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THE SOUTH OF FRANCE

Step out of the shade



HIGHER LOVE

Hannah Betts was drinking herself miserable – but this was the last thing she expected to confront when she went in hot pursuit of a miracle potion at the most indulgent retreat in Europe

ONCE UPON A TIME, there was a dashing adventurer – a rocket scientist, no less – who fell foul of a laboratory accident that burned him and marred his princely looks. Our hero set about concocting a remedy by harnessing the healing power of the ocean, which had always inspired him. For 12 years and with 6,000 experiments, he laboured until his trademark Miracle Broth was brewed. Using this super-charged potion, he healed his wounds and his appearance was restored, and soon the world's most beautiful women were paying a king's ransom to share his secret.

Now, 26 years since Naomi Wolf's *Beauty Myth* ended our belief in fairy tales, one product is still referred to as legendary, and that is Crème de la Mer. Its publicity elaborates not only upon the 'Miracle' but the 'Reasons to Believe', while acolytes attest to metamorphoses similar to those of its chemically scalded creator, aerospace physicist Max Huber: scars eradicated, bloom renewed, surgery staved off.

Today, 50 years after its creation – and 20 years after it was acquired by Estée Lauder and shot to extraordinary public consciousness across the world – the original cream has spawned a range of 53 products sold across 66 countries. Almost 200 jars of this unguent are bought every hour, despite a starting price of £60 for the 15ml travel size, rising to £1,340 for its coveted 500ml incarnation. Facialists might whisper about its 'bog-standard' ingredients, the *Daily Mail* might live to renounce it. Nevertheless, in an age of lifts, lasers and ever more canny consumers, the mystery of la Mer continues to hold sway.

I have dallied with the cream since its smash-hit launch in Britain in 2000, deploying it in all life's emergencies: after illness, before crossing paths with exes, and when nothing else would prevail. However, following an excessive winter of the carousing and gorging variety, I wanted some Crème de la Mer immersion therapy. Naturally, the venue for this was one of the world's most exclusive hotels, in one of the most exorbitant destinations, frequented by the most affluent individuals.

La Réserve Ramatuelle is an impeccably elegant escape among parasol pines six miles – and several hundred light years – from St Tropez. La Mer has been the secret weapon of La Réserve's spa since the hotel opened in 2009. Its setting above the sand and surf, and healthy combination of seaside walks, seafood and sea air makes this – the only destination spa to carry the brand – Crème de la Mer's spiritual home.

It may claim the lofty clientele of St Tropez, and loftier prices, however, a more gracious respite from brashness and bling could not be imagined. This is not a hotel where you come to be seen, à la the Byblos in the middle of town or Hôtel Martinez in Cannes with its private yet rather public beach on boulevard de la Croisette.

Instead, the theory is that the ultimate luxury is feeling blissfully at home, were home a £3,000-per-night sculptural suite with a

mesmerising view. And it works: I was by no means a typical guest, my suite being triple the size of my London flat. Yet this was the first hotel I've stayed at in my 44 years where I have properly unpacked my suitcase and hung clothes in the wardrobe.

The architecture is refined simplicity, a Seventies building that has been transformed into nine rooms and 19 suites by Jean-Michel Wilmotte, who designed Paris's Mandarin Oriental, with sedate neutrals, stone floors, Paola Lenti and Tai Ping rugs, Kieffer and Marc Geisen linens, and contemporary furniture by Hans J Wegner, Finn Juhl, Moroso and B&B. The effect is a paean to relaxed chic, ready for high-net-worth individuals to assume a foetal position.

Chef Eric Canino was a pupil of Michel Guérard, the father of gourmand spa cuisine and owner of three-Michelin-starred Les Prés d'Eugénie. Canino has been awarded a star of his own for his delicious yet healthy food. The secret of his sublime lobster risotto turns out to be unsweetened condensed milk. Puddings are

refined-sugar-free, even the endorphin-inducing 'chocolate essential'. The fish is so fresh you expect it to wink, and I developed a slavish addiction to the tomato salad, which has 15 varieties plucked from the chef's gardens.

Even those who can afford to be complacent about indulgence are beguiled. Karl Lagerfeld takes one of the 12 Rémi Tessier-designed villas here when he wants to leave the world behind, although he brings a good deal of it with him as part of his entourage. One oligarch demanded fireworks launched from a boat, and even this was handled with discretion, as if nature happened to lay on pyrotechnics. Seraphically happy guests wander around dressed in the finest linen and cashmere.

If I am yet to mention the spa, that is because it's treated with customary insouciance.

This is not the sort of place where people wallow around in states of hoggish undress, boasting about their latest purge. Instead, they slip inconspicuously down to ground level, where the sun sparkles into 11 treatment rooms, breezes ripple the indoor pool and all is calm and joyful. Even the spa's principal boast – that it is one of only nine locations in the world to offer Crème de la Mer treatments – is downplayed.

La Mer's Miracle Broth constitutes a blend of nutrient-rich kelp, vitamins, minerals and essential oils, bio-fermented for three to four months during which sound and light waves are pulsed through it to mimic the sun and the sea. To complete this slow-food (face) ritual, the resulting concoction is then potted by hand. A portion of each batch is added to the next as a starter, meaning every product shares something of the potency of the original.

This sort of process does not come cheap and the extravagant prices initially shocked consumers (less so two decades on when rivals have followed suit with bank-breaking salves). Still, the 500ml pot has become something of an urban myth, sold only at the brand's most upmarket outlets. In 2014, 19 customers

I'VE SEEN THIS
CREAM USED ON
HEART-SURGERY
SCARS, BABIES'
BOTTOMS, PRIMA
BALLERINAS' FEET
AND THE WOUNDS
OF MY FATHER,
A SCEPTICAL
DOCTOR

HEALTH ESSAY

► purchased three or more of these 'pounders', one investing in six. Meanwhile, La Mer's Essence Serum is produced in such limited quantities that it can only be bought by invitation.

The A-list line up with the rest of us. Devotees include Sienna Miller, Rosamund Pike, Yasmin Le Bon, Kate Moss, Lara Stone, Jourdan Dunn and Liu Wen. The brand works with some of the top make-up artists so it's a staple in their kits, meaning it is used on shoots and film sets the world over. Angelina Jolie, Julianne Moore, Jennifer Lopez and Jessica Alba are all reported to have applied it pre red carpet. Robbie Williams, Daniel Craig and Johnny Depp are among its male enthusiasts.

The appeal is the same for celebrities and civilians. Enthusiasts attest to transformations of the sort enjoyed by its creator. It works wonders on eczema, I have got rid of my own burn marks with it, and my mother emerged blemish-free from two knee operations after using the body cream. Later, when she was far more poorly, she kept a pot by her bedside. I have come across La Mer being used on heart-surgery scars, babies' bottoms, prima ballerinas' feet and the war wounds of my father, a sceptical doctor. Because, sea shanties apart, the fact behind the fairy tale is that it delivers. For the new *Genaissance de la Mer Serum Essence*, which was launched in March, research shows that lines and wrinkles reduce by 92 per cent, and skin smoothness improves by more than 90 per cent. La Mer continues to hold its own against the latest technology from the likes of Estée Lauder, L'Oréal and P&G, as well as the many dermatologists' products, eco warriors, hipster brands and even initial (and as yet unconvincing) forays into bespoke skin care. People return to it because it gets results.

Accordingly, it not only survived the recession, but flourished. Harrods has always been La Mer's number-one UK 'door', doing a particularly roaring trade during the annual Ramadan rush of summering visitors from the Middle East. But good old John Lewis is its fastest growing retailer, with the country's highest number of counters. Not many products remain a fit for both sets of customers

in the competitive beauty industry, worth £17 billion in the UK (global value is expected to reach \$265 billion in the next two years).

So how would its powers be maximised over a week-long La Mer-fest? I arrived at La Réserve depressed, the heaviest I had ever been, drinking up a storm and entirely unable to sleep. Needless to say, my skin was raddled, bloated and inflamed. Day by rapturous day, I was exfoliated with diamond and quartz, given acupressure point and drainage massages, lifting and firming masks, and treated with the original cream, the serum, the gel and pure Miracle Broth. Some beauty treatments can leave you feeling raw and exposed: these were face- and being-bolstering. There was no way I was sabotaging it with the local rosé.

Having one La Mer facial makes you gleam; having one every day for five days means you emerge with the face of an 18-year-old – dewy, lustrous, positively plump with health. I have worn foundation religiously since the age of 11, but suddenly it was redundant. During the body treatments, the angelic therapist Alexandra looked past my Juno-esque state to focus on the positive – my lack of cellulite. The impact was totally restorative. Nourished by La Mer, risotto and R&R, I finally kicked the bottle after 30 years of hard living. I was able to sleep again, my spirits were soothed, and somewhere between myth and Miracle Broth my skin and spirits were transformed.

I have been fortunate to travel to several life-changing destinations, including Thailand's miraculous Kamalaya and Chiva-Som. Nevertheless, nowhere has succeeded in altering my life as seismically as this secret, super-rich haven where the health factor is as stealth as the wealth. A year on, I am sober for the first time in three decades, a stone and a half lighter, and find myself in a loving relationship after eight years of single living. My skin may have been redeemed, but so too has my mind. *Crème de la Mer* – the legend lives on. **1**

Carrier (+44 161 492 1357; carrier.co.uk) offers seven nights from £2,820 per person, including breakfast, flights and transfers. Crème de la Mer treatments cost from about £165

I ARRIVED AT THE SPA THE HEAVIEST I HAD EVER BEEN AND ENTIRELY UNABLE TO SLEEP. NEEDLESS TO SAY, MY SKIN WAS RADDLED, BLOATED AND INFLAMED

