

bon appétit

HEALTH

Real Talk: How I Survived Beach Body Bootcamp

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Welcome to the Ranch at Live Oak Malibu

I'm a writer of food, travel, sex, and all things that feel good. But at the end of last December I actually *chose* to trade in my fun, indulgent, lucky life for a week of sweat, deprivation, and delirium at the [Ranch at Live Oak Malibu](#). This means that, for the low, low price of \$6,200 a week (\$5,800 in the off-season), I subjected myself to a "results-oriented" boot-camp retreat, during which I was to hike 14 miles a day on restricted calories without Internet, texts, TMZ, or any other toxins to come home to. (Although there *was* the thrill of the [possible celeb sighting](#).)

The thing is, I had been feeling a bit unbalanced--I live the thirty-something, single and mingle existence of late-night meals, dirty martinis and mild self-destruction--and I knew a challenge like this could set me straight. Plus, the Ranch had just enlisted a young chef named Rob Dalzell, a guy my super-healthy, fussy west coast friends raved about. Rumors of bird food were replaced with promises of beautiful produce, and I felt a journalistic obligation to try it out for myself. The only question was: Could I do it?

Preparation

I am a cheat and a liar.

Days before checking in, I get a psyched-up call from Alex Glasscock, the owner.

"By now, you should be completely weaned off all sugar, caffeine, and alcohol..."

"Um, absolutely!" I choke, dropping my cheese danish like a dirty weapon. With one hand on my creamy coffee, the other on my hungover head, I hang up the phone, and sigh hard. *What have I done?*

Sunday

I've never been a fearful woman, yet I arrive in Los Angeles very freaked out.

Physically, I'm up for anything. But touchy feely is for tourists. And yoga? Yuck. Also, I'm a freelance writer. What if Graydon Carter finally calls?

The group, all ten of us, meet at the Fairmont Hotel in Santa Monica for a ride to the Ranch. The gang, a mix of singles and couples, is collectively fit. As we drive away, any pre-conceived image of a fat camp goes out the window...down the Pacific Coast Highway with the stoned surfers and soft sun.

A Tarzan-like creature, program director Marc Alabanza, walks us through the premises. Imagine a rugged campsite gone Restoration Hardware. Alabanza leads us from the votive-lit exercise haciendas to the woodsy massage huts to the lush organic farm to our individual bungalows, which are bare-boned but upscale and serene (i.e. no flat-screen TV, yes Frette sheets). He reminds us that, save an emergency-only business center, there's no Internet or phone service allowed. I really hate this part of it, which means I really need this part of it.

We each get measured and weighed (I'm 5' 6" and 118 pounds, same as always), take a fitness test, and eat four cashews. We ease into the program with an afternoon mini-hike (three miles). And finally, we're served some sublime stuffed squash--a small taste of the veggie heaven to come--and sent to bed at 7 p.m.

And I have the most wonderful sleep since the womb.

Monday

We are woken with chimes at 5:30 a.m. for a morning stretch. We do a million downward dogs and eat some homemade granola.

Next: the hike. It's three hours long and 12 miles hard. Southern California's steep, panoramic views--ocean, mountains, mansions and all--are stupendous (though not for the Vertigo-inclined). I'm second in the lead, trampled only by a type-A++ celebrity real estate broker.

Mid-hike, we get a handful of almonds with a pinch of black salt, which might as well be a pint of Haagen Dazs with a pinch of heroin.

Back at the Ranch, lunch is a crunchy kale Caesar salad. Then weight training, core training, yoga, massage, and an ultra-satisfying dinner that looks exactly like scallop risotto but is really roasted celery root on sunflower seeds. Plates are licked; eyes are glazed. And the world goes on without us.

Tuesday

I dream of Alcatraz and chocolate croissants and wake up with a caffeine-withdrawal migraine. They said this would happen (the trippy dreams *and* the withdrawal).

Today's four-hour hike is scary-steep. The only way out is through, I remind myself, still ahead of the gang. No rest for the wicked. Three hours and four carrot sticks in, I'm hungry and headachy.

By dinner, over pumpkin faux-fettuccine, I'm a little less *Private Benjamin* and a little more Buddhist Monk. I scribble in my journal, "Three days without feeling wanted or needed by editors, men, or friends. Does *any* of it even matter?"

Wednesday

Clive Owen fed me corned beef in my sleep.

Another monster hike followed by push-ups, sit-ups, and self-reflection. Did I mention we get nightly massages? My masseur is a healer, saint, and psychic named Steve. He says highly emotional people like me tend to react instead of respond to everything the universe throws our way. He urges me to release this exhausting "fight or flight" mentality. (But I'm scared of who I'll be without it.)

Dinner is a smoked eggplant soup, one of the best things I've ever put a spoon to.

"Recovering our innocence," I announce to the table. "That's what we're doing here."

Who is this woman? And worse: Why do I like her so much?

Thursday

My limbs are sore, and I still hate yoga, but I'm happy here. Is this Stockholm syndrome?

On the hike of all hikes--five hours of murderous uphill trekking, minimal downhill recovery time, and nonstop panting and sweating, during which I think I actually might die--I see some unfamiliar climbers ahead. I stop to slow my heart rate and catch my breath.

The leader comes my way and asks, "Are you with us, *The Biggest Loser*?"

What I want to say: Do I *look* like I'm with *The Biggest Loser*?

What I do say: "Namaste."

I trade in my afternoon nap for time with the aforementioned Moosewood-meets-Malibu chef, Dalzell, a health-food sensation and all-around sweet person. Poking around his kitchen of whole carrots, celery stalks, ginger, dill, and dates, while gossiping about the New York food scene, I finally miss home.

Friday

It's our last major hike, and it's meditation-style. As we push through mountains, overlooking the ocean, we're asked to privately repeat a self-affirmation.

But I'm not sure what to say. I'm moving slower today, stopping and letting others pass me (for once), six miles in, to eat my snack, half a Granny Smith painted with almond butter. As I tie my fleece around my now-much-tighter torso, the sun sending freckles to my face, a voice inside says, "Everything will be okay."

So I tell myself that.

Again and again and again.

Saturday

We are weighed and measured before departing. The number on the scale is the same, but that's because I'm throbbing in muscle. (When I get home a few days later and my limbs are less inflamed, I'm six pounds lighter.) I lost 14 inches, mostly in my upper body, my skin is dewy and translucent, and I honestly feel like my strongest, most stable self.

Then, all cut and illuminated, I am released back into the real world: Twitter updates, TV meetings, triple lattes, temptation.

Wandering around Santa Monica, I order a celery-pineapple-kale juice at [Nekter Juice Bar](#). I inhale and exhale in between sips. Yup, I'm *that* girl. So what?

Then I stretch my body, reach for my iPhone, and feel ready to respond to this great life. And no, Graydon Carter did not call.

Kale Caesar Salad

Serves 4

INGREDIENTS

1 cup raw cashews
1 clove garlic
1/4 tsp. salt
Juice of 1 lemon
1 big bunch kale, stemmed, torn, and "scrunched" to soften
1 red onion, shaved thinly

PREPARATION

Put first four ingredients in a small food processor and blend until smooth, adding water as necessary to get a creamy dressing consistency.

Toss the kale with the dressing and to with shaved red onion.

Note: This recipe has not been tested by the Bon Appetit Test Kitchen.

Alyssa Shelasky is the author of [Apron Anxiety: My Messy Affairs In and Out of the Kitchen](#).