

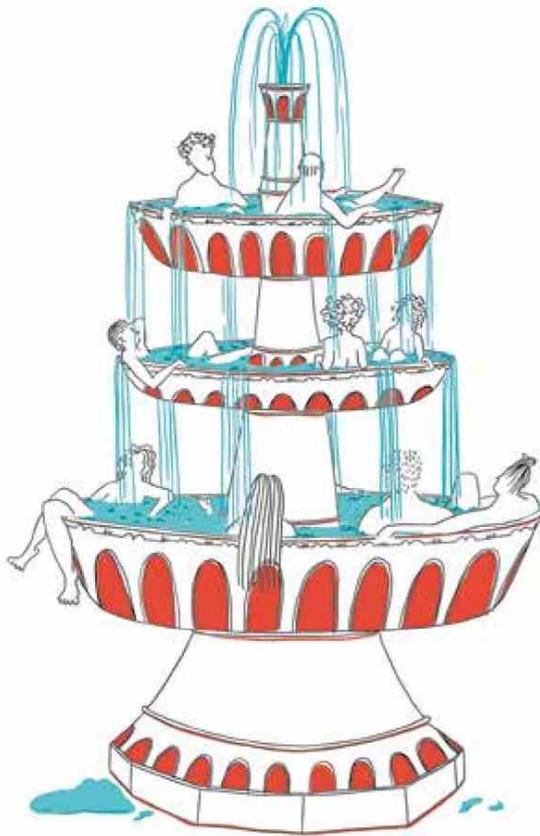


## LETTER FROM VICHY

## SOAKING IT IN

*Taking a cure in the salty and sulfurous waters of France.*

BY LAUREN COLLINS



Let's say that you suffer from arthritis, arteritis, bronchitis, bursitis, colitis, diverticulitis, endometriosis, laryngitis, osteoporosis, rhinitis, sinusitis, tendinitis, diabetes, Parkinson's disease, Raynaud's disease, multiple sclerosis, angina, asthma, sciatica, kidney stones, sore throat, dizziness, spasms, migraines, high blood pressure, heart palpitations, back pain, earaches, vaginal dryness, menstrual cramps, itching, bloating, swelling, constipation, gout, obesity, gum disease, dry mouth, psoriasis, acne, eczema, frostbite, hives, rosacea, scarring, stretch marks, or varicose veins, or that you are depressed, trying to quit smoking, or simply dealing with a lot of stress. You also, crucially, live in France. You go see the doctor. She

writes you a prescription for a thermal cure, indicating to which of the country's hundred and thirteen accredited thermal spas you will be sent. Then you fill out a simple form and submit it, along with the prescription, to the national health-care service. Your application is approved—it almost always is—and you're off to take the waters.

The French government introduced "social thermalism" for the masses in 1947, proclaiming that "every man, whatever his social condition, has a right to a thermal cure if the state of his health demands it." The full cure, consisting of treatments that use mineral water, mud, and steam from naturally occurring hot springs, lasts twenty-one days—

six days of treatments with Sundays off, over three consecutive weeks. In 2019, around six hundred thousand French people undertook cures, targeting specific pathologies and subsidized by the state at sixty-five per cent. Around three million more visited thermal spas as paying customers. Recently, the government has started covering cures for people suffering from long COVID.

Earlier this year, the French tourism minister Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne described the country's thermal stations as "jewels of *bleu-blanc-rouge* tourism" and "an incomparable asset for inciting the French people to take care of themselves while at the same time rediscovering our country through the riches of the territories." Most thermal spas are situated in places of natural or man-made beauty: mountain hamlets, lakeside villages, elegant towns with Belle Époque casinos and bandstands and fountains dispensing waters smelling of rotten eggs or, as a character in a 1901 novel put it, "the marquise's mother's cabbage soup." These waters, prized for their health-inducing properties, have inspired some of France's most famous products: bottled water (at Évian-les-Bains, for example), cosmetics (La Roche-Posay, Uriage, Avène), and even hard candies (the octagonal lozenges known as "pastilles de Vichy" were originally sold in pharmacies to aid digestion).

Chateaubriand, Balzac, and Proust frequented thermal stations. Flaubert's regimen of tepid baths and five glasses of mineral water a day left him feeling "dumb and empty as a pitcher without beer." Presidents, too: in the nineteenth-century, Alexandre Millerand was dispatched to Challes-les-Eaux to "take care of himself and rest from the fatigues of war," and in the seventies Georges Pompidou took a cure, "under greatest discretion," at Bagnoles-de-l'Orne. Hamani Diori, the first President of independent Niger, was also a fan. Charles de Gaulle's son remembered meeting Diori in a hotel dining room, accompanied by "an aide-de-camp who would fetch, at scheduled times, his boss's mineral water in a large graduated tankard."

The current French President, Emmanuel Macron, was very close to his maternal grandmother, who lived in Bagnères-de-Bigorre, a thermal station

*Water cures are treatments with a sense of terroir, akin to that of wine and cheese.*



in the Pyrenees. His mother, Françoise Noguès, was a medical adviser in the national health-care service and sat on a board that studied thermalism. Thierry Dubois, the president of the Conseil National des Établissements Thermaux (CNETh), an industry group, suspects that “good information about thermalism passed from mother to son.” Macron has been “very supportive of thermalism,” he said, noting a recent government allocation to the tourist industry which may result in as much as a hundred million euros going to thermalism.

There are two main types of hydrotherapy in France—thermalism and, for those who prefer their water salty rather than sulfurous, thalasso. The latter—short for thalassotherapy—uses water from the ocean. (“Thalasso” is derived from the Greek word for “sea.”) The properties of the seawater are thought to vary by location. According to one thalasso blog, the water near the English Channel is “invigorating,” that on the southern Atlantic coast is “tonic,” and the Mediterranean’s has “relaxing qualities.”

Thalasso was covered by social security until 1998, when the government decided it was more of a wellness practice than a medical one. France’s fifty-three licensed thalassotherapy centers have done fine as private enterprises, retaining a medical aura while embracing a more luxurious, spa-like ambience. Approximately a million and a half people visit one each year. Recently, Clara Luciani, one of France’s biggest pop stars, posted a shot of herself standing on a white-columned balcony in pig-tails, sunglasses, and a fluffy white bathrobe. She was at the Grand Hôtel des Thermes, in Saint-Malo, “feeling as fresh as a newborn.”

In the film “Thalasso,” from 2019, Michel Houellebecq and Gérard Depardieu, playing themselves, run into each other at a thalasso spa on the coast of Normandy. Houellebecq is afraid that he’s going to freeze his dick off, literally, in a cryotherapy chamber. Depardieu, an old thalasso hand, invites Houellebecq to his suite to feast on illicit stocks of wine and rillettes. They talk about life and death, go for side-by-side algae wraps, and fall asleep on the therapy tables. Depardieu snores while Houellebecq has a nightmare about wandering the es-

tablishment’s halls, mud-smearred, in his tightly-whities.

The rituals of thermalism and thalasso are similar, but, in my conversations, I detected an underlying rivalry. Éléonore Guérard, a third-generation thermal-resort operator—her father is the chef Michel Guérard, the originator of *cuisine minceur*, or “slimming cuisine”—spoke with pride of the “gentleness” of thermal cures. “But it’s not thalasso—it’s real medicine,” she clarified, adding, “Thalasso sold its soul. It was timeless and essential, and it became leisure, and to me this is a pity.”

For some people, water therapy qualifies as a basic need. In 2020, a judge agreed to allow Patrick and Isabelle Balkany—husband and wife, and, respectively, the longtime mayor and deputy mayor of a Paris suburb—to serve their prison sentences for tax evasion at home, wearing electronic bracelets. The couple have been involved in so many financial scandals that they are known as “the Thénardiens of the French Republic,” after the scheming innkeepers in “Les Misérables.” They were busted for lying about their ownership of a Marrakech riad after officials inspecting the property found a bathrobe embroidered with Patrick’s monogram. Recently, the *salle de bain* again figured in their legal troubles. Isabelle, pleading before the court, justified seven violations of her house arrest on account of “hydrotherapy sessions obliging her to immerse her electronic bracelet in the bath.”

Water cures are treatments with a sense of terroir, as indivisible from the places of their origin as wine and cheese are. They offer clues about what the French find alluring in their own country, the most visited in the world. “Even a short thalasso stay can be as much of a change of scene as a trip abroad,” Marie Perez Siscar, the president of France Thalasso, the industry’s national syndicate, recently said. The world goes to France to see the Eiffel Tower and the châteaux of the Loire Valley. French people go to thermal spas and thalasso centers to pass regimented days of peaceable idleness punctuated by the taking of meals in panoramic restaurants, the doing of moderate exercise, and the semi-public displaying of nudity. Jean-Laurent Cassely, a co-author of “La France Sous Nos Yeux” (“The

France in Front of Our Eyes”), a recent best-seller that explains contemporary France to French people, told me, “Thermalism is the point where vintage provincial France, health issues, and Wes Anderson aesthetics merge into a domestic-tourism phenomenon.”

“You’re not claustrophobic, are you?” Florence Schaeffer, the director of the Vichy Célestins Thermal Spa, asked me, over a welcome lunch of roasted prawns and Condrieu, on the resort’s picturesque terrace. We were discussing a treatment that I was scheduled to undergo that afternoon, involving thermal mud heated to forty-one degrees Celsius and slathered onto one’s back, arms, feet, and joints. The mud is harvested from clay beds in Abrest, a neighboring town. Then it spends a month soaking in water from two of Vichy’s springs, allowing blue algae to develop on its surface. The treatment has been offered at Vichy since 1935, and the idea is that trace elements can pass through the skin and into the body, providing health benefits. Calcium, for example, is said to have anti-inflammatory properties, and sodium may ease digestive ailments. This particular mud treatment promised a “toning effect” and improvements in circulation. Some customers apparently do not love the feeling of being tightly wrapped in a plastic sheet while waiting for these benefits to occur. Schaeffer said, “We tell them to put their arms on the outside!”

A couple of hours later, I reported to the Thermes les Dômes, one of several spa facilities in Vichy. Its baths are housed in a sprawling complex with Byzantine and Art Nouveau influences: a gold-and-blue tiled central dome, ceramic murals depicting mermaids and water nymphs. The spa is connected to a mid-range Mercure hotel by a *couloir-peignoir*, which means “bathrobe hallway” and is my favorite new word. After checking in, I was directed to a changing room. I donned the requisite bathrobe and headed off to Treatment Cabin 131.

I was slightly nervous, remembering a 1913 postcard I’d come across online in my research. It depicted a treatment called the Vichy shower, with two topknotted women manipulating the flesh of another topknotted woman, in soaking





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wet bloomers, who lay on a table under a metal apparatus that looked like a giant broiler. (“Postal service / nudity / french / thermal bath / postcard / mail / naked / shower / post / communication / massage / spa / vichy,” the keywords read.) I soon passed a display of antiquated “medical gymnastics” apparatuses, developed in the mid-nineteenth century by a once famous Swedish orthopedist named Zander and used for things like lengthening the arms and stretching the spine. Zander’s system, known as mechanotherapy, even included a stomach massager for alleviating constipation.

Still, the wide, tiled, sun-streaked halls of the Dômes induced an immediate feeling of languid calm. The atmosphere was more Sofia Coppola than Wes Anderson. The windows were open to a spring breeze, and there were considerably more cane armchairs in evidence than there were people who might pass a spell in them.

I was two minutes late for my treatment. “*Oh là*,” the therapist clucked, looking at her watch. She instructed me to undress—the spa provided a disposable G-string—and to sit on a table covered with a plastic sheet. Without further discussion, she began daubing my back at strategic points with steaming, tawny mud. When she had finished, she eased me into a reclining position and folded the sheet around me, forming a sort of Hot Pocket in which the mud was the cheese and I was the ham.

“*Allez, à tout à l’heure*,” she said, taking her leave.

Vichy is famous for two things: thermalism and collaboration with Nazi Germany. The former, dating to Roman times, significantly predates the latter, under the government of Marshal Philippe Pétain, but the two are not entirely unrelated. When Pétain was searching for a place to seat the French government in June, 1940, the resort-town infrastructure of Vichy made it a natural choice. “Let’s leave for Vichy, Monsieur Maréchal, there are more than enough hotels,” Pierre Laval, Pétain’s future head of government, who grew up nearby, is said to have counselled. The

Marshal took Rooms 124 and 125 of the Hôtel du Parc. He put his personal physician in Room 126 and Laval on the floor just beneath, and deposited his wife at a separate establishment.

Today, Pétain’s apartment in Vichy is a kind of private shrine kept up by a group of his admirers. According to Marie-Béatrice Baudet, of *Le Monde*, they have restored his office to appear as though “time has stood still,” reinstalling a set of furniture that originally belonged to a French Jewish family. Pétain was likely sitting at the desk when he worked on a decree barring French Jews from many professions and from much of public service. Around Vichy, one encounters more acknowledgment of water



than of war. History has soaked into the language, though, like potassium or manganese penetrating the epidermis. Pity the unknowing *curiste* who confuses a resident of the city, a *Vichyssois*, with a supporter of Pétain’s government, a *vichyste*.

The Romans called their settlement near Vichy Aquae Calidae (Hot Waters). In the first century B.C., they had already tapped three hot springs—all still in use today—in order to treat ailments such as rheumatism and infertility. The modern era of thermalism, though, is usually said to have begun in 1605, when Henri IV issued an edict appointing his personal doctor, Jean de la Rivière, to the newly created position of superintendent of the mineral waters of France. Until then, as one observer in Vichy wrote, the “pools full of bubbling waters” were “left defenseless to the depredations of the wicked or the defilements of domestic animals.” De la Rivière and a network of local administrators set to work cataloguing the waters, controlling their quality, and recruiting clients to thermal stations.

Napoleon III spent five seasons at Vichy, transforming it into the “queen of spa towns” with the construction of a train station, a casino, and sumptuous riverside parks. “I like Vichy more than anywhere else, because it’s all my creation,” he proclaimed. The Second Empire *curiste* adhered to a tame schedule that revolved around root vegetables,

board games, and the *cure de boisson*, the consumption of certain mineral waters at specific intervals:

- 6:00: Drink water from prescribed spring.
- 9:00: Distribution of letters and newspapers.
- 10:00: Lunch with carrots, “obligatory vegetable of the sick.”
- 11:00: Whist and dominoes. The women sew and the girls play piano.
- 3:00: Another excursion to the springs.
- 3:30: Music in the park. After the final polka, third excursion to the springs.

And so forth until, as one source remembered, “all of Vichy slept at 11 o’clock.”

Thermal spas had their glittering heyday during the Belle Époque. According to the scholar Marie-Eve Férérol, they offered a space for transgression, a loosening of the corset of everyday life. “On the pretext of maintaining their health, this clientele was in fact mainly in search of hedonism, idleness and frivolity,” Férérol writes. One academic, lecturing on hydrology at the medical school in Bordeaux, cautioned students that certain spas yielded “more cuckolds than cures.”

In 1906, Gabrielle Chanel (later Coco) worked at Vichy as a *donneuse d’eau*—a water girl, ladling prescribed beverages into graduated glasses that *curistes* toted around in wicker holders. (As the guests drank, they stuffed stones into their pockets to help them keep track of how many glasses they’d consumed.) According to the historian Eric T. Jennings, the job was a sort of precursor to that of a flight attendant, giving young women of the provincial working classes not only an income but also a “means of social ascension.” At Vichy, the *donneuses d’eau* wore a distinctive uniform of a trim white bonnet and a striped linen dress. Chanel is said to have later been inspired by the memory of her Vichy work boots—short, white, and “of curious proportions.”

Visitors to the spas of France’s overseas empire soaked in racialized ideas about hygiene and leisure. Jennings writes that water cures “became, like the ubiquitous cork helmet, mainstays of the colonial regimen.” France established thermal spas in such places as Guadeloupe and Réunion, “intended as much to remind settlers of home as to impress and distance the colonized.” Colonial administrators were also given leave to take the waters back in France.





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A 1924 advertisement read “Beware! Against the poison that is Africa, there is but one antidote: Vichy!”

In “Maigret in Vichy,” from 1968, Georges Simenon wrote about the almost delectable boredom of a cure: “They would have sworn that they had been at Vichy for an eternity, while it was only their fifth day. Already, they’d created for themselves a schedule that they followed meticulously, as though it was of importance, and the days were marked by a certain number of rituals, to which they lent themselves with the utmost seriousness.” *Curistes* are not unaware that a cure can be tedious; in fact, they inhabit its rhythms and clichés with enthusiasm, and even a sense of irony. The carrots, the constitutionals, the regional papers, “the sugar cubes wrapped in oiled paper,” the pungent libations—all are part of the experience, which, like *Outward Bound* or *Burning Man*, gives back to a participant in proportion to his investment in it.

On my second day in Vichy, I walked through to the Hall des Sources, an atrium that houses fountains dispensing the five waters used in drinking cures: Célestins (22° C), Lucas (27° C), Chomel (43° C), Hôpital (34° C), and Grande Grille (39° C). The building, completed in 1903 by the architect Charles Le Cœur and the master ironworker Émile Robert, is spectacularly beautiful, with filigreed arches, a stained-glass skylight, and a lime-and-white cabana-striped ceiling. Access is restricted to *curistes* with a prescription for a beverage cure. The water girls are a thing of the past: a vending machine sells plastic cups, and each source has several self-serve taps, which create a bubbling soundscape that brings to mind a meditation app.

Inside, I met Nathalie Legros, a friendly *curiste* in braids, sneakers, and an ankle-length quilted jacket. Legros’s doctor had prescribed six glasses of Chomel-spring water a day, three in the morning and three in the afternoon, with at least twenty minutes between. (This was a commitment, but nothing like that of a Charolais beef merchant who, in the mid-eighteen-hundreds, drank forty-five three-hundred-and-seventy-gram glasses a day for fourteen years, before dying of lung inflamma-

tion.) Legros pulled down the tap and filled a cup, which she decanted into an empty water bottle: a roadie. “I cheat and take the water and put it in the fridge,” she said. “You’re supposed to drink it straight.”

“Super nasty!,” she exclaimed, laughing, as she took a sip. I filled a cup and tried it. Rotten eggs and cabbage soup—yes. But chalky, too. I felt like I had licked a blackboard.

A pamphlet informed me that Vichy’s various waters, “each one with unique characteristics and its own personality,” contain sodium bicarbonate, which aids digestion; silicon, which acts as an anti-inflammatory; and lithium, which improves the mood and the skin. But to me the pattern of scheduled *boissons*—five hundred millilitres at 3 P.M., and so forth—resembled nothing so much as a baby’s comfortingly precise schedule of taking bottles. Passing through the portal of the pavilion is an emotional experience, in addition to an aesthetic one: we were back in the Belle Époque, and we were all newborns, needing care.

Legros lives in a southern suburb of Paris and works as a human-resources consultant. A former rugby champion, she’d been in decent health for most of her life, but now, in her early fifties, she’d put on weight and was having digestive problems. Two years ago, she tried to eat a slice of *saucisson* and felt

as if someone were strangling her. A cousin had gone on several cures, and they’d done her “crazy good,” Legros said, so she decided to give it a try.

Legros’s cure was partly covered by the health service, but she’d put about fifteen hundred euros of her own money into food, accommodations, leisure activities, and add-on therapies. “I like to treat myself,” she said. She’d been waking up at 6 A.M. and, in her off time, walking the banks of the Allier River and watching Netflix. “I adore this idea of a parenthesis,” she said. She was feeling refreshed: “I usually turn to Xanax when I eat, because I have these horrible sensations of suffocation. But for weeks I’ve been feeling calm.” Her treatment schedule, she told me, included regular sessions of *entérocluse*, another Vichy specialty, involving irrigation of the colon. She explained, “I’m being vulgar, but, yeah, it’s when they put Vichy water up your ass!”

Dr. Yasmine Bertin was scribbling in black ink on a diagram that was supposed to represent my body. She made five “X” marks—two for the shoulders, one for the neck, one for the lumbar region, and one in the middle of the back. The illustration, which resembled a crash-test dummy, occupied the lower-right quadrant of a government-issued triplicate form. “It’s our signature treatment—it’s warm, so it’s



“Show of hands—how many of you need to hear all three movements?”



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anti-inflammatory, analgesic, and relaxing for the muscles,” Bertin said.

Bertin, a stylish fortysomething with pearl earrings and a sleek bob, sat at her desk, in front of a large yellow-and-black abstract painting. Before converting to thermal medicine, in 2018, she’d specialized in infectious diseases. During a maternity leave from her practice, in Paris, she’d decided to take a weeklong cure in Vichy, where her in-laws live. “I really loved it,” she recalled. “Little by little, I started telling myself, ‘*Le thermalisme, c’est sympa.*’”

There are eight hundred and fifty thermal doctors in France, some of whom complete a one-to-two-year certification in addition to their nine years of general medical training. Each *curiste* sees a thermal doctor three times during his stay at a thermal station: on the first day, to establish a treatment program; for a mid-cure check-in; and for a final assessment. “Patients come with their dossiers, which can be just a few papers or a whole suitcase full,” Bertin said. She explained that, for a *curiste* suffering from rheumatoid and digestive problems—Vichy’s two specialties—she might prescribe eighteen mud baths (Code 406), eighteen high-pressure underwater showers (Code 329), eighteen pool sessions (Code 201), nine water massages (Code 602), and nine steam-chair treatments (Code 512) in the course of three weeks.

Practiced in various forms around the world, thermalism has long had its skeptics. But its status as legitimate health care is relatively undisputed in France. This is partly cultural: in Brit-

ain and in the United States, the scholar George Weisz argues, doctors have long considered spas “places of tourism at best and charlatanism at worst,” but in France the relationship among thermal stations, the state, and the medical establishment has been close since the seventeenth century.

Even now that the blackguards, hucksters, and overleveraged, oleaginous professors of nineteenth-century thermal literature have largely moved on, there’s still amusement and even recognition to be found in Guy de Maupassant’s novel “Mont-Oriol,” from 1887, about an upstart thermal station in the Auvergne, “brought to birth as they all are, with a pamphlet on the spring by Doctor Bonnefille.” It’s perhaps not so much thermal medicine that raises doubts as it is the vortex of regimens, contraptions, liniments, and spinoff industries that has swirled around it since its earliest days.

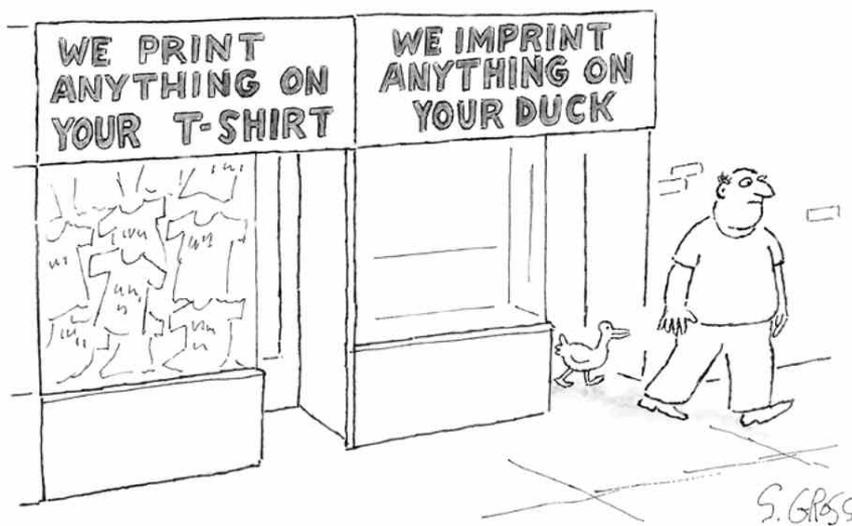
At the Célestins Spa, a young technician tested me with an Oligo/Check, a stapler-size machine that “evaluates minerals, vitamins, trace elements, oxidative stress, and heavy metals by means of spectrophotometry.” “Open your hand,” she said, pressing the machine to the base of my palm. A minute later, I was holding a four-page printout that purported to show everything from the amount of selenium in my system to the health of my hair. My “emotional equilibrium” (fifty-nine per cent) was “acceptable.” But my “slenderness,” the technician warned, indicating a pie chart that illustrated my tendency toward three different forms of cellulite, was

teetering on the edge. I must have raised an eyebrow. “It’s O.K., we usually just ignore that one,” she said quickly.

In 2000, an inspector appointed by the French Parliament issued an unimpressed report on thermalism, calling it a “neglected, miscellaneous, and poorly known sector, with a baroque judicial framework and contested therapeutic value.” Scrambling to hold on to government patronage, the thermal-medicine industry made efforts to demonstrate its scientific credibility, sponsoring independent studies that showed its efficacy in treating issues like chronic knee pain and anxiety disorder. When I asked Maxime Dougados, a specialist in rheumatology at the Cochin Hospital, in Paris, whether he considered thermal medicine legitimate, he replied that the answer was “actually not that simple.” He didn’t put much stock in drinking regimens, but he praised the “multidisciplinary” and “holistic” nature of the full three-week cure, during which patients may be under the supervision of physical therapists, psychologists, and social workers. “Of course, this treatment can be done outside the spa context,” he added.

“Thermal medicine works, or it doesn’t, but in no case does it cause harm—unlike many other interventions,” Thierry Dubois, the CNETh president, told me. There’s an aspect of obviousness to the conclusion that swimming, bathing, massages, rest, fresh air, and a healthy diet can have a powerful effect on one’s health. Thermal cures, despite their name, aren’t meant to magically cure people’s illnesses but, rather, to manage their symptoms. “It’s a solution that doesn’t require medications,” Bertin told me. The philosophy of a cure, she explained, isn’t necessarily to resolve health problems in three weeks but to motivate people to take better care of themselves during the other forty-nine. “Sometimes there are patients who will have changed so much from one year to the next that I don’t recognize them,” she said.

I asked numerous people about the rationale for the cure’s duration. Some cited tradition, or the financial interests of the small municipalities where most of the thermal stations are situated. Then I asked Dubois. “You’re a woman, so you’ll understand. I don’t really like to talk about it, but three weeks





corresponds to a woman's menstrual cycle," he said, adding, "In times past, women didn't bathe during that time." According to Dubois, the French health-care system spends more than three hundred and fifty million euros a year on thermal cures. That's a fraction of a per cent of France's total health-care spending—a tiny drop in a big Jacuzzi—but it's not nothing. One might assume that the authorities would encourage shorter stays, to trim expenditures, but the logic seems to run in the opposite direction, like that of a wing-eating contest: consume enough, and you'll have earned your keep. The authorities don't seem all that concerned, either, about the prospect of the odd malingerer cadging a few mud baths on the hardworking taxpayer's centime. Jean-Bernard Sempastous, a lawmaker who leads the National Assembly's study group on thermalism, emphasized the medical aspect of a cure but also acknowledged that there is "a category of the population that doesn't necessarily have access to vacation." For them, he said, "it's therapy, but it's also a chance to get far away from home for three weeks."

The town of Roscoff is famous for two things: thalassotherapy and onions. The Atlantic Ocean is the common factor. In 1899, Dr. Louis Bagot opened the Rockroum Institute, France's first thalassotherapy center. There, on a rocky, north-pointing finger of the Breton coast, rheumatic patients could come to be treated with seawater rich in algae, which is packed with antioxidants, vitamins, and minerals, including iodine. Between the early eighteenth-hundreds and the nineteen-fifties, teams of Roscoff onion sellers sailed across that same water bearing the sweet, pinkish alliums that are grown in the area's temperate microclimate, now a protected appellation. The Onion Johnnies, as they were called, became beloved figures in England and Wales, peddling their wares from door to door, braids of onions draped over the handlebars of their bicycles.

At the turn of the twentieth century, most of the area's residents worked in agriculture, spending long days bent over in the fields. Bagot designed wave baths and seawater showers to assuage their aching muscles. He also invented

*bagotage*, a kind of vigorous walking in open seawater up to the knees, which is still practiced in the area today. After his death, in 1941, the institute closed, but a decade later it reopened, this time under the direction of his son, Dr. René Bagot. Patients included the actress Arletty and the cycling star Louison Bobet, who was recovering from a car accident. Bobet so enjoyed his stay in Roscoff that he founded his own thalassotherapy center, in Quiberon, to the south.

The thalasso chain *Valdys* now operates a hotel and spa on the site of the former Rockroum Institute. In March, when I arrived in town, the weather was phenomenal, the sun turning the passing views from my taxi into paint-box stripes: emerald land, cyan water, periwinkle sky. I couldn't resist stopping off at La Maison des Johnnies, a small municipal museum. St. Barbara, I learned, is the patron saint of seafaring onion peddlers. A Roscoff onion is not a Roscoff onion if you cut its roots after August 25th. If you want an onion to keep, you must fold its tail, the skin that gathers above the bulb.

At the hotel, a modest three-story structure, Morgane Lemée, the spa director, gave me a tour. Older couples read Paulo Coelho novels or did crossword puzzles under windows that framed the Île de Batz, a car-free island with white sand coves and a towering lighthouse. A cooler dispensed herbal tea made from dulce, a red seaweed. "This is the cryotherapy chamber," Lemée said, leading me into a room that contained a cylindrical booth just like the one that made Michel Houellebecq worry about his dick. Another room housed buckets of mud and an industrial-size steamer, filled with dozens of packets of algae.

We passed by the fitness room, overlooking the ocean, and I was surprised to see a man in a robe and flip-flops pedalling away on an exercise bike. After visiting the treatment rooms, we walked by again. This time, he was running on a treadmill.

The next morning, I got up early for breakfast in the hotel's restaurant. Most of the guests had shown up to the meal in robes, and I noticed that many of them seemed to have brought a higher class of shower shoe from home. The

atmosphere was corporate canteen, but the fare was refined, especially a fruit salad with lime zest and, at dinner, a Roscoff-onion soup with buckwheat, sweetbreads, and a gratin of regional Ty Ewen cheese. For Annie Pélessié, a retired schoolteacher from Cahors, the "perfect food," the sociable atmosphere, and the nightly apéritifs on the terrace are indispensable elements of a thalasso vacation. She has taken forty-one of them, in recent decades going twice a year. "At my age, Madame, I'm not expecting a miracle," she told me. "But it's nice to have my pain taken care of and to get out and see people."

Lemée had told me that her favorite treatment was the *douche à jet*, a vigorous jet of water that left her legs feeling "like they were made of cotton." Later that morning, I visited the hydrotherapy rooms, where I was greeted by a therapist in a black T-shirt and pants, topped with a black plastic apron. I went into a changing stall to hang up my robe.

"Should I leave my bathing suit on?" I called, over the door.

"You can, but it's better without."

Soon I was standing stark naked at the far end of a narrow, gray-tiled room, clutching the side bars of a waist-high metal support. About ten feet away, the therapist was unfurling a thick hose from a wall mount.

"Turn to the right," she said. "Ready?"

I braced myself. The water pressure was intense—almost strong enough to clean a sidewalk. I could taste the salt. The therapist was yelling instructions, but I could hardly hear them over the roar of the spray. She started with my ankles, working methodically up the line: calves, thighs, butt, triceps, shoulders. As she power-washed my back, I fixated on a single thought: Please don't hit a mole!

"Lift up your feet," she said.

She hosed down my soles. Then my palms. My whole body was being spray-painted, and she was determined not to miss a spot.

At the end of the treatment, the therapist had me turn toward her. Here it was: the full-on *douche à jet*, straight to the gut. I closed my eyes and thought of the circulatory benefits.

When she asked if I'd like a final blast of cold water, I surprised myself by saying yes. ♦

