

ALL THE FAMILY

SCHLOSS ELMAU BAVARIA, GERMANY

IN BRIEF All-encompassing retreat that shines for outdoors action

THE LOWDOWN And so, off to the Bavarian Alps for pine forests, glacial lakes and lederhosen; this magical, fairytale castle, tucked away in a secret valley between meringue-peaked mountains and flower-filled meadows, has it all. Rosy-cheeked children love whooshing through the snow in a toboggan or horse-drawn carriage in winter or swinging into the creek on a rope Huck Finn-style in the summer. It's the great outdoors at its greatest. Skiing is a 20-minute drive away: the hotel has a fleet of cars to take guests to the slopes. Everything has been thought of. This is the place to come if you have a von Trapp-sized family; even the smallest in your party will be spoiled rotten. The spectacular bathhouse has the largest hammam west of Istanbul. And it's all overseen by the no-nonsense spa director, Dr Imke König. Skin is buffed with a sensual scrub, followed by a blissful massage in which the therapist creates a cocoon of bubbles by blowing a soapy mixture into a linen pillowcase and then working it around your body. Afternoons are happily whiled away doing circulation-boosting circuits of the outdoor saltwater pool. There are also salt steams, crystal steams, Finnish saunas and even a Nature Spa with its own sauna right on the banks of a creek for an extra-bracing splash in the summer months. In the evening, contemplate the stars in the breathtaking rooftop pool. By now you've probably forgotten you have children, but thanks to the award-winning kids' programme here, they've probably forgotten you, too. Keen parents like the Edutainment weeks for teenagers, which offer philosophy, science labs and a chess academy. Quality time can also be spent lolloping around in the family spa, which has an Olympic-sized pool and tepid saunas and steam rooms for a toddler's first foray into spa-ing. Ablutions aside, hotel owner Dietmar Müller-Elmau also wants guests to expand their minds. There is an action-packed agenda providing all manner of cultural treats year-round, three libraries and probably the world's most impressive hotel bookshop, with a special children's section. The real hub, however, is the grand concert hall, which attracts classical-music and jazz stars, and big book-world names such as Ian McEwan and TC Boyle, who come to give literary talks.

INSIDER TIP The new Schloss Retreat is due to open next door this spring. It will have much larger rooms than the schloss and another huge spa, so guests will be hard-pressed to make it out to the slopes.

BOOK IT Healing Holidays (+44 20 7843 3592; www.healingholidays.co.uk/condenast) offers a five-night Fit and Active Programme from £1,249 per person, including breakfast, a dinner credit, British Airways flights and transfers.

