amazing deep-tissue massage and chilling in the spa. If there's a way to stand out as a Brit, it's wearing

a swimsuit in a European sauna when everyone else is naked.

At dinner, the couple on the next table look at me pityingly when they see my reaction to getting the broth but no chewing trainer. I'm later told it's to prolong my body's fasting state. Oddly, I'm not hungry as I head to bed.

'I feel like a fogginess has been lifted'

DAY 03 I've set an early alarm to ensure I tick off everything on my new to-do list.

The oil pulling is rather pleasant and my mouth and teeth feel extremely clean afterwards.

Drinking the Epsom salts is fine, but the desired toilet consequence takes a few hours to kick in. And I wimp out of the cold shower after the first blast of icy water. After a breakfast of hummus and corn cakes, it's time for spirometry, which assesses the reaction of your heart, lungs, vascular and metabolic system while under physical stress.

As I sit on an exercise bike wearing a mask, more resistance is added while I cycle at a steady pace. The entire test takes nine minutes and the results show that my VO₂ max (a marker for cardiovascular fitness) is 'excellent'. My max heart rate is 'good' and the watt rate max (how high the watts on the bike were turned up) is 'excellent.' Having competed in two CrossFit competitions just before my stay, this isn't a surprise to me.

What does shock me, however, is that my optimum fat-burning zone is sub-126 beats per minute (bpm), meaning I was only burning fat for the first three minutes of the workout. The rest was spent burning carbs and compromising muscle mass. Sub-126 bpm means



1. Vivamayr and its private jetty on Lake Altaussee

2. Claire having hypoxi training

3. Actress Rebel Wilson first visited Vivamayr in 2020

4. The mountain view of Altaussee from Claire's room





walking uphill at pace, not the high-intensity training I love.

My daily appointment with Dr Jandl is after lunch, and the first of my blood tests results are in.

I'm low in sodium and magnesium, something that's easily remedied, but the most alarming result is my lactic acid levels – they're twice what they should be. The doctor explains lactic acid is toxic in the body, and that constant high levels can cause long-term chronic diseases including liver damage and cancer.

Dr Jandl says that levels as high as mine are common in people who do high-intensity training and don't recover properly between sessions. She is 'amazed' that I hadn't felt any side effects already, such as nausea, fatigue and abdominal pain.

When I explain I often pushed myself in the gym until I wanted to vomit, she looks shocked. 'Most people stop before they get to that point. It's not at all good for you,' she warns. Fatigue is a constant complaint – but I put it down to parenting, work stress, or bad sleep because I look at my phone before bed. It never occurred to me that lactic acid build-up could be a factor.

DAY 04 Your third full day at Vivamayr is supposed to be the killer – when you feel your most rotten and are most likely to quit. But I actually feel brilliant. Admittedly, walking up and down the stairs leaves me weirdly breathless, but I feel so awake it's like the world has gone into Technicolor.

My doctor says that because my diet was healthy before I arrived (very little alcohol and caffeine, not much sugar) my body isn't

detoxing as dramatically as other guests'. With a breakfast of avocado mousse and corn thins (I still can't manage the chewing 40 to 60 times thing), I head to my metabolic analysis appointment feeling positive. But the results bring me back down to earth with a bang.

An optimum metabolic index score – the combined evaluation of all of the factors tested – is nine to 10. Shockingly, mine is one! The test finds my metabolism is overworking at rest, with a basal metabolic rate – the number of calories your body burns at rest – of 1,977 rather than the optimal 1,489. My body exists in a constant state of high stress, never recovering or resting. Again, I'm told that if I stay on this path, it could lead to chronic disease. So, what could improve my metabolic index score? 'An appropriate balance of training and relaxation, and more time spent outdoors,' I'm told.

I leave the appointment upset – and then things get even worse. The results of my free radicals and antioxidant potential are in. My free radicals are too high and my biological antioxidative capacity is too low. A balance between the two is crucial for good health and wellbeing. 'Excessive free radicals debilitate health and promote disease,' I'm told. 'Your body is inflamed. You need to reduce your inflammation markers.'

That word again: 'disease'. And why were the measurements out of



whack? That's right – overtraining, constantly being stressed, not relaxing enough. It seems I could be sending myself to an early grave.

That evening, the waiter looks at me with what I'm sure is pity as she offers me my teapot of broth, before I have another early night.

DAY 05 I wake up in a stinking mood so I head to the gym – it's my failsafe mood-booster. Under strict instructions not to elevate my heart rate dramatically, I try to do a simple strength session using weights much lighter than normal.

I start with 50kg barbell deadlifts and although I manage them, it's so tough I feel like I'm hitting a PB, which would normally be twice that weight. Next, I pick up two 8kg dumbbells to do box step-ups, but have to stop almost immediately because I'm feeling so dizzy.

Deflated, I go to my osteopathy session (amazing) before lunch. And what a treat lunch is! After having soup every day, my smallish plate of broccoli and potatoes feels like Christmas dinner.

I don't experience hunger during my stay. Yes, the portions are small, and the no-snacking rule means that what you get in the restaurant is your lot, but focusing on the food and slowly chewing clearly works.

Next on my itinerary is a liver detox wrap. I lie on a waterbed and what looks like a funky-smelling big teabag is placed beneath my right breast over my liver. Heated blankets are wrapped around me, the lights are dimmed and I'm left for 20 minutes of pure bliss. Whether this actually detoxes my liver is questionable, but it is a beautifully calming experience.

At my doctor's appointment that afternoon, I tell her about my dizziness in the gym. 'You must take it easy,' she warns. 'You are detoxing. You need to relax.' She tells me that a urine test shows I have a good level of ketones, so I'm in a fat-burning state and my body needs to rest. No more deadlifts!

So, what could be more relaxing than listening to Céline Dion while walking around a beautiful lake, sobbing my heart out? Céline is far from my normal jam, but something makes me choose her and when *It's All Coming Back*

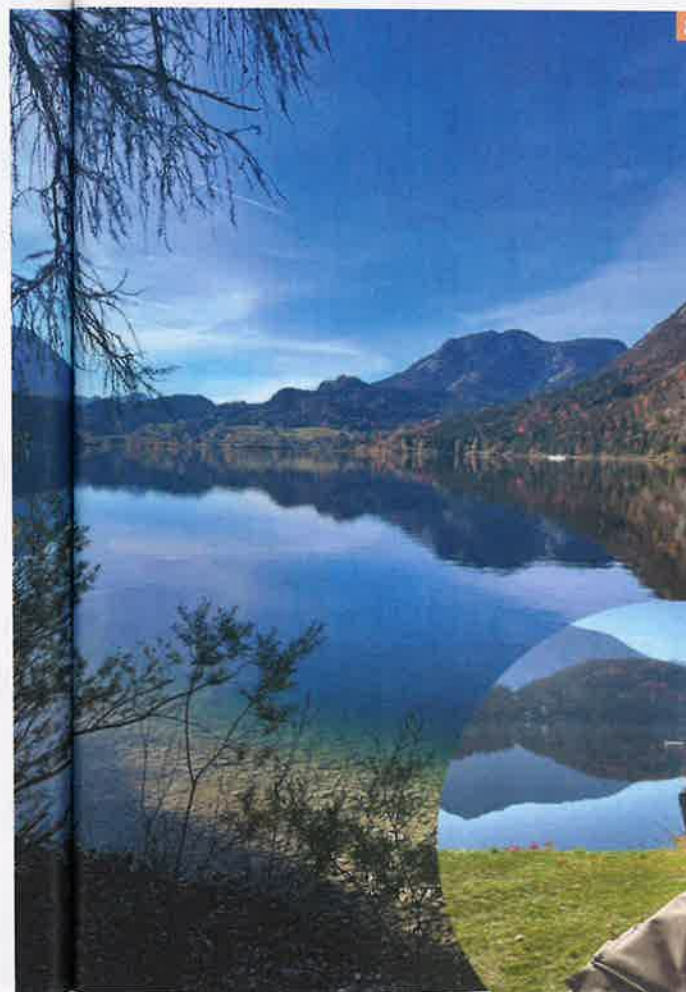
- 5. Claire has her fitness levels tested in spirometry
- 6. A typical lunch at Vivamayr
- 7. Liver detoxing was 20 minutes of bliss
- 8. Claire walked around Lake Altaussee every day

To Me Now starts, I burst into tears and power-walk through the song.

DAY 06 I wake up feeling amazing. I feel so energised that I want to run around the lake (but think better of it). It's weigh-in day and I'm disappointed to have only lost 0.8kg, but my doctor explains that my body was in such a state of stress before my stay that it will take a few weeks for my weight to start decreasing. I'm booked in for kinesiology – a muscle response test sometimes used to identify food intolerances. It's an alternative therapy, which some scientists have discredited, so I'm sceptical but fascinated.

I lie on the bed with one leg up at a 45-degree angle, and Dr Jandl asks me to resist while she tries to push my knee back down. It stays put. Then a powder is put on my tongue, and I'm told to hold it there while the doctor tries to push my knee down again. This time it collapses immediately. 'What just happened?' I ask. 'Spit it out,' the doctor replies. 'That was lactose,' she reveals. 'You shouldn't include it in your diet.'

The tests continue. Fructose: my knee stays put. Caffeine: no movement. Alcohol:



all good. Gluten: not only does my knee move, it becomes wobbly before it collapses. It's like I momentarily lose all strength. 'That was a very extreme reaction,' Dr Jandl says.

After lunch, I have my final meeting with my doctor. I'm told to avoid dairy and gluten, relax more, ensure high-intensity exercise only makes up a fifth of my training, stop snacking, aim for four hours between meals, and eat a light evening meal as early as possible so that fasting time overnight is longer. Not drinking anything – an hour before or after eating is recommended, as is chewing food properly, and no raw food after 4pm. But I'm also told that life is to be enjoyed, and that a good glass of wine with dinner is absolutely fine – just not every day.

DAY 07 and beyond... Vivamayr changed my life. For more than 20

years, I was a slave to overtraining, living in an elevated state of stress and in a constant battle with my weight. If I didn't exercise, I'd feel guilty, then eat rubbish food as self-punishment. What I learned in Austria made something click, and I've been much kinder to myself.

I still train six days a week, but it's mostly strength training with just two 20-minute cardio sessions thrown in. I walk everywhere, trying to do at least 10,000 steps a day, and giving up gluten and dairy has left me less bloated.

In the weeks after my trip I felt leaner, energised and had never looked better. Then, at Christmas, I indulged. But I now know what my body really needs, and once again I'm adopting the rules into my day-to-day.

I lost 7lb after my trip, but don't weigh myself any more because it's a negative trigger for me. Instead, I'm appreciating feeling healthy, happy and more energised.

I thought I was super-healthy. Vivamayr showed me otherwise, and may have saved me from an illness-ridden future. For that, I will be forever grateful. **WH**

RULES OF VIVAMAYR

Chew, chew, chew

Every mouthful of food should be chewed 40 to 60 times to encourage your digestive enzymes to do their magic. A healthy gut starts with good digestion – so get chewing.

Put down that glass

No drinking anything an hour before or after a meal, so as not to dilute your digestive enzymes. Even water is a no-no.

No mealtime distractions

Forget mindless scrolling during your tea – mealtimes should be a strictly distraction-free affair. No supper on your lap in front of *EastEnders*; not even a good book if you're dining alone. Savour every mouthful of your meal.

Avoid raw food after 4pm

The body finds it more difficult to digest raw food, and you don't want anything undigested sitting in your gut overnight. So keep salad and uncooked fruit to earlier in the day.

Snack off!

Resist the urge to snack between meals, even if that digestive biscuit is talking to you from the cupboard. Ideally, leave four hours between meals so your body can digest one meal before you start another.

Early din' dinn

Try to have your dinner as early as possible to allow your body to fast for longer overnight. But life is for living, so dinner with friends and good glass of red should be enjoyed. Just not every night.

Walk away

Swap high-intensity exercise for walking and strength training. And if you really can't resist a bit of HIIT, it should only make up a fifth of your entire workout week.