

TRAVEL



Marc Alabanza leads a morning hike at the Ranch at Live Oak. Above: one of the Malibu resort's guest cottages.

Tough Love

In Malibu, an intensive fitness retreat promises—and delivers—results

By Geraldine Campbell

Even though I've read the materials and stuck (mostly) to the monthlong preparation for the Ranch at Live Oak, a new retreat in California's Santa Monica Mountains, I'm not fully prepared for the rigor that the weeklong program entails.

I've spent the night at Santa Monica's beach-chic Fairmont Miramar, where I've had my first slip-up, indulging in meat, dairy, sugar and wine at the hotel's farm-to-table restaurant, FIG. But the next morning, I'm back on track with a massage at the property's Exhale spa, followed by a quick trip to REI for last-minute items and a stop at Chipotle for a vegetarian bowl. And I'm feeling good about the last week, to be honest: If I haven't eliminated coffee, wine and sugar completely, I have at least cut back significantly.

Marc Alabanza, the peppy program director who seems to run on good vibes, does not seem as pleased. During our preliminary interview, Marc

makes it clear that I will no doubt feel the effects of detox in the next few days. Headaches, nausea and shaking are all to be expected, he tells me, almost gleefully. Welcome to boot camp.

Days here start before dawn with morning stretching, a light breakfast and a grueling 10-mile hike—come rain or come shine. And on the first day, the morning mist turns into a slow and steady downpour that doesn't let up. Back at camp, we are cold, damp and broken, and the thin, vegetable soup, while delicious, doesn't quite fill the gnawing void in my stomach. Still, after a quick nap, it's on to the afternoon activities: a series of mandatory core and strength training classes, pool workouts and yoga. It's all made possible by daily massages, which you can only hope come during the dreaded TRX hour (a form of cable suspension training).

It doesn't hurt that the property is gorgeous. Set three miles from the Pacific, the ranch includes 14 rustic

but elegant cabins, an airy main house with steel-pane windows, rough-hewn wood floors and roaring fires, and a pool pavilion for those rare moments of downtime. More importantly (at least to me), chef Kurt Steeber can make a strict, 1,500-calorie vegetarian diet feel like eating at Robuchon (almost).

Still, this is not a luxury retreat. The goal here is detoxification—and like it or not, you will learn to live without your daily vices, at least for a week. The upside is that guests here lose both pounds and inches. For me, the pounds (four) were not as satisfying as the inches (16, cumulative), but the real gain was in the sense of accomplishment and the slow realization that, by midweek, the hikes that had felt grueling on Day One were now, dare I say, enjoyable. ■

The Ranch at Live Oak, \$5,600/week all-inclusive, 310-457-8700, TheRanch-Malibu.com.

3 More Healing Destinations in the Southwest

Ojai Valley Inn & Spa

This Spanish colonial resort an hour and a half north of Los Angeles is the opposite of the Ranch at Live Oak. There are no rules, no agenda—just 220 acres of stunning natural beauty. The recently renovated rooms have four-poster beds, terra cotta tiles and locally made art. It would be enough to leave windows open and inhale the air here, but don't miss classes at the artist's cottage or a trip to the spa, where signature treatments incorporate local, organic ingredients. *From \$300 a night, 805-646-1111, OjaiResort.com.*

Canyon Ranch

The go-to destination for de-stressing has a new weight-loss program. Launched last February, the physician-led program in Tucson, Ariz., incorporates daily physical activity, group discussions and lectures, and customized eating plans. Bottom line: you will lose weight. If you're more interested in unwinding than shedding pounds, opt for a three-night personalized retreat, which includes more than 40 daily fitness classes, access to the 80,000-square-foot spa complex, and three healthful meals a day. *From \$3,590/three nights all-inclusive, \$7,730/week all-inclusive, 520-749-9000, CanyonRanch.com.*

Sanctuary At Sedona

There are only five rooms at this year-old retreat, where the focus is on spiritual, emotional and physical health. Stays are customizable. For example, morning sessions with a psychologist might be followed by meditation with Sarah McLean, Deepak Chopra's guru, or a meeting with a traditional shaman, or an afternoon hike. Intended for those seeking transformational changes in their lives, the program is about healing through both Western medicine and alternative practices. *From \$6,900/week all-inclusive to \$27,600/month all-inclusive, 928-639-1300, TheSanctuaryatSedona.com.*



The Yoga Dome at Canyon Ranch.