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PORTUGAL

The holiday that will beat insomnia

Millions of us suffer from sleeplessness — and a Portuguese spa hotel reckons it might have the cure. Our writer heads to the Douro Valley to hit the sack

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Could the pool at the Six Senses Douro Valley displace Joanna's nightmares?
FRANCESCO GUIDICINI



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I haven't slept since 1981. Well, not properly, anyway. The year I started university, I turned into a creature of the night, and not

more than five hours a night — but for reasons that are a lot less fun: noisy neighbours, London flight paths and stress. And nightmares, although the less said about them, the better. (A recent one involved Martin “Money Saving Expert” Lewis and nudity.)

To make matters worse, I started losing sleep over my lack of sleep. Well, insomnia is a health issue: according to one study, those who sleep for less than five hours a night have a 45% higher chance of suffering a heart attack. It’s also been linked to diabetes, dementia, obesity, memory loss, premature ageing and, probably, Brexit. That Margaret Thatcher and Donald Trump have both claimed to get by on four hours a night was not reassuring, either.

Then I read about the new Sleep Programme from Six Senses, the luxury spa hotel group. Most hotel press releases are pretty good for sleep induction, but this one seemed to be offering, literally, the stuff of dreams. I’d have a Sleep Ambassador looking after me; I’d benefit from the hotel’s two years of scientific sleep research; I’d use the hi-tech sleep-monitoring gadgetry they’d installed; and (the clincher, this) I’d wear, it said, an eye mask fashioned from hand-combed Tibetan yak down. Sold: I packed myself off to the Six Senses hotel in Portugal to see if it could change my harmful habits of a lifetime in three days.



Land of Nod: the hotel is nestled in the vineyards of the Douro Valley

Six Senses Douro Valley sits on a steeply terraced hillside tightly swathed in vines, but we're not here for the scenery. My Sleep Ambassador, Diana, meets me on arrival and wastes no time in showing me to where most of the action is to take place: my bedroom.

There's a huge picture window with a fabulous river view. But not for long. At the touch of a button, blackout blinds descend. The bed is a Naturalmat one, handmade by a specialist company in Devon. The sheets, duvet cover and pillowcases are made from moisture-wicking organic eucalyptus and cotton. The down pillows are cloud-soft. I have bamboo-fibre pyjamas for breathability and comfort; a jasmine spray for spritzing at sleepy time; foam earplugs; and a Little Book of Wellness, in which I am invited to write down any random worries that might be keeping me awake. The supplied eye mask, though, has clearly been nowhere near any large Himalayan mammals. It's more Fifty Shades of Zorro. This is annoying, but I'm determined not to let it keep me awake at night.

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Comfy PJs are hardly groundbreaking science. The next bit is. Under the mattress is a pad connected to a sort of foot-high white funnel. This is a Withings Aura, and it will measure every aspect of my night's sleep. It will tell me not only how long I have slept for, but also the proportion of light, deep and REM sleep, and my average heart rate and temperature. It will monitor the noise, light and temperature in the room and, with the assistance of red and blue light, and ambient music, help me drift off and wake up whenever my body is ready. And for its final trick, it will relay every last gory detail to an app on my phone. I'm exhausted just hearing about it.

When I return to my room after dinner and attendant wines — the Douro is Portugal's prime wine country — my bad habits kick in straightaway. Being a news addict, I never go to bed without a fix from either television or radio, so it's 12.45am when I finally turn off the TV and snuggle down — and that's me making a special effort. I set the Aura to wake me with the dulcet haranguing of John Humphrys, then tap it once to begin sleep mode, whereupon it lights up bright red and plays gently soothing music.

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Under the mattress is a pad that will tell me how long I have slept, my average heart rate and my temperature

The Aura comes to life at 7am, waking me from a deep sleep; I hate being woken up. I feel I've slept well, albeit not for very

Before he gives me the analysis of my first night, I undergo a health assessment. Measuring a series of biomarkers linked to sleep, it reveals that it's a wonder I get any rest at all. I have depleted serotonin, a mood stabiliser thought to produce healthy sleeping patterns; and I'm dehydrated to the point of desiccation, which means a nightmare for my kidneys and a possible toxin build-up.

My blood pressure, heart rate, cholesterol and levels of adrenaline are all high, while the amount of cortisol kicking around inside me — the hormone released during stress — would keep an elephant awake. Speaking of which, it is also recommended that I lose a lot of weight, which I knew already, but had managed to justify to myself with the thought that, come a nuclear winter, I will outlast Kate Moss by about 3½ years.

But how sweet were my dreams? The Aura report shows that it took me 19 minutes to drift off and that I achieved only 67% of my eight-hour sleep goal. I slept for 5hr 22min, with a paltry 1hr 29min of deep sleep and only 58min of rapid-eye-movement (REM) sleep — the two sleep states considered the most beneficial to health. But, I argue, if I hadn't been woken by the Aura — which had ignored my choice of Radio 4 and woken me instead with a bright blue light and gently chivvying tinkly music — in time for the early-morning yoga session, I'm sure I could have done better. Javier points out that I could have gone to bed earlier. Touché.

The following days are timetabled to complement the sleep programme and make the most of my short stay: a visit to a port producer; lunch in a Michelin-starred restaurant; swimming, yoga, walking through woods and by the river in the crisp January sunshine; meditating to the sound of Tibetan singing

sleep). This exacting level of relaxation is such that it clearly influences my sleep patterns: I score 77% on the second night and 93% on the third, with the deep and REM sleep cycles both markedly increased.

I develop a strange addiction to the Aura: seeing the results every day on my phone makes me want to do better and, weirdly, the proof that I am sleeping more gives me a definite psychological boost. I even begin to look forward to the plinky-plonk alarm.

My last night in Portugal doesn't go so well, when my mind is preoccupied by the next day's pre-dawn journey to the airport and I'm struck by the cold, hard realisation that my dearth of sleep is probably all my own fault (and that I really do need to get a new bed). My score falls to a nightmarish 33%.

Back in Britain, I have been sleeping a little better — largely thanks to the reassuring knowledge, newly acquired at a luxury hotel in Portugal, that I can permanently change my night-time routine. I've been trying to eat less, exercise more, drink my own body weight in water and write down my thoughts in what has become a great tome of neuroses. I've stopped flicking on the radio should I wake in the night, and the nightmares have all but disappeared (apart from a disturbing lapse involving Ed Balls). I'm even going to bed at a sensible time. Well, a more sensible time.

I reckon if I'd had just a few more nights, I'd have nailed 100% for sure. Sleeping well isn't rocket science, it's more a fine art, as Six Senses has triumphantly proved. You can't fail to sleep better with this level of detailed encouragement. So, just get with the programme.

£1,545pp, B&B, including flights and transfers (elegantresorts.co.uk). The three-night Sleep Programme costs £140pp extra

The Sleep Doctor's tips for travellers

Dr Michael Breus, aka the Sleep Doctor, has been a sleep clinician for 16 years and helped to devise the Six Senses programme (thesleepdoctor.com)

1 Get a headstart on beating jet lag: move your wake-up time towards that of your destination by half an hour every two days for a week before your trip.

2 If possible, select a flight that arrives in the early evening, and stay up until 10pm local time.

3 If you have to arrive in the morning, make sure you get a healthy dose of sunlight. It's as good as a coffee for perking you up, but without caffeine's side effects.

4 If you must sleep during the day, take a short nap (25min) in the early afternoon.

5 Avoid heavy meals and alcohol, which slow jet-lag recovery.

6 When it's time for bed, make your hotel room as dark as possible by pulling down the blackout blinds or wearing an eye mask.



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