

I'm with Mr Sue Barker — there's been too much head-banging in my life

Kevin Maher



SILVERHUB

It's not often that I punch the air when I hear the results of a stranger's planning consent. But the news that Sue Barker's husband has been granted permission to raise the roof, literally, on their Gloucestershire cottage filled me with unbridled ecstasy. Finally, someone is fighting the good fight for us lankies.

Yes, Barker's husband has struck the first blow for people like me who are sick of banging our bloody heads. In his application to Tewkesbury borough council, landscape gardener and former policeman (he's "over 6ft") Lance Tankard said the ceilings were so low, and his head so often bashed, that he had twice received cuts to the skull and was once knocked out cold.

To this I can only say: "I hear you, brother." Although I have not been knocked out by any low-hanging ceiling beams, I have spent an indecent amount of time during my adult life savagely cracking my head on them. And I'm only 6ft 2in. I'm not exactly Shaq (Shaquille O'Neal being the 7ft 1in former US basketball star).

Human physiological evolution has clearly outstripped architectural change. I dare not tell you, for instance, about the many different and infuriatingly "sizeist" houses I have encountered through the years (as tenant, owner or visitor) that were obviously designed with members of the Lollipop Guild in mind. OK, I will.

The worst was a 16th-century cottage in Scotland. Oh, my, God. It was like a freezing, granite-based Wendy house with door frames barely rising above nose height. Medieval Scotland was, basically, Lilliput. I had to tape sheets of A4 on to every frame bearing Sharpie-scrawled alerts such as "Duck!" in the hope that I might pass from room to room without injury.

It worked only if you concentrated really hard and ducked really low. But any distraction, any invitation to pass between rooms that was vaguely "off-message" (ie not explicitly about the act of ducking), and you were doomed. "Darling! Quick! One of the kids has fallen over!" You might as well pick up a hammer and whack yourself



in the forehead. Because you're never going to duck for that. Or getting up in the small hours for the night-time baby feed? Hah! As if! It's hammer time!

There have been other houses since. Not just mine, but those of friends and acquaintances — typically in the countryside, often lovely listed buildings and barn conversions. I'd be invited down for a weekend of relentless and mildly agonising head-whacking. I have been known, on such occasions, to sit sulking in the car while huffing aloud: "I'm not going into that place until they do something about those door frames!"

Even my family home has one killer frame. It's from the bedroom to the bathroom and it's a strange step-down arrangement that can just about be negotiated on ten cups of coffee, maximum alertness and inch-perfect equilibrium. But at 2am, while trudging through, half-asleep, for an urgent appointment with the facilities?

Let's just say that the most common prayer at our place, regularly issuing forth from the darkness, consists of four or five paces, barefoot on carpet, followed by the unmistakable thwack of skull on stone and a full-blooded, "Oh, Jesus Christ!" But, alas, unlike the neighbours and Sue Barker's husband, he doesn't seem to be that bothered.

Manford's job pleas are no joke

I don't think "will get your parents back into full employment" was exactly what Tim Berners-Lee had in mind when he invented the internet. Yet the comedian Jason

Manford clearly had no qualms about transforming the web into a personalised career search for his dad when he recently appealed, via social media, for a job, absolutely any job, for his 62-year-old father.

The struggles of Manford Sr, who previously worked for the crown courts and yet couldn't get employed by Aldi,

had inspired Manford to act on his behalf. Naturally, this has provoked a flood of hysterical responses from fans and furries alike, many of whom have pilloried Manford, a successful — and one would presume, solvent — career comedian for not financially supporting his father. (Manford responded by saying that his father does

Get ready for some sexy chess

Oh yeah, baby. Hold on to your pantyhose. Chess is about to get sexy. Yes, the 900-year-old board game. Where you sit and move the pieces. And then sit. And move the pieces.

Yet we're not even talking about playing chess. Just watching it! World Chess, the body that runs international chess tournaments and streams them online to audiences of "hundreds of thousands", has big plans for the game. It is going to fit players with heart monitors to chart their stress levels so that those streaming matches can tell when the game is getting, you know, tense. "This makes watching the games so much more exciting," said Ilya Merenzon, the body's chief executive.

Now, I like chess and I always promise myself that I'll play more and try to fully understand, and use, the "en passant" pawn capture. But something tells me that you could stage a chess match over a shark-infested pool while the fuse from a stick of dynamite burns slowly down to boom-time and tarantulas crawl up the legs of the players, and it would still be the same as a spectacle: crushingly dull.

not accept "handouts from his son".)

It's a minefield. For every "senior" who wants to work, there are others — including my parents — who are happy with retirement. So what do we do? How do we legislate for everyone? And what's the truth about working life for the over-sixties? Well, I'll answer that last one first. In 20 years' time.

Feeling burnt

From 'executive' pedicures for CEOs to golf-themed massages, spas are coming over all macho. By Tom Chesshyre

At the Man Spa at the Adler Thermae hotel in Tuscany the options for burnt-out male executives who are seeking to re-energise are varied, sumptuous and occasionally eyebrow-raising.

After a morning's hike in the hills, recommended to get the circulation going, therapists suggest that tired chief executives have a gentle spot of "fangotherapy", which involves being wrapped in "bioactive volcanic mud containing zeolith". The mud is claimed to loosen muscles (20 minutes, €47, or £43).

Next up it's time for an "anti-ageing facial with vegetable melatonin extracted from sage, oats and yarrow". A snip at a mere €127 for 50 minutes — and very soothing. Then it's on to the Vichy bed, with water jets, for an "anti-stress massage" using almond oil (45 minutes, €79).

After lunch in the health-conscious restaurant, private fitness coaching is available (45 minutes, €60). Therapists advise booking a package of one-on-one classes during your three-night, €734 stay. And if, by the end of your holiday, you feel like indulging in a final rub-down, the Man Spa people suggest a good old-fashioned sports massage (50 minutes, €79) followed by a bath of cream infused with camomile, vervain and lavender (75 minutes, €125).

Spa holidays among men, not just exhausted executives, are booming. Across Europe and the UK — and particularly in the United States — hotel spa directors have recognised that there is a growing market for blokes who no longer regard spa breaks as the preserve of groups of female friends.

Health and Fitness Travel, a leading specialist in wellness breaks, says bookings by men have increased by 48 per cent in the past five years, with yoga, meditation and spa treatments now de rigueur and no longer regarded as "sissy". A decade ago men almost exclusively booked sports holidays involving golf, tennis or trekking. Now the focus is on "stress relief, weight loss and mind healing".

And it's not just metrosexuals signing up. "In today's ever more liberal society it's becoming more socially acceptable for men to escape on a wellness holiday where they can take part in masculine activities like boxing and HIIT [high-intensity interval training] before recovering with massages or spa treatments," says Denise Teh of Health and Fitness Travel, who believes there has been a societal shift away from "ultra-masculine men" to those who are aware of the benefits of pampering.

Overseas packages do not come cheap. A week's full-board trip with Health and Fitness Travel, including flights and an intense fitness programme of mountain biking,

boot-camp training, boxercise classes, massages and body exfoliation in the Algarve, starts at £2,080 per person at the Epic Sana Algarve Hotel. A seven-night stay at the Atmantan Wellness Resort in Hadashi in the Indian state of Maharashtra is from £2,835 per person with flights, meals, boot-camp training, massages and private meditation classes. Body wraps, reflexology, aromatherapy baths and "sleep ritual" baths are also available.

The trend for mini-breaks in the UK is especially strong, with hotels such as Chewton Glen in the New Forest and Cliveden in Berkshire targeting men seeking to de-stress. Over the past decade the hotels, which are part of the same hotel group, report an increase in bookings made by men on their own — as opposed to men booking with partners — from about one or two a month to 40.

However, Kerry Hudson, the spa director at Chewton Glen and Cliveden, believes that there remains a residual male reluctance to take the massage table. "There is still a stigma about going to spas among some men. Some gents get it; some don't. Those

The Arabian beard ritual is a 25-minute facial for hipsters

who don't are missing out," Hudson says. "In this world in which people rarely switch off, spas are a sanctuary."

Treatments are sometimes tailored to men with descriptions such as "deep-tissue massage" or "strong, powerful massage", but Hudson says: "A good therapist will simply adapt a facial or a massage to whoever they are treating. Facials for men, for example, aim to open pores to help with shaving."

Corporate groups have become big business for chichi spas in America. At the Cal-a-Vie health spa in southern California the proportion of men attending some spa events — booked by companies for team-building weekends — has been as high as 90 per cent.

Such packages are also offered at Chewton Glen, often with a lot of men taking them. "We add male-orientated options such as personal training and tennis," Hudson says. "You have to sell these breaks harder to gents who often want to be active. We have to teach them to relax."

But some male guests at spa hotels need little prompting. Hence the success, for example, of the Men's Grooming Club at Ockendon Manor in West Sussex. As well as deep-tissue massages using hot stones and lemongrass, nutmeg and rosemary (£99 for an hour), guests can luxuriate with "hot-oil acupressure scalp

out? Time for a manly facial



COVER AND BELOW: MARK HARRISON FOR THE TIMES MAGAZINE

David Aaronovitch

I admit it! I love a spa

By David Aaronovitch

I know it's incongruous: the thought of a tall, big man in the early September of his years lying cucumber-eyed on a recliner to a soundtrack of waterfalls. But I've done that. I've lain loin-clothed on matting, slathered in sesame oil and been walked over by a lady hanging by a rope. I've stared into my third successive supper of thin broth and longed for death. I've stood bare-assed in a ceramic cell and been cold-hosed by beefy Svetlana. I've had my neck cracked by a furry Turk in the dense fog of a hammam. I've done it from Crete to Miami and, if I had the dough, I'd be doing it right now.

Why? It's safer than skiing. People don't return regularly to the office from winter breaks with spa injuries. I've never met someone with his arm in a sling because he fell off a massage table during a strenuous chocolate wrap. But that's not it. Nor is it, for me, the idea of luxury or — vile word — pampering. By and large I don't buy the pseudoscience that the more earnest spas sell to their visitors. I have no great affinity for the fluffy towel and I loathe padding around in a bathrobe. Bloody things are always just one snag away from unwanted revelation. If I want to read I won't do it lying down in semi-public just because there are ten kinds of herbal teas on tap in the resting room.

I'm a spa junkie for three reasons, one bad, one good and one bonkers.

The bad reason is because I love the attention, unrequitable, of the usually charming attendants. I like their white-coated, medical-without-the-illness concern for my physical wellbeing. It's all about me as they knead, slap, wrap and bathe. It's like being a baby.

The good reason is that I am a creature of constant bloody thinking

I like the white-coated concern for my wellbeing

about stuff. Venezuela, the threat from climate change. Can a new party thrive? Brex-bloody-it. Theresa, Jeremy, Nicola and Vince. I think about this stuff *all* the time. But after 20 minutes of pummelling by an amazon named Desiree, I switch off my non-stop internal Radio 4 and let the body do the talking. The relief can be overwhelming.

Finally, I can't remember who said that we're all trying to climb back into the womb, but I think they had a point. A dark warm room. Your eyes closed. The feeling of a caring person moving around you. A repetitive, low noise coming from hidden speakers. A feeling of safety. Mama, I'm home.

An outdoor tub? Pure bliss

By Matthew Syed

OK, I confess, I love spas. I crave them. Not too often, mind. Nobody wants pure, unadulterated enjoyment every day. As Prince Hal put it in *Henry IV* Part I: "If all the year were playing holidays, To sport would be as tedious as to work, But when they seldom come, they wished for come..."

No, it is the occasional break with my wife, a couple of days away from the kids (three and four), that I crave. Pure tranquility, sitting on loungers by the side of the pool, then a few minutes in the sauna (not crazily hot, mind) and then, the greatest and most wondrous of luxuries, a massage.

I have loved massage ever since Dad used to give us a head rub as kids. We adored it so much that he used it strategically to improve our diets. Whenever we asked for ice cream or chocolate, he'd give us a straight choice: you can have a Twix or a massage. Chocolate and toffee-coated biscuit, even as a

pair, doesn't compare, let me tell you, to an Indian head massage.

I have sometimes, on a whim, and with a few hours to spare, treated myself to a massage in the middle of the working day. A quick phone call, an allocated time, and you can duck down into the basement of a city hotel and take your mind off the world. A morning of bliss (well, after you have dealt with the residual guilt, and provided you don't get a chap with a mobile phone alongside you in the changing room — how do they get a signal down there?). It is pricey, but fabulous.

My main criticism of spas is the damn music, what I can only describe as eastern mystical. I would happily go without music altogether. Oh, and I could also do without the pseudoscientific cant about how massage gets rid of impurities, or gets you in touch with your inner vibrations. There seems to be something about the spa industry that inclines its practitioners to

talk a very specific kind of bullshit. I am happy to just enjoy the sensation, and to allow my mind to switch off.

The key thing with a spa break, I'd suggest, is the absence of children. Not just your own, but those of other people. There is nothing worse than sitting by the pool with a four-year-old vomiting on your feet, or boasting to his mum about how he has just peed in the water. I love my kids more than life itself, but an absence every now and again, provided it is short, can make the heart grow fonder. Spas, to work in any meaningful way, should be quiet. Calm. Bereft of manic screaming.

One other treat worth considering is an evening spa. At Lucknam Park in Wiltshire, my favourite spa hotel, they have an outdoor hot tub and you can sit there on a frosty winter evening, gazing up at the stars. I once sat next to John Cleese there, but didn't dare talk to him. That's the other thing about spas: they are never the right forum to try to impress someone with your Basil Fawly impression.

