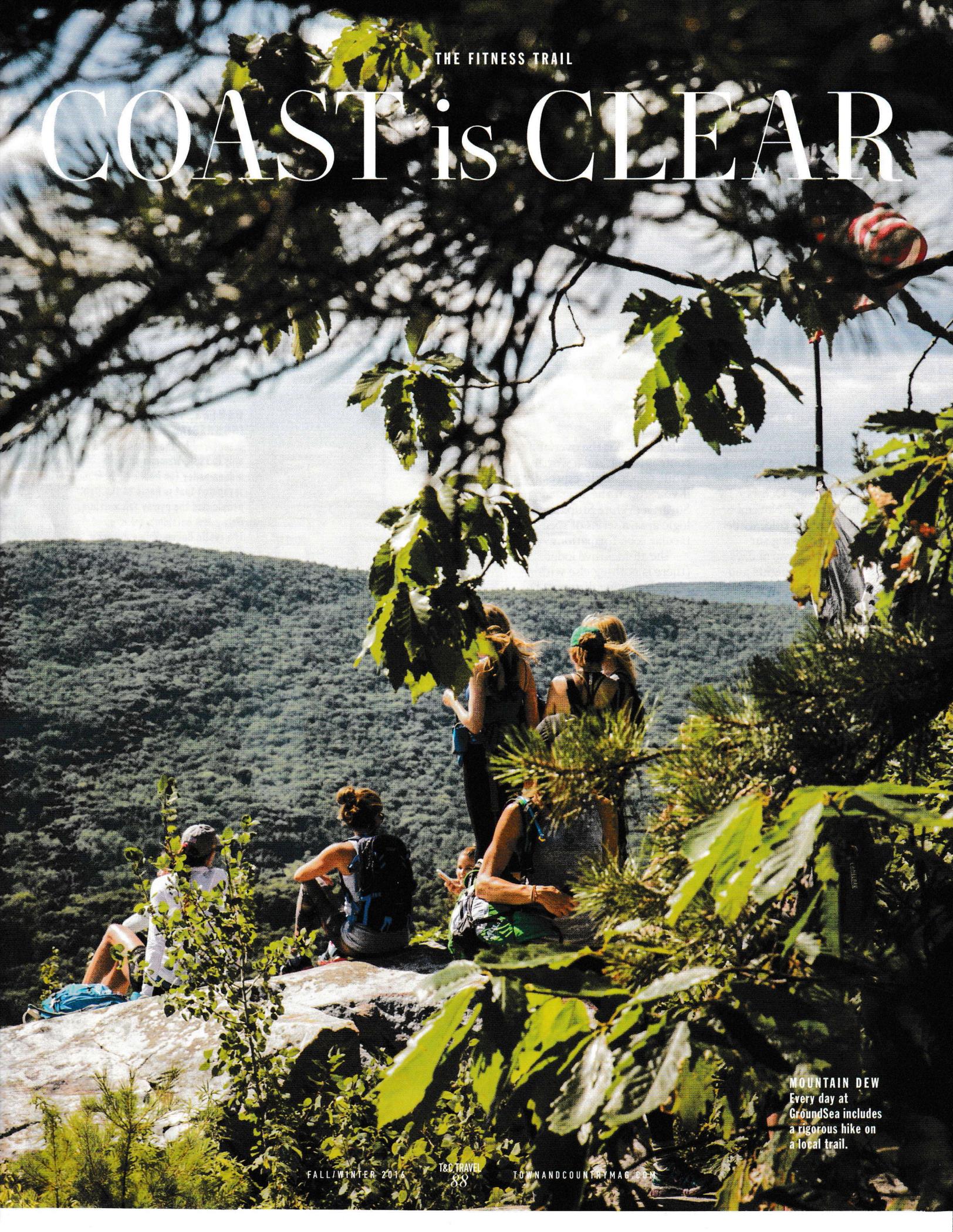




THE FITNESS TRAIL

# COAST is CLEAR

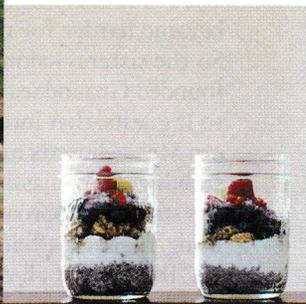


**MOUNTAIN DEW**  
Every day at  
GroundSea includes  
a rigorous hike on  
a local trail.

FOR DECADES, WOMEN HAVE FLOCKED TO CALIFORNIA RETREATS TO CALM THE MIND AND EXHAUST THE BODY. CAN A NEW ENTRANT IN THE BERKSHIRES GET THEM TO STEER EAST?



By Alex Kuczynski  
Photographs by Victoria Hely-Hutchinson



**WELL JAR**  
Breakfast: a coconut yogurt and berry parfait. Left: Model Iskra Galic on one of the hikes.

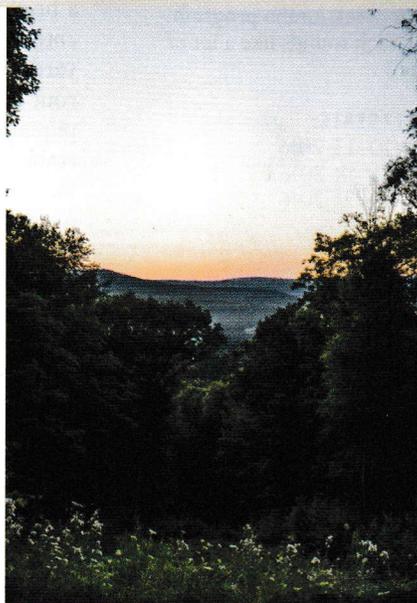


**HOME GROWN**  
Guests stay at the Mountain House, a private estate in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, with valley views.

**T**wo words have come to define fitness and adventure in the past few years: six almonds.

Six almonds is what they feed you at the Ashram in California as you near the middle of a 12-mile out-and-back hike. Six almonds is the dread-inspiring ration you get on a 10-mile ascent in the Santa Monica Mountains with the guides from the Ranch Malibu, the pricier, newer, more comfortable descendant of the 40-year-old Ashram. (You might get an orange, too.) Six almonds and a luxurious pinch of black salt is the gut-sinking halfway treat you get at the Ranch 4.0, an offshoot of the Ranch Malibu, as you struggle through a luxuriant forest, all 11 horrible miles of it.

The “starvecation” fitness camps in the United States, of which the Ashram is the undisputed funky Earth Mother, differ in



philosophy but share similar schedules. The day usually begins with crack-of-dawn meditation, followed by 10 to 14 miles of hiking, yoga, multiple exercise classes, and, if you're lucky, a massage. The food is vegan. There is no alcohol. No caffeine. Most visitors on a seven-day retreat can expect to lose at least five pounds, and I once witnessed a man lose 18 pounds in less than a week. Every day at breakfast you could see that his face had gotten thinner—in a day!

At most of these retreats there is no cell service, no computer, no WiFi, no TV, no checking e-mails. The only thing you check is out, for seven days. And in order to check in you pretty much have to be in California.

Many visitors become repeat customers, drawn by the physical challenge, the promise of mental clarity, and the allure of weight loss and the so-called “afterburn,” a kind of metabolic lift that stimulates weight loss. I am a repeat visitor to the Ranch because I like to challenge myself physically, and hiking a half-marathon every day is a pretty steep challenge.

New Yorkers Tracy Gaslow and Denise Kleinman were among ➡

➔ the faithful, making the cross-country rejuvenation trek twice a year for the past 12 years. But with busy lives and families, it became harder for them to go west as often as they wanted to. So the sisters—along with an equally fit friend, Hollie Levy—founded GroundSea Fitness, a four- or five-day program, limited to 11 guests, that integrates rigorous hiking through scenic western Massachusetts mountain ranges with meditation, yoga, fitness training, daily massage, and mindful eating—but with a slightly less stringent approach than the Ranch’s or the Ashram’s. (For one thing, there is caffeine.)

“This type of all-encompassing wellness and detox retreat was not available on the East Coast in a meaningful way,” Kleinman told me. “We wanted the benefits of a rigid detox program in a less severe, more luxe environment. It’s detox without deprivation.” Unlike its West Coast counterparts, GroundSea doesn’t ask participants to cut out alcohol, sugar, caffeine, or processed foods before their arrival. They do, however, keep guests to a modest caloric intake; the snack during a hike is a piece of fresh fruit or...a whopping seven almonds.

“We just didn’t want to have to hustle to California every time we needed to recharge,” Gaslow added as we hiked a part of the legendary Appalachian Trail, which runs 2,200-miles from Georgia to Maine. The contrast between us—with clean sport capris and brand-new CamelBak water bottles—and the men and women we saw through-hiking the entire trail was striking. We were showered and had manicures. They looked rugged and hewn by their journey, and, despite the fact that you could smell them coming 200 yards away, they looked positively transcendent.

Shrewdly, the sisters enlisted alumni from the Ashram and the Ranch Malibu to kickstart GroundSea. (The name is a nautical term that refers to a kind of storm that is known for its ocean-cleansing properties.) Marc Alabanza, GroundSea’s director, spent several years at both the Ashram and at the Ranch Malibu, which is where I met him three years ago. Memorably, I had neglected to eat breakfast and also forgotten to pack my orange and the six almonds for a 10-mile out-and-back hike, and by mile eight I began to hallucinate. (I did, however, have plenty of water.) I imagined a homeless man emerging from the brush with a ham and yellow mustard sandwich on untoasted Wonder Bread. He said that if I had sex with him he would give me the sandwich. I’m ashamed to admit that I don’t remember any other time in my life when I have been so hungry, and I admit that I would have joyfully prostituted myself for that imaginary ham sandwich. Alabanza was waiting for me at the trailhead with a pack of Emergen-C powder, shaking his head. Every other hiker had rolled in already, some three hours earlier than I had. I told him about my vision.

“Well, did you accept the sandwich?” he asked as I greedily lapped up the Emergen-C powder as if it were a Thanksgiving feast. I think I laughed. A week later.

Alabanza—a veteran of the Ventura County Sheriff’s Search and Rescue Team 3, an expert hunter, and an adventure runner who has been known to race for 32 hours straight—runs a tight ship. The women also enlisted Alexx Guevara, a vegan chef and nutritionist who has also worked at the Ranch. While not everyone will stay to oversee GroundSea day-to-day, the inaugural team did lay out a solid foundation, and the retreat is staffed with top-tier local guides, fitness coaches, and massage therapists.

To put GroundSea through its paces, I brought three fitness-minded friends with me. One of my hardcore ski buddies, Anna Geist, a mother, caterer, and fitness instructor who just posed in her first bikini-fitness contest, flew out from Sun Valley, Idaho, to join us. (She is famous there for doing spread eagles, on skis, in a bikini. When she tore her ACL, MCL, and menisci doing it, she was laughing the entire time.) Will Hanigan, an Australian pearl diver, a jewelry designer, and an exceptional athlete with whom I have shared some serious hikes in California, and his girlfriend, Iskra Galic, an Australian-Serbian model, joined me on the drive up from Manhattan. We stopped at Dunkin’ Donuts. Iskra has this thing about their hash browns. (She’s a model. Unlike regular human beings, she gets to have a thing about hash browns.)

Over two days we did a mini version of the retreat. Upon arrival, chef Katie Gilligan, one of Guevara’s protégés, served us a lunch of heirloom tomato gazpacho and butter lettuce with walnut cream, rose-radish sprouts, squash, and marinated purslane and gave us a brief nutrition lecture. Purslane—apparently the new kale!—is common in our back yards as a weed that most gardeners want to rout out, but it is exceptionally nutritious, piquant, and, unlike almost any other vegetable, a great source of an essential omega-3 fatty acid found mostly in eggs and grass-fed meat. (Gilligan recommends trying purslane in a pesto; because it is so juicy it creates a low-fat sauce without needing a lot of oil.)

After we filled our CamelBaks, Alabanza led us on a dreamy afternoon hike through miles of ancient oak and maple forests—so verdant and aromatic it put me in mind of the Japanese ritual of shinrin-yoku, or “forest-bathing”—up a humbling mountainside to Flag Rock, a quartzite ledge with soaring views of the Housatonic Valley, the Taconic Range, and beyond. In cold weather this hike can be done on snowshoes, I was pleased to learn. Then I thought, In cold weather? No thanks. (This is one advantage of the California retreats.)

After fitness and yoga classes—and the all-important massage—we sat down for dinner: zucchini squash boats filled with quinoa and white beans, topped with a roasted beet and parsley puree with cashew cream. I ate mine and looked around wolfishly for more. Will ate everyone’s leftovers. Our reminiscence of Dunkin’ Donuts’ hash browns was interrupted by the call to the evening activity: essential oil acupuncture and crystal chakra therapy.

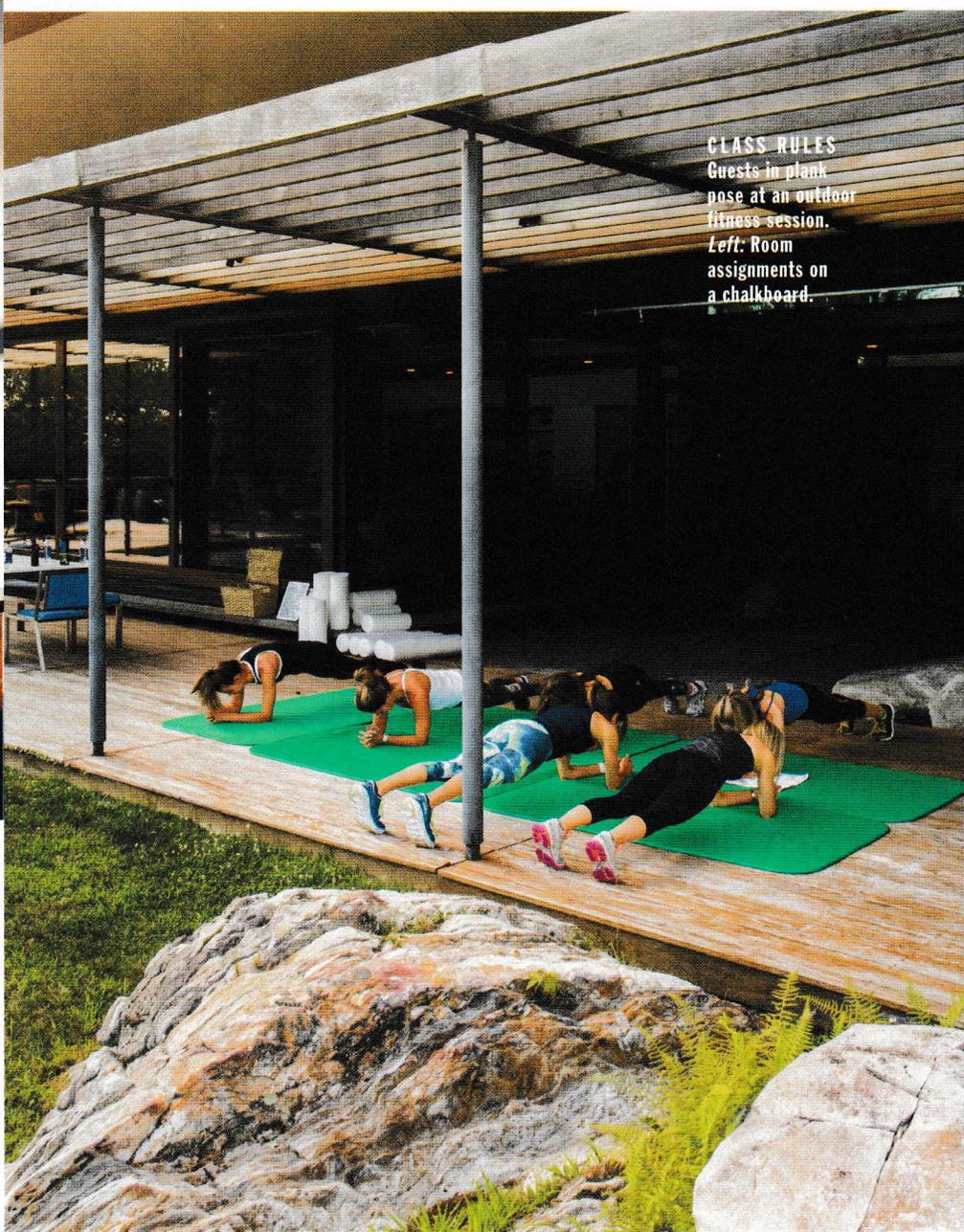
TIPS & TACTICS

WELL & GOOD

GroundSea offers four- and five-day retreats, and until its permanent location opens, in late 2017, it is hosting stays at an estate in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, for 11 guests at a time. It is the kind of fitness adventure that will be relished most by both those who are already in fairly good shape and those who don’t mind paying for it: A five-day retreat is \$6,000. (To compare, the Ashram’s seven-day program costs \$5,200, complete with a roommate you may not know, and the Ranch Malibu’s six-day program is \$6,800 to \$7,200, depending on the season. The Ranch also has a four-week jumbo program for \$25,160, which sounds like a lot of blisters to me.)

UPCOMING RETREATS:

- November 10–13, 2016
  - November 14–18, 2016
  - November 18–21, 2016
  - May 15–19, 2017
  - May 22–26, 2017
- GROUNDSEAFITNESS.COM



**CLASS RULES**  
 Guests in plank pose at an outdoor fitness session.  
 Left: Room assignments on a chalkboard.

Five acupuncture needles were placed in each ear, my temples bathed in lavender oil, and a crystal was suspended on a silver chain over my belly. “Allow the blue light to let you speak your truth,” Kathi Pickett, a healing-touch practitioner, admonished. “Allow the blue light to rest in the throat chakra.” We were then supposed to see if, after proper meditation, our crystals swirled more mightily in a clockwise direction over our bellies. Mine dangled a bit from side to side. My throat chakra was definitely jammed up. Anna and Iskra seemed to inspire their crystals to swirl dervishly over their chakras. Pickett, who also leads classes at nearby Canyon Ranch, told me I needed to work harder on my chakra meditation, and rather than sound like Jeff Goldblum in *Annie Hall* (“I forgot my mantra”) I decided not to pursue the rest of the conversation. (“Why are my chakras listless?”) Anna leaned over and whispered, “Your chakras need more purslane.”

Although GroundSea is modeled after the California retreats, there are some differences. The Ashram and Ranch are run out of dedicated residences (the Ranch is at Hollywood western star Hopalong Cassidy’s ranch in the Malibu mountains), while GroundSea has a more semipermanent space in a breathtaking private house with a sweeping valley panorama and comfortable, modern rooms. But as with any rented home, there are the tell-tale tiny suggestions of other lives. When I couldn’t sleep I rifled through my cabinets and—apologies to the owner!—drained a bottle of NyQuil, which did not help the detoxification process.

The next morning, after my deep, medicine-induced sleep, I was

pleasantly surprised. At GroundSea you get a Bulletproof coffee with breakfast, a whirled-together mix of coffee, grass-fed butter, and coconut oil, which is to regular coffee what Adderall is to, well, regular coffee. Nor is GroundSea strictly vegan; they do serve eggs. (They also serve bone broth in the afternoon.) And, unlike at some of the other retreats, there is cell service, and you can bring your laptop. The question is, do you want to?

This morning breakfast consisted of a gluten-free parfait—layers of coconut yogurt, fruit, and granola topped with goji and other berries and hemp—served in a mason jar. After a rigorous round with coach Alison Miller (a self-described former chocoholic) doing weighted curtsy squats, renegade rows, mountain climbers, and Russian twists, we were off to the AT, as hikers call the Appalachian Trail, for a nine-mile hike. We had majestic views, an energizing climb, and just enough almonds. «