

Spa, spa away

The evolution of the hotel gym has reached a new level

DENISE CULLEN

have always struggled with saunas. The experience feels like being stuck in a traffic jam during a Queensland summer, when the car's air conditioning has conked out. But inside the Finnish-style rooftop sauna at the new Total Fusion Platinum health club in the Brisbane suburb of Newstead, I sit, and pant, and sweat, because fitness manager Sam Merza has promised that the warmer our body temperatures get in here, the easier the next step will be. The next step? That's the cold plunge pool. No, it is not easier. Sinking up to my neck in 10C water, I shiver, shake and fight to get my ragged breathing under control.

"That's one minute now," Merza says, tapping his smart watch. I leap out, relieved, but the fun's not over. Next is a jag in the infra-red sauna, followed by a spell in Australia's first health club snow cave. Chilled to minus 10C – somewhere between a household refrigerator and a freezer – the facility is a room the size of a large office lift, with metal walls and floor covered in icy snow. There's even a swing where the social media set can sit and take snaps before their phones turn to frosticles.

The fitness industry's recent shift in focus to include recovery as well as workouts has meant hot and cold contrast therapies are trending. According to Merza, they hasten muscle repair, promote mental resilience and unleash a tidal wave of feel-good hormones such as dopamine. But TFP is upping the ante even further with a minus-110C cryotherapy chamber joining a host of other hi-tech facilities across the club's 9000sqm, with two of the six floors dedicated to Technogym and other weights equipment. On the ground floor, a day spa features 14 treatment rooms offering cosmetic and medi-spa therapies. A couples therapy room is fitted out with Ayurveda bed and copper bathtub, and two around-the-clock spray tan booths.

On the rooftop, alongside the snow cave, saunas, and hot and cold plunge pools, there's a hyperbaric oxygen chamber, float tanks, steam room, salt cave and "healing lounge", all overlooking the 25m Olympic short-course magnesium pool, where those so inclined can indulge in an IV drip vitamin infusion, or choice of red light or ozone therapy. Or, as I do, slip on a pair of Normatec compression boots that inflate around workout-weary legs like giant blood pressure cuffs. From here, another set of steps leads up to a productive

urban farm complete with six Sussex hens with a penchant for escape (chasing chickens, I'm told, helps staff keep their daily steps up.) Sprinkled on different floors between rooftop and ground are 10 purpose-built studios, one of which is filled with Pilates Reformer beds, where we started this day in a haze of cramped calf muscles at the ungodly hour of 7.30am. Other studios are devoted to yoga, boxing or treadmill running.

Then there's the hypoxic altitude chamber, which can be dialled up to Everest Base Camp conditions, says Leon McNiece, who with wife Michelle founded the Total Fusion brand of health clubs. To pass through TFP's doors, you need to be a member, a spa client or a guest staying at either The Calile Hotel (just around the corner) or The Westin Brisbane. But gaining access to this palace of pleasure and pain is a sign of just how far hotel gymnasiums have come since they first emerged in the 1980s. No longer a jumble of creaking machines in a basement, hotel gyms, spas and pools have become points of competitive advantage, as the wellness tourism market surges to \$650.7bn globally each year, according to the Global Wellness Economy Monitor by the Global Wellness Institute.

"There are other businesses that provide some of the offerings we have at TFP, but none that we know of that provide such an extensive and thorough offering," says McNiece. TFP has launched 10 "wellness suites" in a neighbouring high-rise tower, for three to 11-night stays. A medical concierge will work with guests to tailor treatments, whether the "superhuman protocol", involving daily hyperbaric chamber sessions, or programs dedicated to fire and snow, recovery and sleep, or detoxification.

Fortunately, it's not all hard slog, with TFP's rooftop cafe and restaurant dishing out healthy cuisine and drinks, including those with alcohol, but a maximum of two. Freshly showered after my stint in the Queensland snow, it's where I head for a late breakfast – a smoothie laced with vanilla protein, chia seeds, and turkey tail and lion's mane mushrooms, followed by poached eggs on sourdough with avocado and feta. The sun is shining, my workout is done, and saunas, ice bath and snow room are behind me. Is this the rush of endorphins Merza was talking about? I could get used to this.

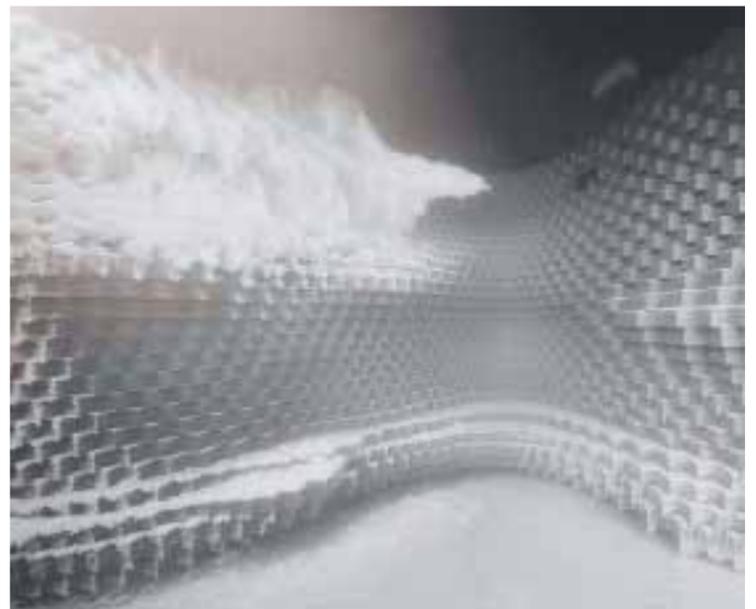
Denise Cullen was a guest of Total Fusion Platinum.

IN THE KNOW

Total Fusion Platinum also operates health and wellness clubs in Brisbane's Morningside, Chermside and Springfield, plus at Westfield Garden City, Mt Gravatt.

totalfusion.com.au

Hot and cold therapies, main; the snow cave, below



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The historic Villa d'Este, Lake Como, an hour north of Milan, has a sporting club with state-of-the-art gym, sauna, Turkish bath, tennis courts, three swimming pools and water sports on the fabled lake.

villadeste.com

SIRO One Za'abeel, Dubai is billed as a "holistic fitness and wellbeing" hotel. Its Fitness Lab offers private sessions, studio classes and signature programs. All guestrooms have "recovery cabinets" stocked with yoga mats, resistance bands and more; suite stays include in-room treatments. A sister hotel will open this year in Montenegro.

sirohotels.com

Like Brisbane's The Calile Hotel, the Equinox in New York made the 2023 World's 50 Best Hotels. Occupying 15 floors of a mixed-use tower, it's the first property from the Equinox luxury fitness brand. There's a gym, pools, and barrel saunas; in-room amenities include wellness accessories such as face masks and sleep supplements.

equinox-hotels.com