

Matteo Thun

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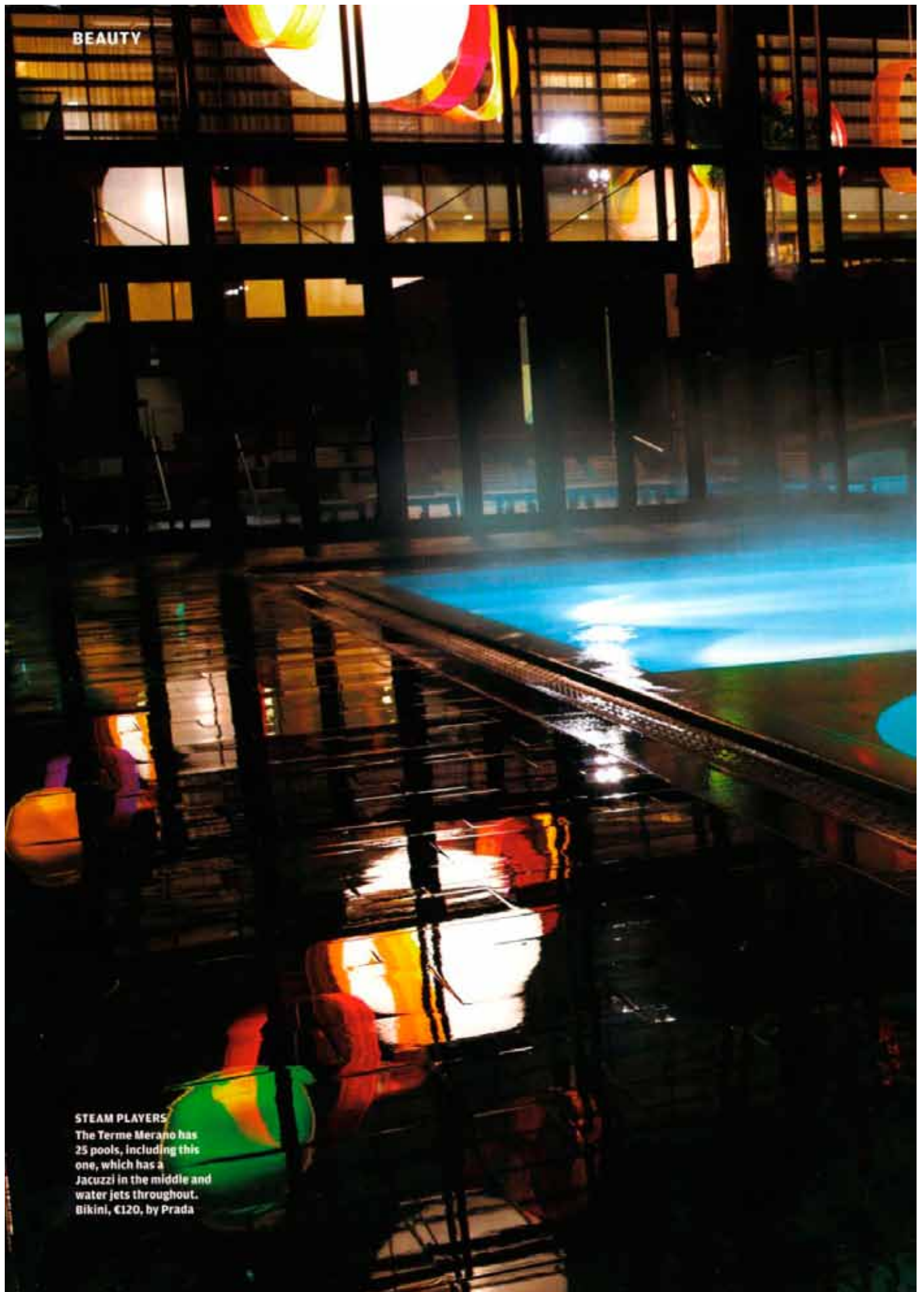


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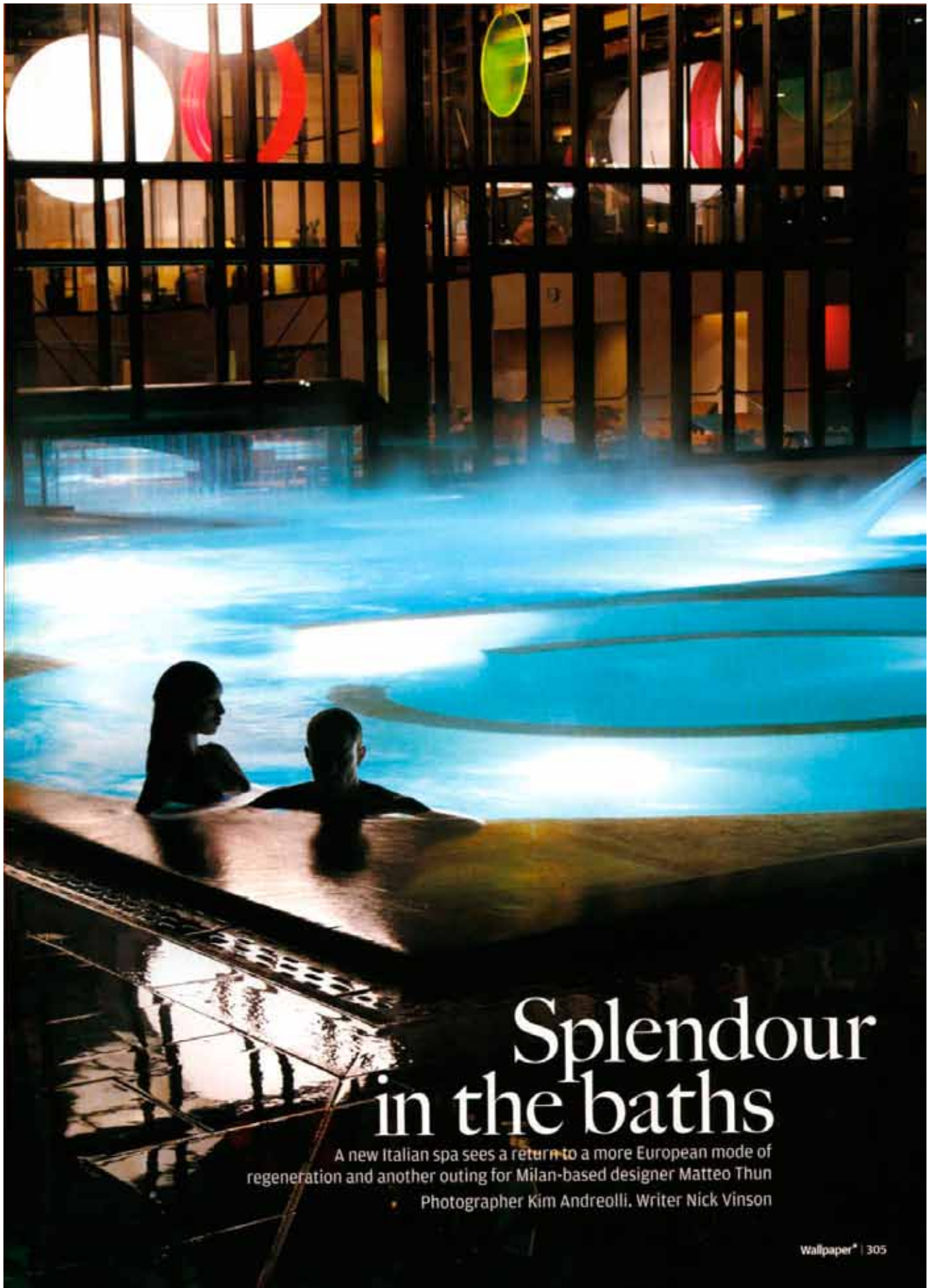
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STEAM PLAYERS

The Terme Merano has 25 pools, including this one, which has a Jacuzzi in the middle and water jets throughout. Bikini, €120, by Prada

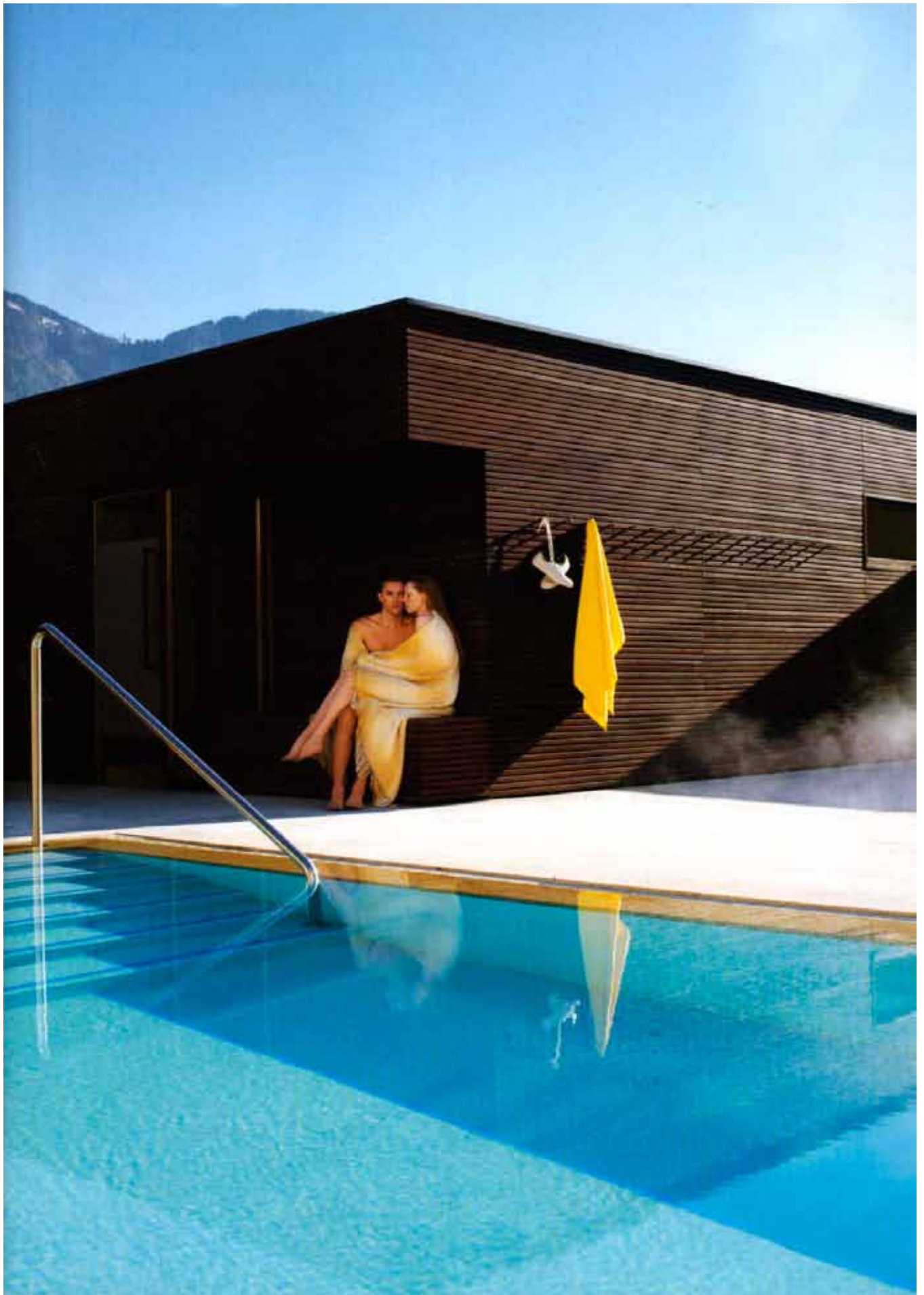


Splendour in the baths

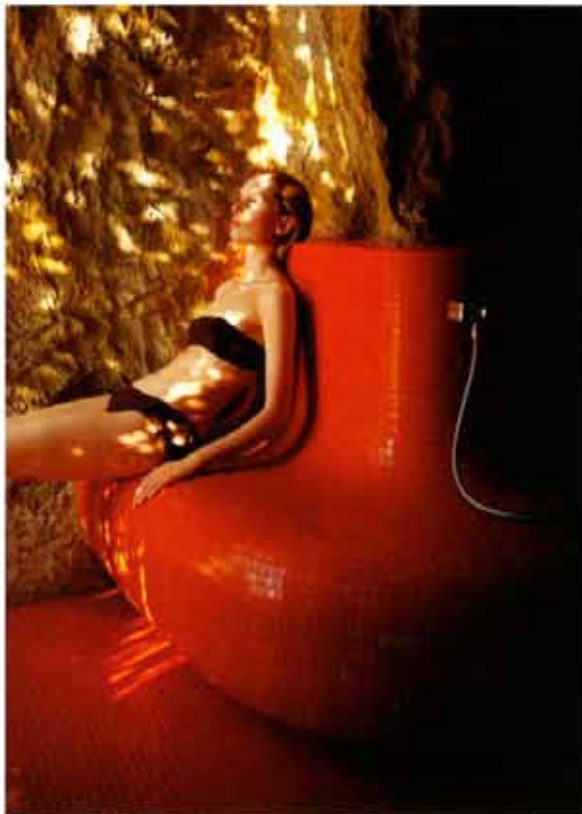
A new Italian spa sees a return to a more European mode of regeneration and another outing for Milan-based designer Matteo Thun

Photographer Kim Andreolli. Writer Nick Vinson





BEAUTY



Stunning, panoramic mountain vistas, 300 days of sunshine a year and a vast fund of salubrious resources, from spring water to hay, ensure there are few places more appropriate to seek out a cure for the ravages of our toxic lives than Merano, a small town in northern Italy. Nearby upscale mountain resorts Vigilius and Pergola are recent developments that have exploited the local regenerative and gastronomic advantages and now, consolidating the fresh wave of health tourism in the region, is 7,650 sq m of beautifully designed, state-of-the-art spa facilities in the centre of Merano itself.

Merano's history as a spa town actually began nearly 500 years ago when the health benefits of its mild climate were noted by Emperor Charles the Fifth. The South Tyrol town sits in the basin of the Tessa mountain range and enjoys a favourable microclimate. This, along with the local grape-, whey- and apple-based cures, great air quality and water from the underground springs, has attracted influential visitors from the mid-19th century to the present day (though a predilection for Eastern spa practices in recent times has tended to eclipse the appeal of European-style mountain cures, such as hay and sheep's wool baths, on an international level).

The new thermal bath resort, Terme Merano, is the result of an international design competition that was held by the local authorities. Berlin practice Baumann Zillich

came up with the winning masterplan, and local-born Milan-based designer Matteo Thun took care of the design, lighting and graphics. Spread over five hectares, the project has benefited from a €100m investment and aims to draw international visitors (once again) to the area or, as Thun puts it, 'to change Merano from a town name into a brand name'.

A new riverside piazza is flanked on one side by the recently completed 139-room Hotel Terme Merano, also designed by Thun, with direct subterranean access to the Terme. On the other side is a giant glass cube containing the baths. Inside the cube, Thun has fully exploited the unique position with seamless views of the surrounding mountains and lush alpine parklands. Suspended above the pools and relaxation areas are giant self-illuminating Plexiglas rings that spin slowly, reflecting light onto the glass walls and roof.

There are 25 pools in a range of sizes. Thirteen are indoors and include a spring bath, Jacuzzi, whirlpool, brine pool, and hot and cold plunge pools. Two of these pools flow outdoors, where an additional 12 lead away from the structure deep into the landscaped park. These include a whirlpool, bathing trail with spring baths, a flume, hot and cold pools, and an Olympic-sized pool floating within a giant lily pond.

The vast sauna zone (swimwear-free and mixed) includes a Finnish sauna, a Sanarium (offering a less intense heat),

a steam bath, a caldarium and a hay bath (a local speciality), as well as a snow room and various cold water pools and relaxation areas. Hot and cold plunge pools flank an additional sauna outside with park views. No watery means of corporal purification is unexplored.

The Spa & Vital Centre is the place to try out the wide range of treatments in one of the 26 specially designed rooms. Thankfully, there's not a single pseudo-Balinese speciality in sight. On offer instead are 'baths' of herbs, wine, apple or whey, as well as sand, sheep's wool or mountain hay, apparently a powerful detoxifier. Packs, wraps, peeling and massage also make use of apple, whey, grapeseed and salt. The quality and range of the treatments is exceptional, yet prices remain reasonable.

As well as all the spa elements, the resort also has a fitness area, providing a workout with a view, a medical centre offering general medicine, homeopathy, dermatology and nutrition, and an inhalation centre for radon treatments, using the radioactive water from the nearby Monte San Vigilio.

The Terme Merano doesn't only provide a lesson in how to successfully revive home-grown cures, generating a new breed of tourism, but it also shows how municipal projects can showcase cutting-edge design and offer services that are generally considered the preserve of the privileged. ★
Terme Merano, Piazza Terme, Merano, Italy, tel: 39.0473 252 000, www.termemerano.com

WATER WORLD

This page, a water-jet treatment room. Swimsuit, €25, by Prada

Opposite, far left, in the caldarium, steam and herbal essences cleanse and relax. Bikini, €295, by Gucci

Opposite, near left, giant Plexiglas rings spin and reflect light above the relaxation area

For stockists, see Resources, page 324

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