Culture

What a Week on an Island, Eating Almost Nothing, Taught Me About Food, My Body, and My Mind

On Germany's northernmost island, a legendary longevity clinic offers a fabled fasting cure that promises to promote cellular regeneration. *GQ* columnist Chris Black goes where the elite meet to barely eat.



By **Chris Black**

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This is an edition of the newsletter Pulling Weeds With Chris Black, *in which the columnist weighs in on hot topics in culture. Sign up here to get it in your inbox every Thursday.*

I had never heard of Sylt before I spoke to someone at Lanserhof via email. After a quick Google search, I learned that it was often referred to as "The Hamptons of Germany." Turns out it's a North Frisian island with sprawling dunes that make you feel like you are on Mars. The weather is unpredictable, and the wind whips almost all day. The houses are all topped with a particular kind of traditional thatched roof that makes them blend seamlessly with the landscape. It was the perfect setting for an eight-day solo fasting retreat.

Landerhof had been in my peripheral for years. It's a longevity clinic whose Web site describes it as the "world leading institution in holistic medicine," integrating alternative healing with state-of-the-art medical science. I had heard plenty of glowing personal recommendations from mostly hot chicks who reside somewhere in Europe. It's a place people with a substantial bank balance visit to reset their bodies through a signature method called "The Lanserhof Fastenkur," which is essentially a doctor-led fasting program that eliminates toxins and helps the body regenerate healthy cells.

The facility is immaculate and modern, with blonde wood and a dramatic white spiral staircase that connects the entire building. There is a world-class gym with a climbing wall, a sauna large enough to hold an NBA team, an indoor and outdoor pool, and countless Eames Lounge Chairs covered in a nubby neutral fabric facing windows. My room was on the second floor and had surprisingly good Wi-Fi, a terrace for contemplation while gazing out at the sea, and an endless supply of glass-bottled water. A custom pair of Lanserhof Birkenstock Arizonas in my size was waiting in the closet. When I arrived after a noisy and debaucherous wedding weekend in Sicily, the vibe felt like the perfect palate cleanser.

My first full day started at 7 AM with blood work and a myriad of tests. I don't love being poked and prodded before noon, but when in Rome. This was also the first day with no coffee, a part of the deal I knew was coming but was deeply unprepared for. Coffee is the only thing I have left; without it, I felt foggy and lost. The food is, well, not the point. My daily breakfast consisted of a plain bowl of coconut yogurt, two small pieces of toasted fermented bread, and a small side of avocado. Lunch was a vegetable, and dinner was soup with a vegetable side. The ingredients were of the highest quality, and the presentation was excellent, but getting comfortable with being hungry proved to be a much more complex challenge than I had anticipated. At the beginning of your stay, you pick a table in the dining room and eat every meal alone at that same table. Everyone faces out towards the window and is instructed to chew every bite 40 times.

As the week progressed, I did my best to work out as usual, but, as you can imagine, my energy was low. I woke up early and drank my Epsom salt. I read (*Happiness and Love* by Zoe Dubno), I watched all of *Black Rabbit* (great music), and did my usual writing and recording of my podcast, *How Long Gone*. I also got some intense body work from a buff German guy, did cell replacement therapy while getting an IV-drip, had some foot reflexology administered by a cool Danish girl who was also a pilates instructor, and got hypnotized by a calming German therapist. I had been dying to get hypnotized after my friend Issy Wood raved about her guy in LA who gets everyone to stop smoking. My goal was to conquer my final boss: desserts. I lay down on a white table, and as she spoke, repeating the word "sweets" in different ways throughout the fifty minutes, I pleasantly drifted in and out of consciousness. More than a week has passed, and some of what she said still sticks with me. I think I would need a few more sessions, but overall it was a good exercise for me in letting go. Hopefully, I can resist a slice of cake from Quartersheets this week, but regardless of sugar cravings, I left the treatment much calmer and aware of my breathing.

The solitude got to me a bit. I love being alone, but something about this felt intense. I realized that even though I don't cook, I think about restaurants and food quite a bit. When you take that away, you are forced to sit with yourself. The serotonin or dopamine I get from restaurants and food was eradicated and I was left alone with my thoughts and an acute awareness of my physical body: how it felt and how it looked. People go to Landerhof for all sorts of reasons: to recover from intense chemotherapy, injury, or cosmetic surgery. Some come for a yearly reset, and others just want to lose a few kilos. I didn't go in with a specific goal, except to fully immerse myself in the experience. I heard several stories of guests bringing in candy or alcohol, but Landerhof isn't jail; it's a choose-your-own-adventure experience for feeling better.

The morning I was set to check out, I had my exit exam with my doctor. He walked me through several pages of color-coded findings. He told me I was in great shape for my age and that I had lost five pounds. It made me proud that following the program yielded such clear results. I desperately needed a haircut and a shave, but my skin was glowing and my mind was alarmingly clear. I loaded my bags into the house car, a black 2025 BMW 7 Series, and they drove me to the tiny airport in Sylt. I was forced to check my bag, and my flight to Berlin was delayed for a few hours. Usually, these sorts of minor inconveniences make me crazy, but I took it in stride; I was still feeling Zen. I went into the rinky-dink lounge and made myself a coffee. I sat down, stared out the window, and drank it slowly while Alex G played through my headphones. It was the best bad coffee I have ever tasted.

I got to Berlin and met my friends Jeremy and Sven for dinner at Grill Royal on the river. I had some bread and olive oil, a piece of fish, and some French fries. I chewed every bite as if I were still in Sylt. Landerhof was a success;; if nothing else, I proved to myself that I could do something challenging. It also made me examine my relationship with food and my body more positively. It was nice to slow down and think about self-esteem and self-worth as they relate to food and the body. I won't be reaching for the plain coconut yogurt anytime soon, but the effects of Lanserhof are going to stick with me for a long time.