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**A deadly prescription for respite**

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* For at least 2,000 years the Dead Sea has been a centre of therapeutic excellence. Cleopatra is among those who have used both the water and the mud in their beauty routines but today Dead Sea treatments are used to alleviate a wide range of chronic conditions, particularly asthma and other breathing problems, arthritis and skin diseases, eye conditions such as uveitis, hypertension and Parkinson's disease. The therapy is so highly regarded by some European Union countries, notably Germany and Austria, that long stays in the area are available courtesy of health insurance plans.

This is not a view that extends to the UK, where hydrotherapy and other forms of naturopathy are usually regarded as quaint 18th-century - and ineffective - phenomena. Perhaps the factor that stretches our credulity most about climate therapy claims is that it consists of simply being there: breathing in the air, sitting in the sun, bathing in the water and massaging mud into the skin.

In Germany the Psoriasis Association has lobbied hard for acceptance of climate therapy and this has certainly helped persuade health insurance schemes to use it. But there is also a historical openness (shared by the French, Swiss and Italians) to the idea of natural treatments and visiting a spa for a cure.

For some, though, the therapy has proved little short of miraculous. Fritz Bilz, 60, is a historian from Cologne and suffers - like Michael Gambon's character in Dennis Potter's *The Singing Detective* - from psoriatic arthritis, a condition that leaves his skin constantly peeling and itching until it is covered in open sores and his joints swollen and stiff. "The psoriasis started when I was 15, the joints problem when I was 25," he says. "Twelve years ago a doctor in Germany told me I'd be in a wheelchair by now. I said I'd do anything to prevent that.

"No other treatment worked. I'd had numerous topical creams and expensive injections. I had been to three German spa hospitals where they simulate climate therapy using salt baths, heat lamps, massage and physiotherapy. Eventually, I heard about the Dead Sea and I've been here every year for the past eight. By the time I get home my skin has cleared completely and I don't need to take any painkillers for my joints for about six months."

Water and air may seem unlikely cures but the Dead Sea's water and air boast unique properties. Dr Mohammad Kana'an has been running the Therapy Centre in Jordan for five years. "This is a unique location," he explains. "We are 400m below sea level and at this altitude there is high atmospheric density and pressure and the air is rich in oxygen - the richest air on earth. Because it is warm every day of the year, the sea evaporates, producing a mist like a filter over the area, blocking out harmful sun rays but allowing beneficial ultraviolet A-rays through.

"The evaporation from the sea means the air is infused with many minerals - magnesium, calcium, bromine - making a natural inhalation cocktail. The minerals are in the sea itself as well as the mud that we use in treatments. Part of the treatment is outside - the air, the sea, the sun. And inside the clinic we have massages, mud baths, hot and cold seawater wraps, ice therapy, exercise, traction, physiotherapy and manipulation. We prepare our own creams for patients with skin problems but they don't contain cortisone." Those who arrive too ill to go into the sea often improve by taking the air and can go on to take the water in a matter of days.

The Dead Sea is what is known as a "terminal lake" (its only water loss is through evaporation) so it has a unique concentration of salts and minerals. Ten times saltier than the Mediterranean, nothing can live in the Dead Sea - hence its name. In Madaba, just south of the Jordanian capital Amman, there is a 6th century mosaic map showing fish swimming away from the Dead Sea in fear of their lives.

For people, however, the benefits are legion. While climate therapy does not claim to cure chronic diseases, it does relieve them - and if you visit every year it can keep conditions under control. With a problem such as arthritis it can increase mobility and reduce pain, thus repeatedly postponing the need for physiotherapy, cortisone injections and even joint replacements.