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Seeking Wellness After Cancer at the Lanserhof Health Resort in Sylt, Germany

Is seven days of longevity programming the key to living better, longer?



The Lanserhof grounds.
(Image credit: Sue Williamson)

My Arrival at Lanserhof

It took two planes, a pair of trains, and a short cab ride to arrive on Sylt from my home in California, but it was well worth the journey when I arrived. Nestled in dreamy dunes, Lanserhof's futuristic buildings look more like a luxury resort than a place where one receives medical care. It feels like the type of place Kendall Roy would hide out after a bad MSNBC interview, all quiet and clean and beige. Everything is beautiful. The rooms are full of soft, comfortable lounge chairs. The windows offer panoramic, uninterrupted sea views. And the bath towels are enormous. At five foot ten, traditional spa towels tend to leave me half exposed, but when I wrap myself in a Lanserhof towel, it pools at my feet and drags behind me like a wedding veil. There is even a king-sized cushion in the bathtub meant to support your back as you soak. I made a mental note to research giant towels and bath pillows to buy immediately—*for my health*.

By Sue Williamson Published 2 Hours Ago In Features

How far would you go for wellness? Cutting alcohol, squeezing in an extra workout, applying vitamin patches, dedicating yourself to a daily cold shower routine? For me, evidently, the answer is traveling 5,399 miles to the Lanserhof longevity resort, where I fasted, gave up coffee, and danced around a cryo chamber while a technician played *Espresso* on repeat.

If you've heard of Lanserhof, you may be picturing ***White Lotus*** types sitting around a gilded plate of "chewing bread"—the lore of the European medical retreat includes famous faces, strict diets, and customized medical care prescribed against breathtaking landscapes. But its real claim to fame is being ahead of the longevity trend. Since 1984, Lanserhof has combined naturopathy with medical care to promote good health and prevent disease, the latter being the *raison d'etre* for my recent visit.

I used to think preventative wellness was all about springing for a booster shot in my smoothie and dry brushing every now and then, but my 30s have proved me very wrong. I've seen the first signs of aging in my body, the loss of my father to dementia, and a breast cancer diagnosis I'd love to never endure again. So, after years of hearing about the benefits of a Lanserhof stay, I visited the newest of its three locations on the German island of Sylt with the goal to hit "refresh" on my body post-cancer treatment, and to learn everything I can about preventing future

I begin my Lanserhof journey with an Epsom salt drink and a brisk walk by the sea; then I report to Stefanie Helmbrecht, MD, the internist who helped me craft the week's schedule. She orders a series of blood tests, urine tests, breathing tests, and a 24-hour heart monitor; then we discuss my goals. I point to Lanserhof's tagline of "Living better for longer"—what more could you really want?—and tell her that's my goal. We touch on cancer, but we really talk about me. It seems there's no symptom too trivial nor daunting to share. She listens to it all.

Then Dr. Helmbrecht walks me through The Cure, the resort's core concept that combines fasting, nutrition, and intestinal cleansing. There are 11 nutritional levels in total, ranging from Level 0 (a zero calorie diet made up of water, tea, and a clear liquid generously labeled "broth") to a full Active Menu (consisting of healthy multi-course meals that total at least 1700 calories for the day). After a little back and forth, we decide I'll start on Level 0, then climb up the levels throughout the week with foods that help foster good gut bacteria.

Fasting has become trendy in longevity circles, and it may not work for everyone (there are clear risks involved), but there's some science to back it up. Studies show that fasting triggers autophagy, a natural process in which damaged cells are broken down and cleansed from the body. Fasting can also reduce inflammation, improve cholesterol, and potentially help prime and redistribute Natural Killer cells, special lymphocytes that naturally destroy cancer cells.



Wearing my 24-hour HRV monitor; my broth and health pass.
(Image credit: Sue Williamson)

My Experience at Lanserhof

My fasting days go by in a haze; I'm too weak to do much but rest in my beautiful room in my beautiful, giant towel. At one point, I run into Dr. Helmbrecht in the hall and she immediately ups the nutrition level for my next meal. It's this small, yet crucial customization that reminds me why it's important for cancer patients to fast under professional supervision—and why guests come back to Lanserhof again and again.

Another reason they come: the vast array of services. Highlights from the 34-page treatment booklet include AI-assisted cancer screening, dental work, spirometry lung testing, sleep studies, and pharmacogenetic analysis, which helps tailor medications to one's specific genes. Even with the best doctors at home, it can take months to get in with a specialist if an unmanageable side effect should arise. Here, there's a professional for almost anything I need on call. When I mention lingering shoulder pain from my surgery, I'm booked with an osteopath the next day. I point to skin changes I blame on chemotherapy and not the more obvious answer (ahem, aging) and I'm booked for a facial at the spa. They also offer, I learn, aesthetic treatments like Botox and lasers, but I stop with a pair of Skinceuticals potions from the spa shop and call it a day.

Dr. Helmbrecht prescribes a psychology session for any lingering post-cancer feelings, so I visit Claudia Zeidler, a certified psycho-oncologist who specializes in post-breast cancer psychology. Like the preventative treatments I'm using for my body, she recommends looking ahead for my mind. She doesn't dismiss my fears; instead, she gives me tangible tools to focus my mind. She reads me passages from books by self-compassion author Kristin Neff, Ph.D, sends me links to guided meditations, and together we watch a 2019 Harvard Talk called "Uncertainty and the Power of Possibilities" by Ellen Langer, Ph.D. "Nobody knows what's going to happen," Dr. Zeidler summarizes with a smile. "So think of the possibilities!" I leave with a Notes doc full of recommendations and a sudden feeling of hope.

Each day, I check my little blue "Gesundheitspass" for my appointment times. I try preventative treatments like IV infusions of high dose Vitamin C (currently being studied for boosting the effectiveness of cancer treatments) and sessions in the aforementioned cryo chamber (helpful for reducing inflammation and symptoms of depression). Other days, I join group activities like Nordic Walking and candlelit yoga. Between lymphatic drainage and guided meditation, I take a long bike ride to admire the island's natural beauty until the wild landscaping tapered to reveal a seasonal Hermès store and I realize I'd ventured too far.

After three days, I graduated to solid foods, but I had to pace myself per Lanserhof rules. I already changed a lot about the food I eat post-cancer, but here I learn there's different *way* to eat. Cooked vegetables are better than raw to ease evening digestion. Water and other liquids should not be consumed half an hour before, during, or after a meal. And every bite should be chewed 30-40 times to make food softer and enzyme-rich so it's easier to digest. As hard as I try, I never quite reach 30 chews, but the practice of trying helps me eat more mindfully and savor even the simplest food.



Starting to feel the Lanserhof effect.
(Image credit: Sue Williamson)

My Lanserhof Takeaway

By my final day, I started to feel the Lanserhof effect. My skin was glowing, my brain fog was starting to clear, and my sugar cravings were gone. I was sad to leave such a beautiful place, but I was excited to go back to my real life and continue everything I'd learned. I left with a goody bag of spelt bread and yogurt from the kitchen, two boxes of super-strength probiotics, and a dossier of test results, nutritional advice, and detailed recommendations for continued care at home. I opened the folder, expecting a long list of high-tech, expensive treatments, but I'm relieved to find it's full of practical advice I can easily do at home: move my body (preferably outdoors), meditate daily, eat gut-friendly foods, and do a short 14-hour fast once a week. These are small tweaks I'm happy to make to continue feeling benefits, but I would never give up coffee again. The second I left Lanserhof, I bought a cappuccino and I savored every single sip.

So, was it all worth it? Aside from the long travel days to and from Germany, the cost to visit Lanserhof is high. Each property offers a few different packages but my program, the Lanserhof Cure Classic in Sylt, costs €2,890 for seven to eight days. (Rooms are not included and start at €579 per night.) At a total of $7,323 by today's exchange rate, that is a lot of money, but I can't say it gives me sticker shock. As a cancer patient in America, I've spent more on 30 days of medication when my insurance erroneously rejected a claim. If the things I learned at Lanserhof help me "live better for longer," it's worth that and more. And if it doesn't (knock on beautiful beachwood), I spent an unforgettable week in nature receiving personalized, around the clock care. I learned empowering information about my health, shed some hospital anxiety, and even learned to be more compassionate with myself. Sipping my cappuccino as I rode the train away, I felt a little more like the person I was before my diagnosis — and ready to admit I may never be entirely the same. I've been through something big and that changes you. But I'm not powerless. I can move on.