My Greek grief retreat in the Peloponnese

After the death of her mother, Gavanndra Hodge found solace in Greece's Euphoria Retreat and the magic mountains that surround it

Euphoria Retreat, Greece

Gavanndra Hodge

Tuesday April 14 2026, 4.05am BST, The Times

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The death of someone beloved is an intense and devastating experience and yet rarely do any of us have the time to fully grieve, especially those organising the funeral. You may have two weeks off, during which you will be so consumed with admin that the only time you actually feel your sadness is when you are standing up reading the eulogy, after which life's rollercoaster chugs back into action, dragging you along with it, and there is no more time for tears.

I have had experience of this, too much really. My sister died when I was 14, my father when I was 34. Both deaths were a shock. There was a sense of short, sharp immersion in grief and then normal existence resumed. In both cases my sadness — vast, raw, unfathomable — had to be tucked away just so I could continue. This meant that the unprocessed grief resurfaced later, decades later in the case of my sister, incapacitating me in unexpected ways.

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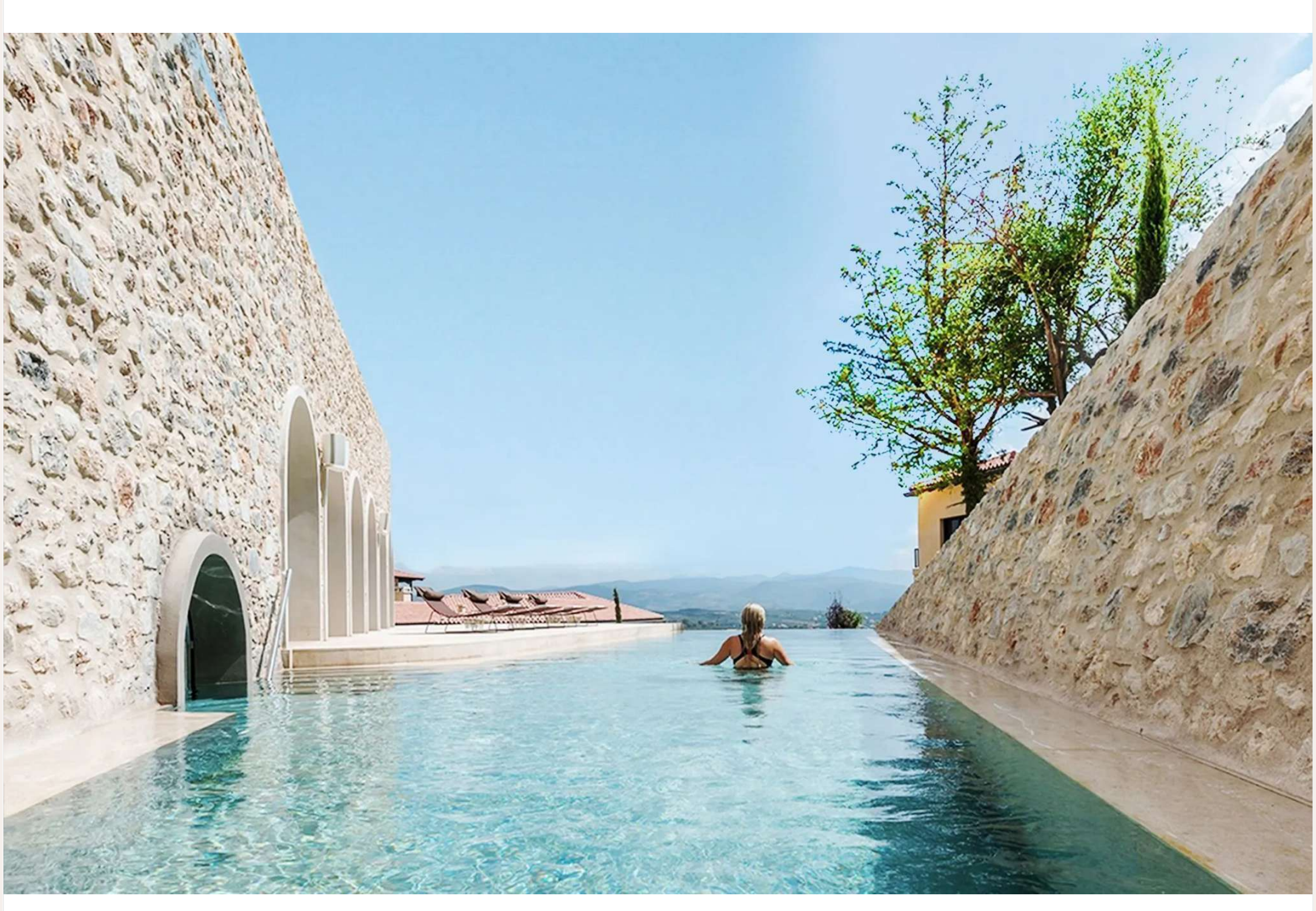
With my mother's death last year (I organised her funeral, as I had my father's), I was determined to do things differently. And so, three months after sitting beside her at Croydon University Hospital, holding her frail hand as she took her final breaths, I travelled to the Euphoria Retreat in Greece, hoping that there I would find the space and support I needed to grieve.



Euphoria has spectacular views over the plains of Sparta

Euphoria is the creation of Marina Efraimoglou. In her twenties she survived cancer, an experience that first sparked her interest in the connections between lifestyle and wellbeing. After this she founded a bank in Greece, but by her forties felt burnt out and quit her job in finance to research various healing practices. In the process Efraimoglou visited numerous spas, but often found them soulless and overmedicalised. So in 2018 she opened her own spa in the Peloponnese, constructed around a restored 19th-century mansion and surrounded by pine forests. Euphoria, as the name suggests, is intended to be a joyful place, its ethos underpinned by ancient Greek philosophies and traditional Chinese medicine. Here guests can be nourished and healed, rather than suffer and endure denial.

For me, coming from London, which had been under thick rain clouds for what felt like the whole of winter, one of the first joyful things about being at Euphoria was waking up to sunshine and sitting on my terrace with a cup of Greek mountain tea and an extraordinary view. Beneath me were the plains of Sparta, inhabited by the warlike Spartans in the 4th century BC, and above the hilltop site of Mystras. This was established in the 13th century, initially by the Franks, but became a fortified city under the Byzantines and the Ottomans. Its last remaining citizens left in the 1950s and it is now a historic monument. Visitors can climb to the acropolis for views of the snow-topped Mount Taygetus and weave down through the narrow paved streets, populated now only by tourists and cats, stopping to look into the many churches, which are still decorated with frescoes.

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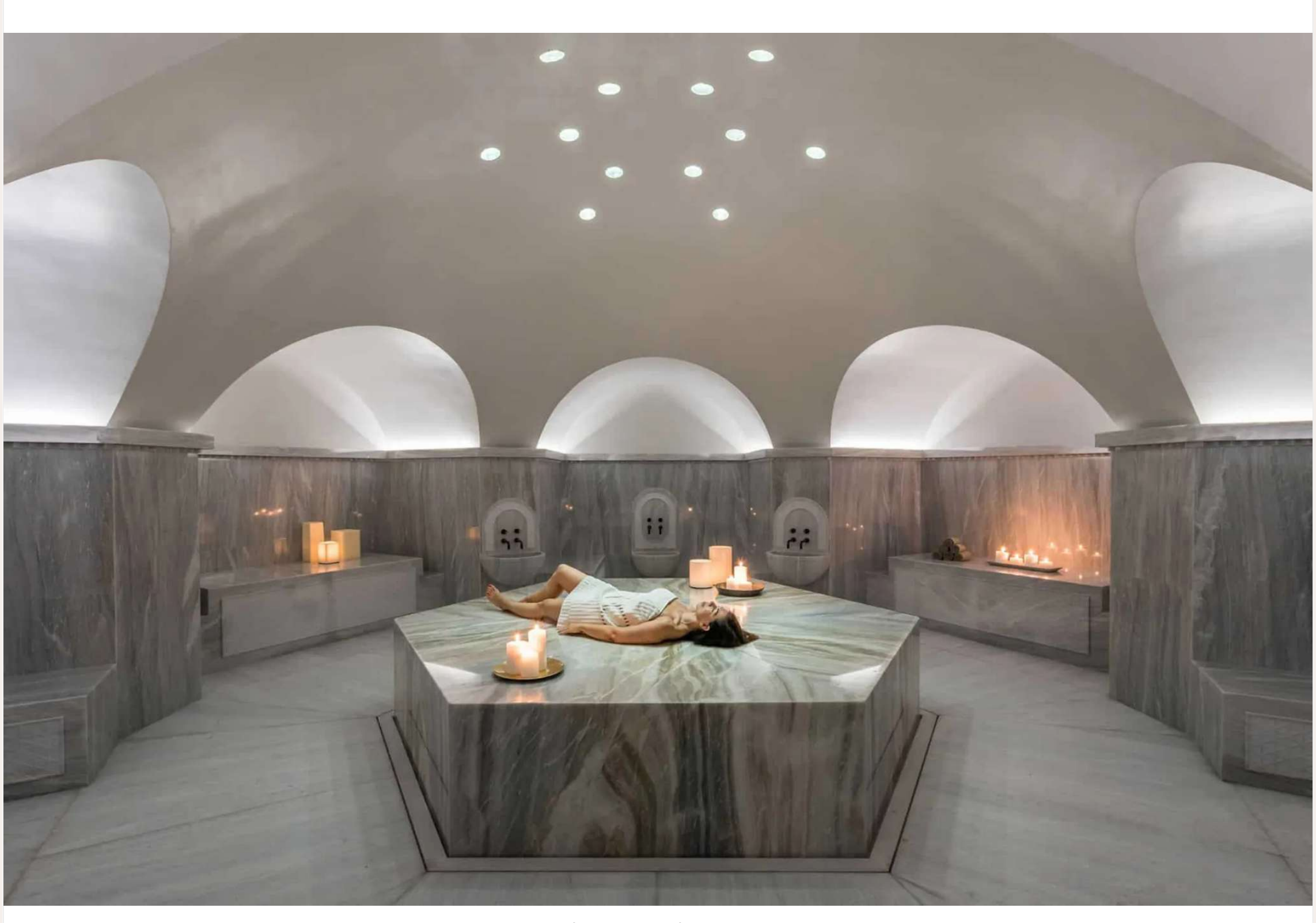
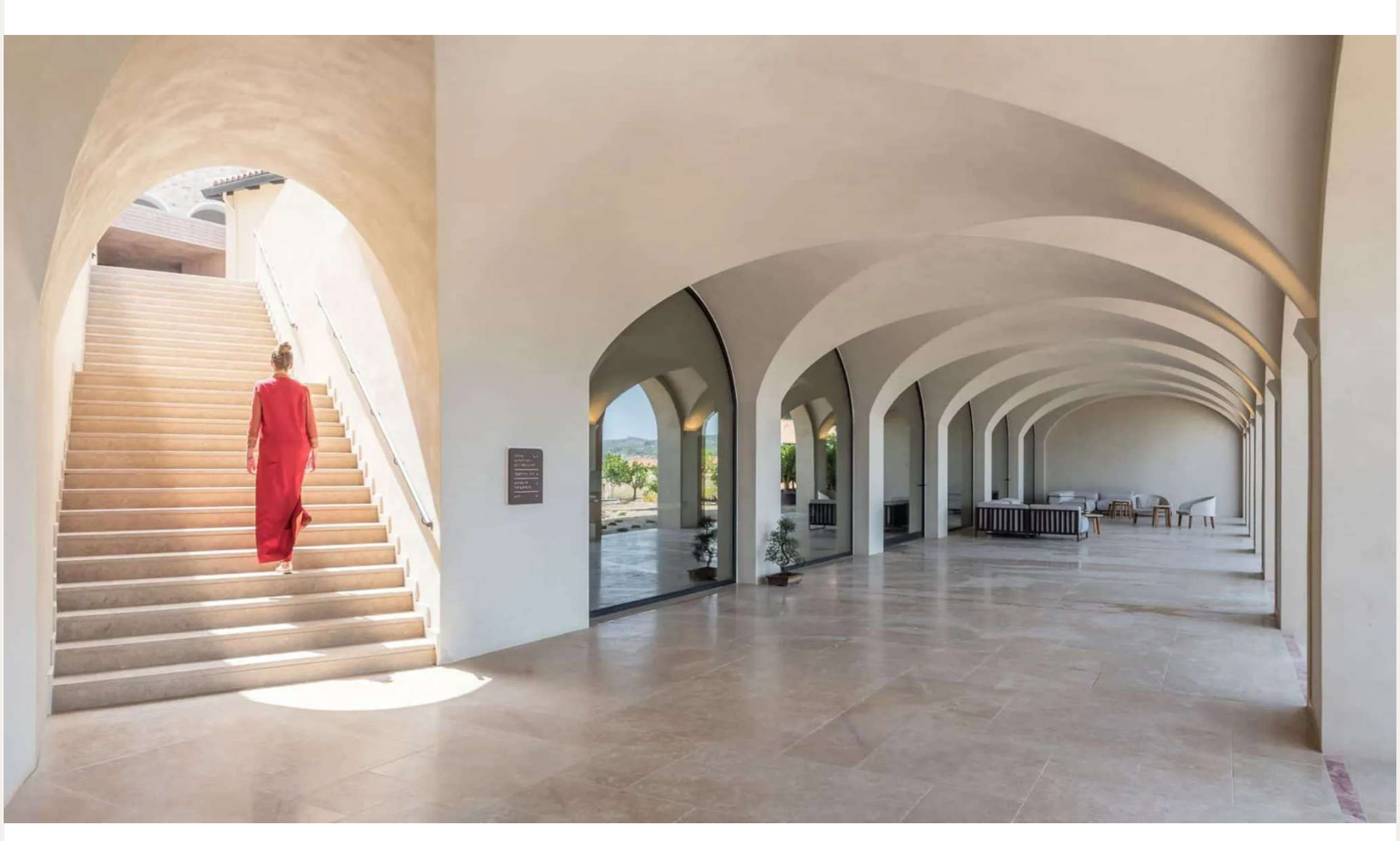
The architecture and heritage of Mystras was the primary design reference for Euphoria. There are arches, vaulted ceilings and a serene palette of cream, red and matt gold. The staff glide about wearing vaguely Byzantine-inspired robes.

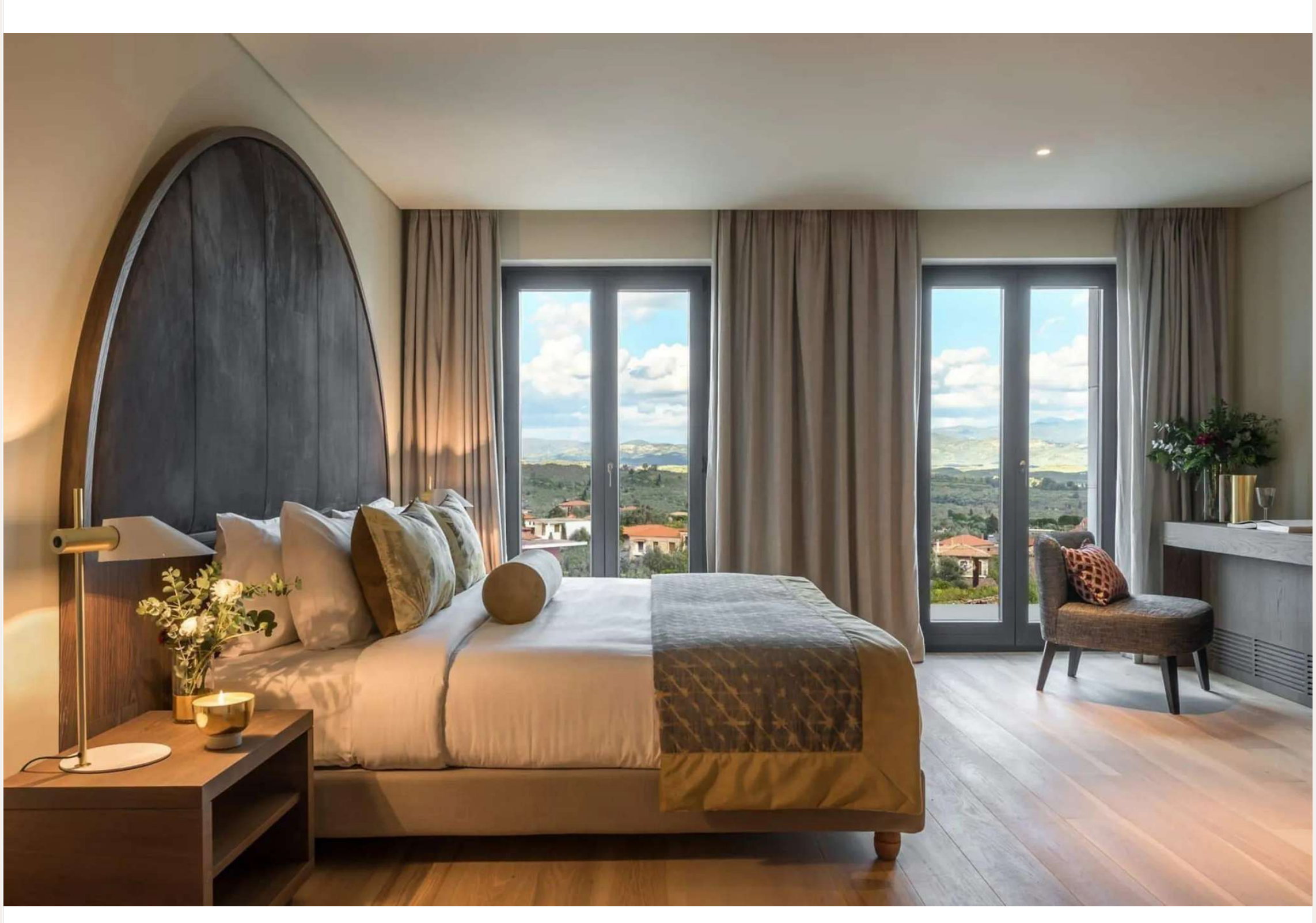


The Byzantine hammam

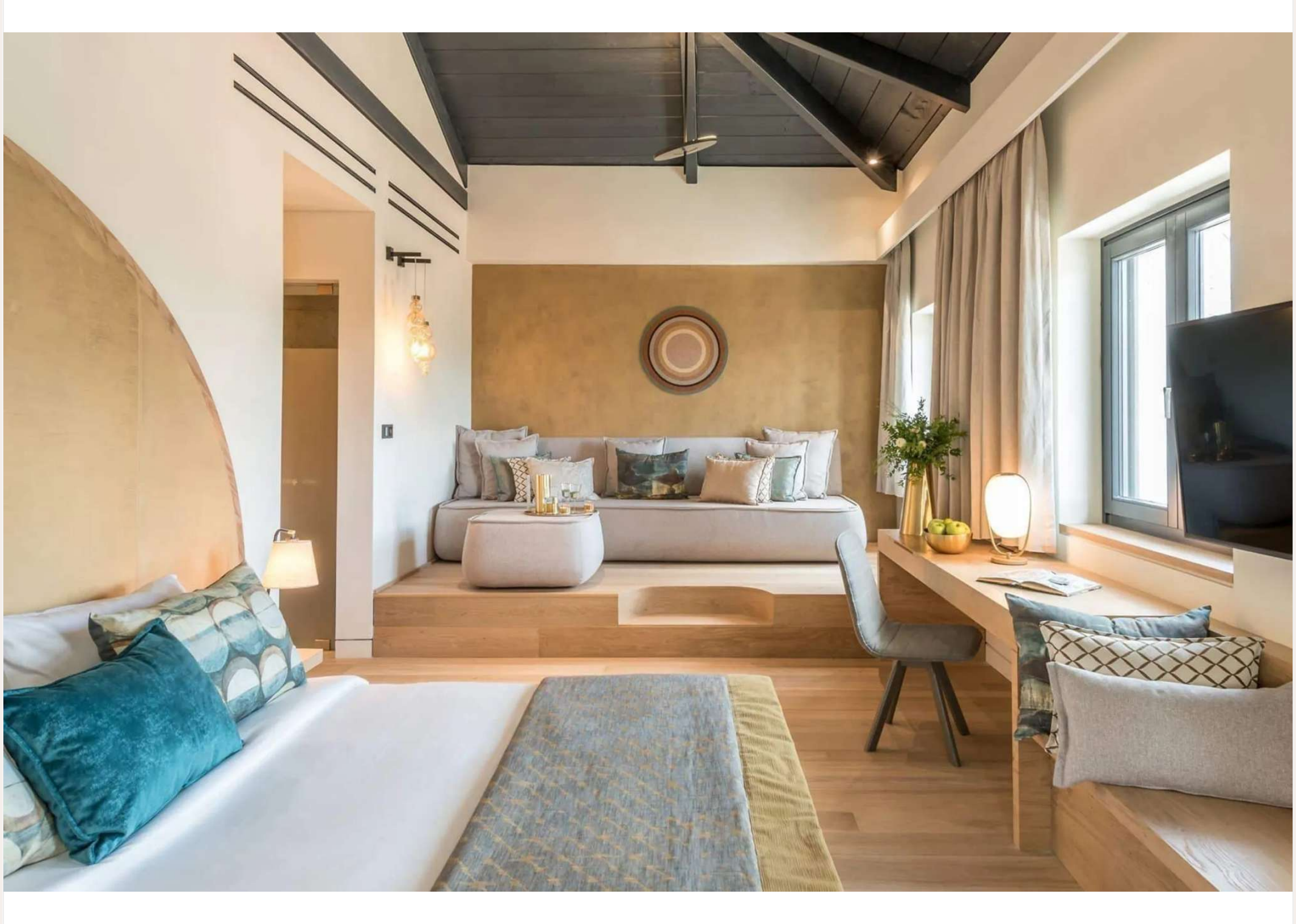


Ancient architecture was a primary design reference for Euphoria

The 45 bedrooms are all slightly different; mine had a cushioned niche and a pale marble bathroom with delicious-smelling own-brand products. The restaurant, Gaia, has an almost monastic vibe, but one that is softened by woven wall hangings, fairy lights and lavish food. Wine and beer are available, as is water infused with thyme or nettle. At every meal there is freshly baked bread to be doused with local olive oil. For lunch I particularly enjoyed big bowls of pasta with local cheese; at dinner there was octopus braised with fava beans and veal chateaubriand with red pesto; and puddings including halva mousse and chocolate tart. Some of my fellow guests were on weight-loss programmes and didn't dine quite so decadently, but they never looked depressed and hungry or like they might steal my mousse. Excitingly, when I got home I found I had lost a kilo in five days despite all the bread and oil; perhaps this is the true magic of the Mediterranean diet.



The 45 bedrooms are all slightly different



There are many programmes available at Euphoria, such as Integrative Female Health, Nutrigenomics & Biohacking, Advanced Medical Holistic Longevity and Optimal Sleep. But I was to follow the Emotional Harmony programme, intended for people who have been through painful and traumatic life experiences and need to let go. That first morning, after feasting first on the views and then on thick Greek yoghurt with homemade granola and mountain honey, I proceeded to the spa, where this release was to happen.

The spa is Euphoria's heart — or *omphalos* ("navel") if we are being Greek and mythic about it. It is arranged over four storeys accessed via a central spiral staircase built to resemble a medieval well or initiation tower, with a sense of ascending from darkness to light. I was booked in for about 18 different appointments, a mixture of treatments, consultations and tests, mixing high-tech diagnostics alongside meditation, massages, acupuncture and stints in a salt room. There is also a daily timetable of yoga, Pilates and lectures on the five-element theory. It's quite the schedule. The programme can be done over five or seven days (I would recommend seven if you don't want to feel rushed).

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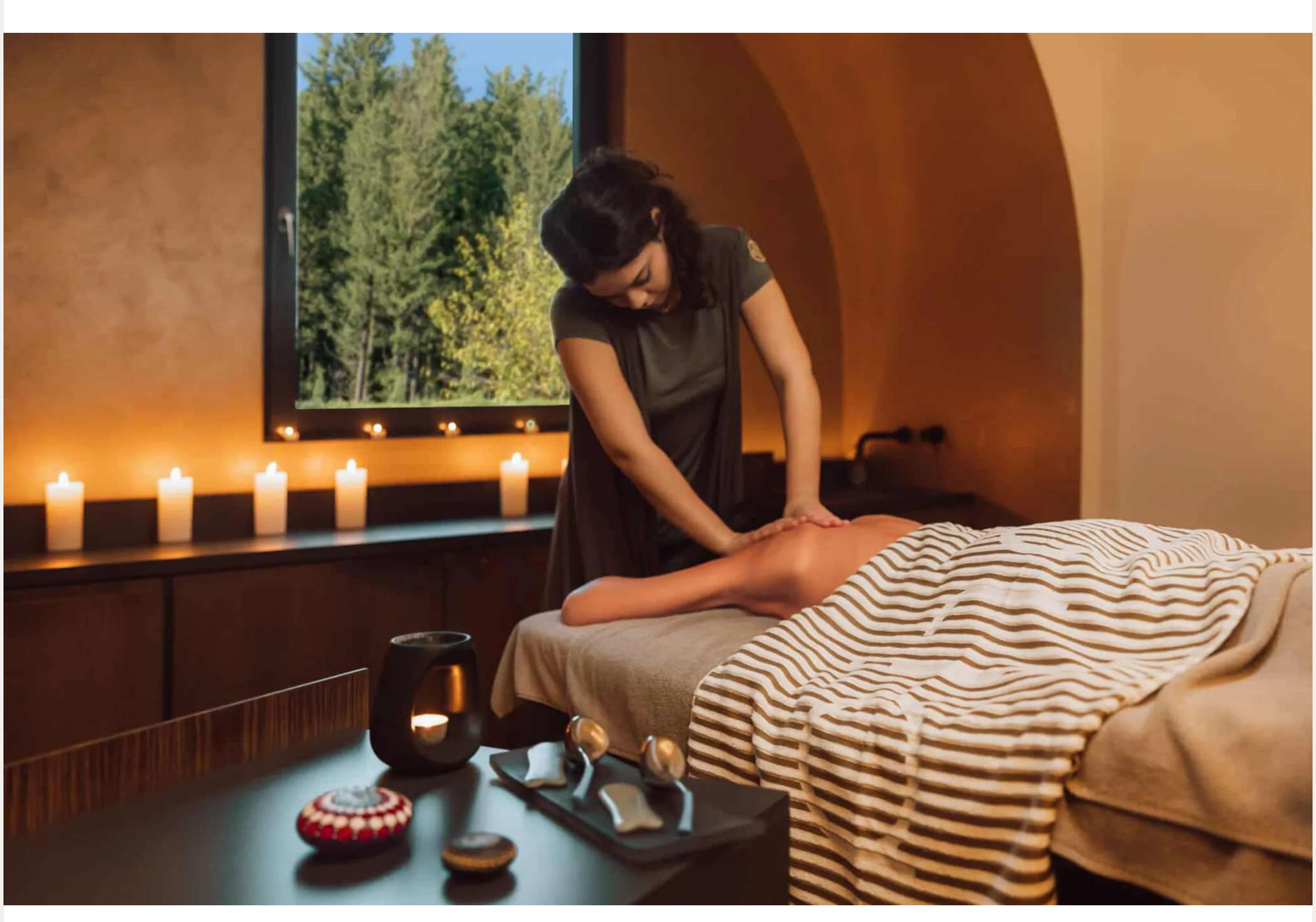
My first session was the "sanctuary for the busy mind", which called for lots of deep breathing and the activation of pressure points on my toes and neck. This was followed by a PNOE test, which involves breathing into a mask and measuring various biomarkers to assess health. Most of my results were pretty good, including mitochondrial function, metabolic rate and lung fitness. But my heart-rate variability and parasympathetic nervous system were both severely depleted, suggesting that I was chronically tired, stressed and anxious. This was no great surprise. My mother had had dementia, so I'd spent the past three years looking after her as well as my children, plus doing my job and all the other tasks that normal life entails these days.



Therapeutic massage formed part of Gavanndra's programme

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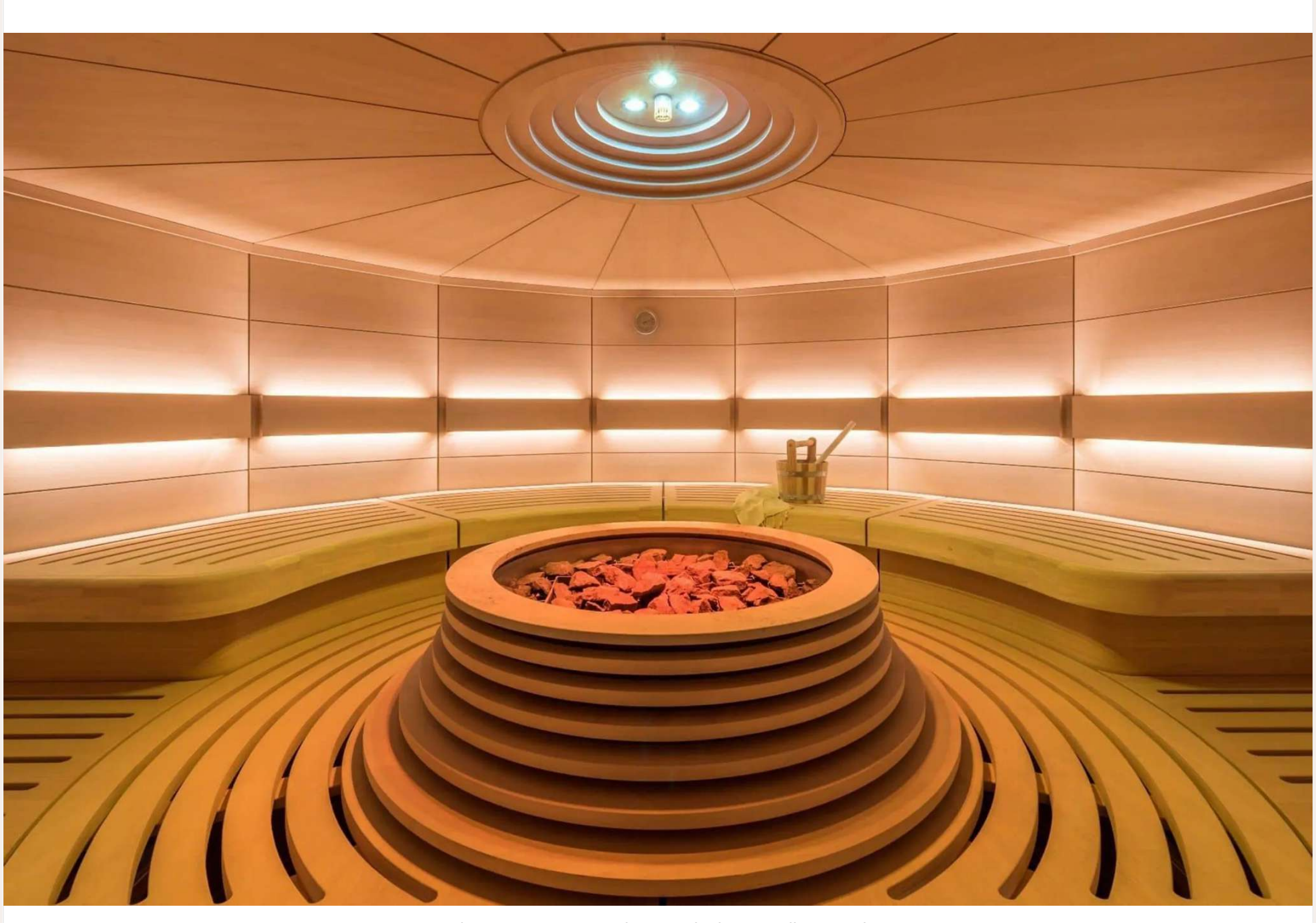
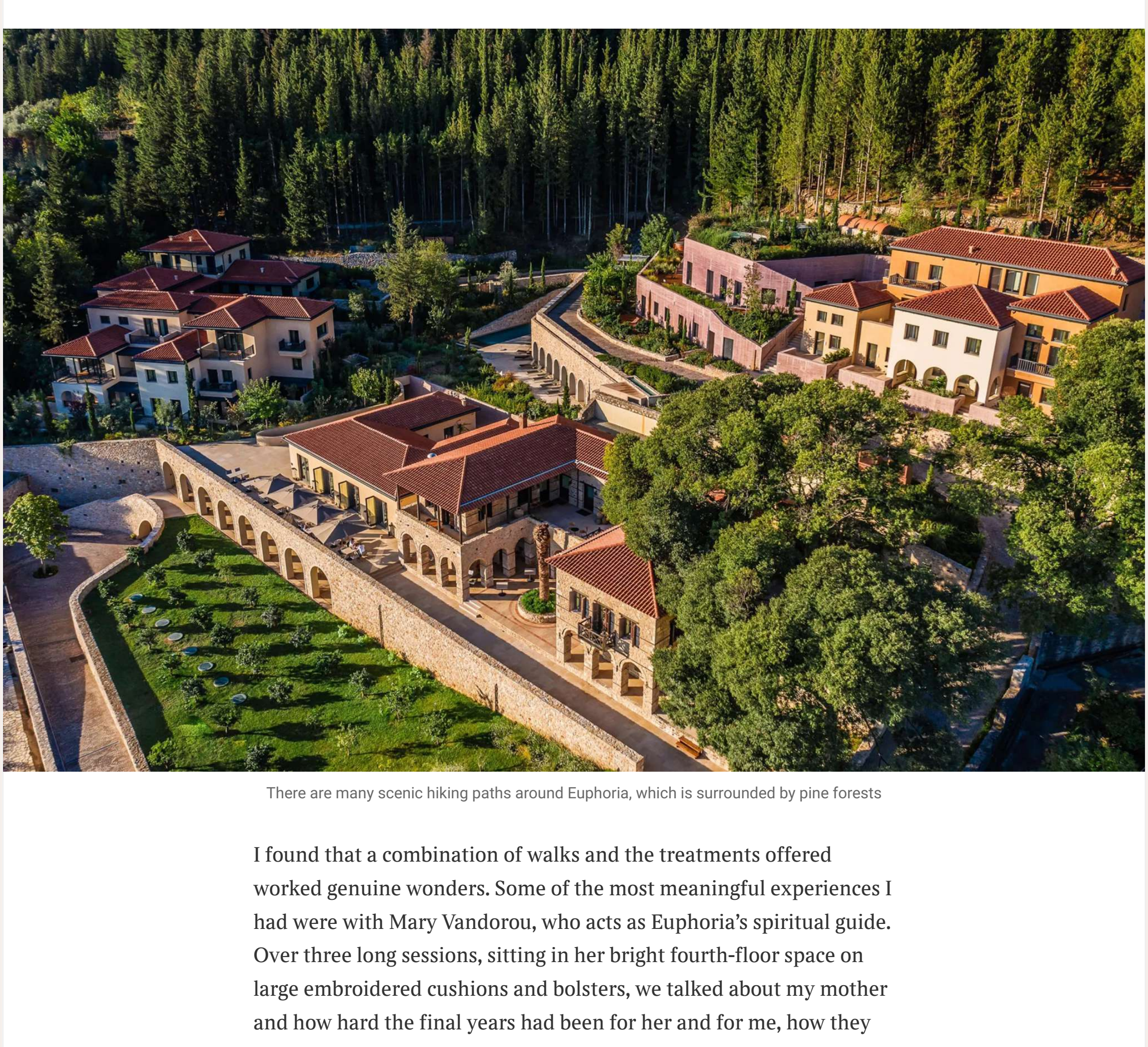


The sauna is a great place in which to noodle around

But these manifold concerns did seem to evaporate as I bobbed like mindless flotsam in Euphoria's deep "sphere pool", which is inspired by the dome of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. It is splendid to float here, or to swim outside, looking at the birds, the blossom and the mountains beyond, or indeed to noodle around in the cold plunge, sauna, steam room and hammam zones.

But my favourite way to relax is hiking, and there are some incredible paths here. There are daily guided walks, but I am a solo beast, so I downloaded the Spartan Trails app and headed off by myself, past bright green fields of olive trees and bountiful citrus groves, up into the mountains where once, according to myth, Zeus pursued nymphs. It was the end of February and it had been raining for about a month, my arrival coinciding with the arrival of the sun, which meant that the mountain path was fringed with greenery — euphorbia, wild fennel, poppies — that was almost indecently lush. Above me waterfalls thundered and eagles circled. But what was even more awe-inspiring was that along one of the routes were two churches, the first built inside a cave, the second located in what must be the most beautiful glade I have ever visited. These felt like genuinely sacred, out-of-time locations, and good places to sit a while and say goodbye to my dead.



There are many scenic hiking paths around Euphoria, which is surrounded by pine forests

I found that a combination of walks and the treatments offered worked genuine wonders. Some of the most meaningful experiences I had were with Mary Vandorou, who acts as Euphoria's spiritual guide. Over three long sessions, sitting in her bright fourth-floor space on large embroidered cushions and bolsters, we talked about my mother and how hard the final years had been for her and for me, how they had seemed to overshadow everything else. We talked about other traumas, the loss of my sister and father. Vandorou led me on guided meditations that were surprisingly vivid and cathartic. These sessions were complemented by therapies such as "emotional release massage", which involved a lot of work on my stomach as this is where we store tension and fear, and the most bonkers but also amazing treatment I've ever had — sound bath chakra healing. This involved sounding tuning forks along various parts of my body and the application of different scented oils, which together sent me into some sort of visionary trance.

On the last night, as I walked back to my room after a delicious dinner of sea bass ceviche and lamb chops, not really looking where I was going because I was so busy staring up at the incredible night sky, I realised that being here had enabled me to engage with my grief, that I had let go of some of my sadness and heaviness, and that I felt lighter and happier as a result. Indeed, I felt almost euphoric.

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A classic room with the Emotional Harmony programme and full board costs £4,245 for five days and £6,000 for seven days. This excludes alcoholic beverages, transfers and flights; euphoriaretreat.com