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Harper's

EDITED BY FRANCES HIBBARD

ESCAPE



The world's most beautiful **BOOT CAMP?**

Welcome to The Ranch, the five-star retreat that's equal parts gorgeous and gruelling ... plus best of the rest: five-star healthy holidays

MARK ADAMS PICTURES



Lose YOURSELF

The healthy holiday goes super-luxe with California's The Ranch at Live Oak, where portions are tiny, hills are steep and the results are indisputable. **FRANCES HIBBARD** walks the line

MARK ADAMS PICTURES

The peaceful pool at The Ranch at Live Oak, Malibu: yes, it's used for exercise also.

There's no two ways about it, I declare to the bemused salesman in a Sydney camping store, hiking shoes are ugly.

His take? You'd have to be extremely vain and more than a little superficial if, while clambering the trails of the Santa Monica Mountains, you're looking down at your feet.

But on the fifth day of my stay at The Ranch at Live Oak in Malibu, that's exactly what I'm doing. I've walked nearly 18 kilometres in four hours. The California sun is beating down with atypical ferocity for this time of year, and my three-litre CamelBak — the week's most on-trend accessory — is empty.

As I try to stride out the final few hundred metres, I can no longer focus on the glorious Sycamore Canyon scenery in the distance. Instead I'm utterly fixated on my right leg, which is paining angrily.

I swore after my last health retreat that I was done with punishing myself. A stint in the middle of the Austrian nowhere, ingesting Epsom-salt cocktails and meals of sad-looking solo steamed potatoes had cured me of my passion for extremism. Balance, I maintained, was the new black.

Time plainly heals all wounds — or in my case, helps develop some new ones — which is how I find myself minutes later in a grubby Malibu camping-ground amenities block, exercise tights around my ankles as I furiously rip off the knee brace I've unwittingly pulled too tight, cutting off circulation and causing my lower right leg to bloat to twice its size.

Let's be honest: I came here, along with most of The Ranch's 14 other guests, to shrink myself via its eight to nine hours of daily exercise and clean diet. Yet ironically, here I am with elephantitis.

Fortunately, as per the daily routine, I'm soon in one of the retreat's four rustic-chic massage huts, my leg being coaxed back to normal proportions by head therapist Steve Schwartz. The same cannot be said for my emotions: I burst into inexplicable sobs midway through my treatment. And I don't think it's just because my leg's suddenly having a fat day.

Steve says he could see it coming the minute I hobbled down the steps from the Ranch gym. But this is a man who sees with a particularly experienced pair of eyes. Both he and fitness director Marc Alabanza spent many years at nearby California detox institution The Ashram — with its similar program of rigorous exercise and calorie restriction plus the added pain of shared bedrooms and communal bathrooms — before defecting to The Ranch for its opening last September.

The Ranch's owners Alex and Sue Glasscock might have created a supremely beautiful retreat up here in this isolated former children's recreation camp in the Malibu hills, all recycled timbers, elegant lines and staggering attention to detail. But detoxing ►



Gorgeous and grueling: the central area at The Ranch.



Bedrooms are elegantly restrained with timber floors and soothing tones.



Rosemary hedges and water features dot the retreat.



Chef Kurt Steeber's vegan cuisine is stunning but not plentiful.

in such an intense manner remains a process, says Steve, and at The Ranch, it's a process from which you cannot escape, although that's not to say a few don't try. One fellow guest, a life-coach type, maintains a mantra for the week of "happy and healthy", which in reality is code for "I don't really do exercise". And a straight-talking Texan I'll fondly call Bloody Mary admits to having a few of her namesake cocktails on her flight over from Dallas, in spite of the pre-arrival volley of "four weeks to go, three weeks to go" emails advising you to extract all the enjoyable things from your diet — caffeine, artificial sugars,

Bernadin, are sample-size couture all the way: beautifully crafted and intricate creations, but precious little of them. Day one's organic granola breakfast is so small I bend over my bowl to confirm its existence. A blink-and-you'll-miss-it lunchtime bowl of parsnip puree can't be more than three tablespoons, while Thursday's "crab cake" of red lentils, celery, red capsicum, carrot, macadamianut cheese, seaweed and bay seasoning on a bed of spinach and topped with searcess is a (miniature) work of art.

Mornings are spent on four to five-hour treks of the scenic I-can't-believe-I'm-in-LA Santa Monica mountains, complete

downtime — a shower for me, a power nap for the clever — it's back to the gym for stretching, a strength/core class, a pool workout and yoga, bookended by a brief window best used to plunge between the bitingly hot jacuzzi and icy pool or risk total muscular paralysis.

There's no mobile phones or WiFi at The Ranch and detoxing from devices is encouraged as part of the process. I relish the lack of contact, and fall into a glorious rhythm of solo hiking with just the two-way radio issued to all for company and diary writing at night. Fellow guests are not as enamoured with this disconnection, and morning trips to our hike start points are punctuated not only by fantasy-food talk but a cacophony of beeps as stashed phones find a network.

The week plays out: endless mountains, minimal snacks, the forging of friendships along the trail, the occasional detox tantrum (on my part at least). But come Saturday, it's all down to the numbers: 85 kilometres of trail, a further 25 hours in the gym, not even a handful of almonds, a lot of salad. I shed almost four kilograms and lose 28 centimetres.

Steve Schwartz tells me The Ranch is like childbirth. Everyone's thrilled when it's over, and no one's keen to do it again any time soon. But I'm actually frightened to leave the comfort, controlled portions and isolation and later sit in my room at Santa Monica's Fairmont Miramar hotel, butterflies in my stomach at the thought of reconnecting with reality.

Eventually I exhale and turn on my computer, where 630 emails await. I log straight off and venture outside, in search of a raw vegan restaurant. ■



The gloriously sunlit communal dining area.



MARK ADAMS PICTURES; ULPOTHA; NICHOLAS J. SCAURRO; PHOTURROS, 2009

Guests pay a daily visit to one of the rustic-chic massage huts.

Healthy holidays

Embrace the spa-cation with *BAZAAR's* guide to the best places for revving up your fitness regimen, taking time out for a detox or daring to disconnect.

BY FRANCES HIBBARD



Chill pill: Ulpotha Sri Lanka

Ulpotha is part eco village, part yoga retreat, part ayurvedic healing centre. Check into this charming Sri Lankan retreat that is located at the foothills of the Galgiriya mountains for the recommended fortnight to enjoy absolute escapism: shared mud huts, monkeys, no computers but plenty of yoga, daily ayurvedic treatments and nature galore. Gloriously isolated and utterly relaxing. 0406 595 033 (in Australia); www.ulpotha.com.

Exotically yours: in:spa Europe/North Africa

A converted monastery in southern Spain; your own villa in Marrakesh, a chateau in Provence. London's in:spa retreats take you to some of the world's most exotic locations for inspiring exercise-focused spa holidays that include yoga, circuit classes, running, hiking, sea kayaking, personal training, daily massages, nutritional consultations and healthy eating. Choose from classic in:spa weeks or in:spa in:tense, to really up the ante. +44 20 8968 0501; www.inspa-retreats.com.



Côte d'Azur cool: La Réserve Ramatuelle France

It doesn't come any more glam than the La Réserve Ramatuelle on the Côte d'Azur. Its six-day action plan is all about working on the body beautiful, possibly in preparation for baring it all at nearby Saint-Tropez. Treatments focus on toxin elimination, cellulite reduction and lymphatic drainage, with hikes on the cliff tops, fab Mediterranean vistas and spa treatments by La Mer aiding your transformation. +33 4 9444 9444; www.lareserve-ramatuelle.com.

Tough(ish) love: The Farm The Philippines

Launch into a healthier version of yourself at The Farm at San Benito, in Batangas, just two hours away from Manila. This award-winning medi-spa sits on manicured grounds and cocoons guests in luxurious suites and villas while immersing them in a detox program that combines raw vegan cuisine, supplemented with lashings of exercise, spa therapies and alternative and medical treatments. +63 2 884 8074; www.thefarm.com.ph.