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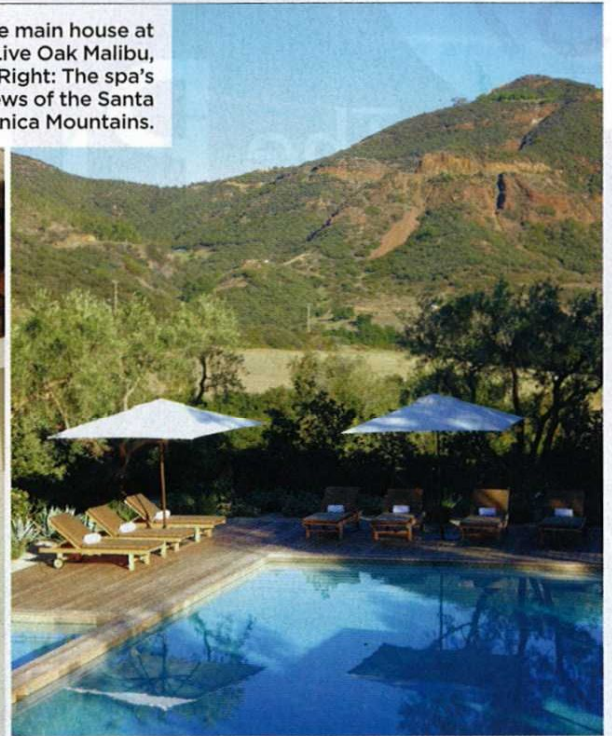
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The lounge of the main house at the Ranch at Live Oak Malibu, in California, left. Right: The spa's pool, with views of the Santa Monica Mountains.



MALIBU, UNPLUGGED

FIVE 1,500-CALORIE DAYS, 60 MILES OF HIKING, DOZENS OF WARRIOR POSES (AND NOT ONE E-MAIL), BUT WHO'S COUNTING? **KATE BETTS** CHECKS IN TO CALIFORNIA'S LATEST SPA BOOT CAMP, THE RANCH AT LIVE OAK, AND TURNS OFF HER IPHONE—WELL, ALMOST.

LIKE SO MANY GADGET ADDICTS IN this age of digital gluttony, I am hooked on the narcotic of electronic content: Twitter, RSS feeds, Facebook, Tumblr, e-mail. On vacation, in the subway, while brushing my teeth, I seem to be logged on, constantly serenaded by a symphony of iPhone dings and clicks. My addiction, if you could call it that, drives my kids crazy. "You walk down the street like this," says my son, squinting at an imaginary iPhone, mock horror on his face.

He got me to thinking how good it would be to leave the digital cacophony behind and go somewhere where I could actually complete a thought. In an age of hyper-connectedness, there's something almost romantic about being alone and

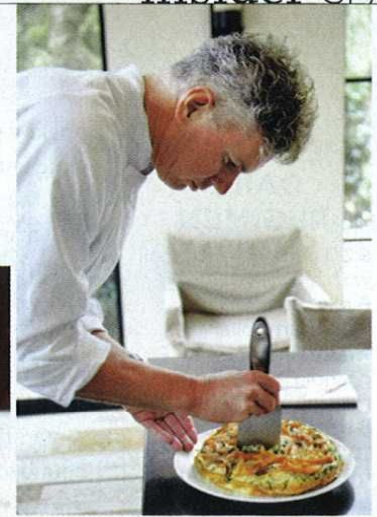
unpestered by IM's. And there certainly would be no harm in losing the extra 10 pounds I'd put on by Twittering instead of working out. You don't burn a lot of calories typing with your thumbs.

As it happened, a friend e-mailed a blurb about a new "boot camp" called the Ranch at Live Oak Malibu that promised to help guests get "off the grid." So, on a late-fall morning, I flew out to California. The only preparation I had, apart from the occasional spinning class, was a phone call from the ranch's owner, Alex Glasscock, who warned that it would be ugly the first few days if I didn't wean myself off caffeine, diet soda, sugar, and alcohol immediately.

I was still floating in a reverie of denial when I arrived at a big white wooden gate high in the Santa Monica Mountains. Set on 120 acres with an organic garden, a saltwater swimming pool, and a "massage village," the ranch looks more like a five-star hotel than its name suggests. Each guest has his or her own cottage decked out in beautifully weathered wood that Glasscock's wife, Sue, reclaimed from a scaffolding company. Plush beds are swathed in Alta Pampa blankets and the »



AUSTERITY DELUXE Clockwise from right: Chef Kurt Steeber prepares his signature vegetable frittata; his roasted acorn squash stuffed with quinoa and black beans; some of the desert succulents that dot the 120-acre property; one of the 14 simple but chic guest rooms.



limestone bathrooms come with Turkish towels. The place was made for design aficionados who would gladly deprive their bodies for the sake of some personal improvement—but wouldn't like to compromise their aesthetic standards.

At the main ranch quarters, staff members were waiting to size me up. Marc Alabanza, the relentlessly upbeat program director with an indomitable spirit, cautioned me in the pre-interview he conducts with each guest upon arrival. "Toxic Tuesday might be rough," he said after reviewing the questionnaire I'd filled out, in which I'd inventoried my consumption of artificial sweeteners, alcohol, caffeine, red meat, and processed food.

But how bad could it really be? I had climbed Mount Kilimanjaro (13 years ago) and endured the militaristic dawn-to-dusk Ashram program in Calabasas, California—10 years and 20 pounds ago. The Ranch's "no options" program was similar: guests handed over their watches, powered down their cell phones, and relied on the staff to lead them through an intense schedule of four to five hours of hiking followed by yoga, fitness classes, and a massage.

After each of the 10 guests in my group—nine women and one man—had been weighed and measured, we all sat down to a dinner of acorn squash

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stuffed with quinoa and black beans. The ranch chef, Kurt Steeber, a veteran of San Francisco's Zuni Café and the Ventana Inn & Spa, in Big Sur, is not a vegetarian, but he has an alchemist's ability to infuse dull vegetarian staples such as green lentils and cauliflower with zesty flavors. He's also remarkably inventive when it comes to finding replacements for such high-calorie no-no's as cheese and cream sauces. At every meal, the food was delicious—what little of it there was.

Alabanza went around the table and asked each of us to describe our goals for the week. I wasn't the only prisoner of the grid. Most of the group had paid the ranch's high weekly rate of \$5,600 just to step away from the daily grind. Carey, a blond mother of three from Darien, Connecticut, dressed head-to-toe in Lululemon, confessed she needed a break from the chaos of scheduling »

THE RANCH'S DAILY REGIMEN

- 5:30 a.m.** Wake-up call with chimes
- 6 a.m.** Stretch class with foam roller
- 7 a.m.** Breakfast of granola and almond milk in the ranch house
- 8 a.m.** Begin hike
- 10:30 a.m.** Snack of three almonds and one dried apricot
- 1 p.m.** Return to the ranch for lunch: black-bean-and-quinoa chili
- 1:45 p.m.** Nap/free time
- 2:30 p.m.** TRX class or ab/crunch class
- 3:30 p.m.** Yoga class or calisthenics by the pool
- 4:30 p.m.** Massage
- 5:30 p.m.** Aqua aerobics in the pool
- 7 p.m.** Dinner of roasted cauliflower with tomatoes and mushrooms
- 8:30 p.m.** Bed
- Total Calories** 1,500

hockey practice and playdates. Daphne, an energetic entrepreneur from Santa Monica, had threatened to quit her job from exhaustion but instead struck a deal with her boss that allowed her to unplug for a week once every three months. Another fortysomething mother of two from Palo Alto, named Trina, was obviously not looking to lose weight—she was a marathon runner; she merely wanted to check in with herself.

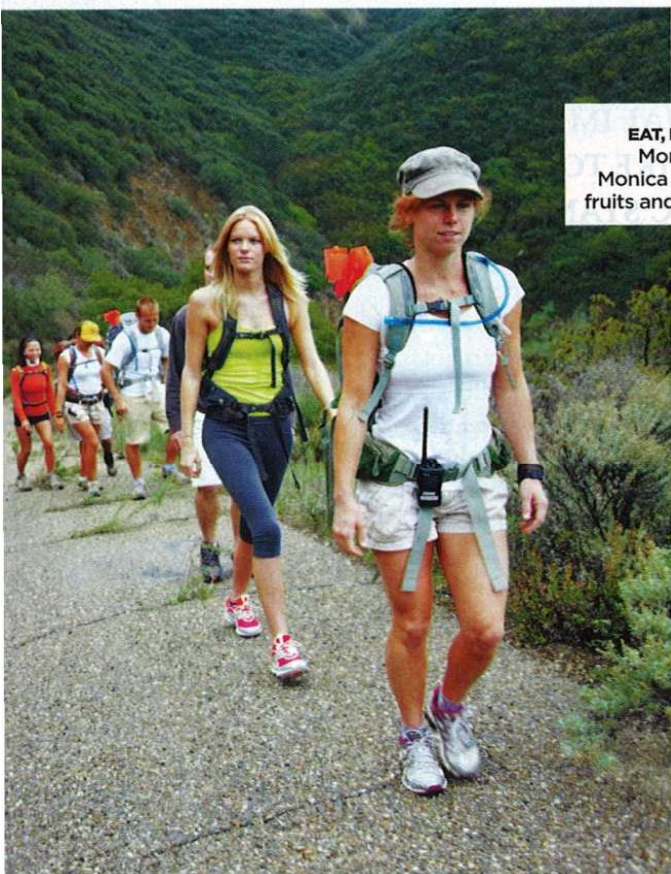
On the desk in our rooms alongside a leather-bound journal was a list of Ranch Values to guide us through the week. They suggested we try to connect with nature and remove “can’t” and “won’t” from our vocabulary. Alabanza encouraged us to remain in the present. “Don’t think about ten pounds from now, don’t think things like ‘When I get off this hike, I’m going to have the biggest cup of coffee,’” he said. The therapeutic value of this was both long-term and emergency advice for the ordeal of the next day.

WE WERE AWAKENED AT 5:30 A.M. BY THE sound of chimes and a knock at the door. After wrestling with a foam roller in stretch class and devouring a microscopic slice of a frittata, we piled into the van and set out for Sandstone Peak. Glasscock joined us for the first hike, along

with Alabanza and two other staff members. It all started off rather bucolically as we walked through a grassy valley of undulating, sun-dappled hills. Three of the guests moved to the head of the pack and quickly disappeared beyond the horizon. I tried to keep in step with Glasscock, grilling him about his previous life as a real estate finance guy and his passion for fixing up dumpy Malibu beach houses. But before long, talking was a strain. After about an hour and a half, the group stopped under the canopy of two ancient California oak trees. “Are you all right?” somebody asked me, concerned by my bright red face and the spreading sweat stain on my shirt. Oh, yeah, fine, I said, even though I was already exhausted.

Only an acute fear of rattlesnakes and mountain lions kept me from lagging too lamely at the rear as we began to climb up, and up, and up. Trina, the Palo Alto sprinter, and the rest of the speed demons in the group had passed me long ago. Three hours in, my legs began to shake. The switchbacks seemed to go on forever. Every 10 steps I stopped, gasping for breath, reaching for branches to steady myself. When I finally stumbled into an open, rocky, lunar-like landscape, I spotted Alabanza coming down the trail. I must have looked like someone who was about to vomit up several quarts of water and a frittata because he stopped to give me a pep talk. “Your body is detoxing,” he said with a friendly smile. “It’s all those sugar substitutes. It takes a while to get »

EAT, PRAY, HIKE From left: Hiking Monday’s 12 miles in the Santa Monica Mountains; snacks of dried fruits and nuts; a daily yoga session.



them out of your system.” It didn’t take that long, as it turned out. I began to find a rhythm: walk, stop, vomit, sit; walk, stop, vomit, sit. The trail seemed like punishment for having logged so many hours in front of a screen. I would have sworn off Wi-Fi forever just to be done with the hike.

Back at the ranch I was too exhausted to eat. I crawled into bed and collapsed, only to be awakened 45 minutes later by a knock on the door: time for the abs workout. Sit-ups? Crunches? Are you kidding?! That night Alabanza consoled me by telling me that Monday was really the toughest day. Everything would get easier from here.

And it did, sort of. Toxic Tuesday turned out to be less debilitating. On the hike up from the Pacific Coast Highway, we crested a ridge shrouded by the cool morning mist, then descended into a valley that went on for miles, and I entertained escape



One of the spa’s resident goats, Bean, left. Right: Returning to the ranch.

fantasies. By Wednesday, I was so weary, I completely lost track of time. Food and rest—not Twitter—were all I could think about. Alabanza kept urging us to “strive to learn who you are in this process.” I was learning that I have a let’s-get-this-over-with view of hiking. I was learning that I am the sort of person who does not think three almonds is a decent snack. I am also the sort of person who is prone to counting

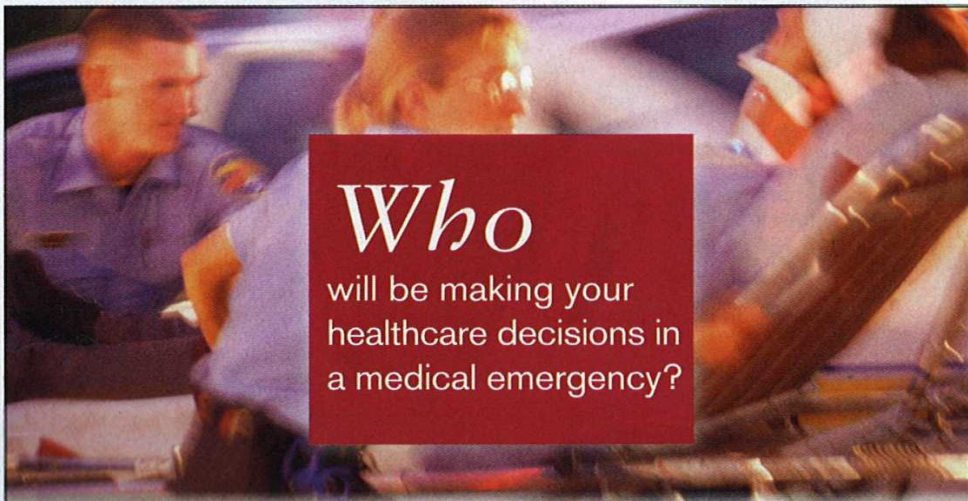
the number of forks laid out at each place on the dinner table to figure out how many courses we will be served. Nothing is as painful as self-knowledge.

Then I had a relapse.

Several guests had been surreptitiously checking e-mails at the end of hikes while they waited for stragglers like me. So I, too, stashed my iPhone in my pack on Thursday morning and headed off to stretch class. We would be hiking above the Pacific Coast Highway again and having lunch on a beach where there was perfect cell phone reception. No harm could come from one quick update.

As we headed toward Mugu Peak, above the Pacific Ocean, I found my pace and my place at the back of the pack with a lovely woman from Dallas named Kelley. “I’m not too proud to be the last in line,” she said, as we climbed through the fog, crossing a ridge and then back up another big hill. Every once in a while we’d shout to each other the food we were craving—“Pizza!” “Chopped salad!” “Starbucks Venti skim latte!” The mere thought of coffee kept me going for a few hours, but by mile five we were cursing again. It’s when the body is spent and you have to keep going for another five miles that you find your resolve, strength, and endurance. When we finally arrived at the bottom of the hill, on the PCH, we ducked under a tunnel and emerged onto the beach. And just as we reached Alabanza and the rest of the gang, my phone rang. Loudly.

“Let’s put our electronic devices away when we are together as a group,”



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Alabanza said, tapping me on the shoulder. I was mortified, like an addict caught with a drink or a smoke. It turns out that detoxing from carbs, caffeine, alcohol, and artificial sweeteners is not necessarily the hardest part of the ranch's program. For many of us, the most difficult habit to break is the Pavlovian desire for updates at every ding and tweet of the gadgets that ride us. Being present can be more challenging than climbing any hill.

BY THE FINAL DAY OF HIKING, I FELT strong, clear-minded, and giddy at the idea that I'd survived this extreme physical test. We had logged more than 60 miles of hiking and umpteen crunches and yoga poses in the course of a week—all on less than 1,500 calories a day. But nobody was counting until we stepped on the scale.

On the last morning I woke up before the morning chimes and sat down to write a letter to myself, an exercise they ask each guest to do. The real romance

of a place like the Ranch at Live Oak is not necessarily the solitude, but the elation of losing 10 pounds, I decided. After breakfast and a hike around the ranch, we said our good-byes and headed to the airport. Weirdly, I felt no compulsion to check my e-mail. But at the gate I reached into my handbag for my ticket and saw my iPhone light up with a voice-mail message. My daughter had called two days earlier to say she missed me.

We can disappear into a program and rediscover ourselves through extreme physical exertion, but ultimately we are always plugged in, attached, connected, no matter what. I was 10 pounds lighter physically when I left the ranch, and mentally I was 100 percent clearer, but I was also ready to reconnect. +

888/777-2177; theranchmalibu.com; one-week retreat from \$5,600 per person, all-inclusive.

Kate Betts is the author of Everyday Icon: Michelle Obama and the Power of Style (Clarkson Potter; \$35), out this month.

ADDRESS BOOK: BOOT-CAMP SPA RETREATS AROUND THE GLOBE

CALIFORNIA

The Ashram
The original austerity boot camp incorporates lengthy hikes and 1,000-calorie vegan days. Famous guests: Oprah Winfrey, Ashley Judd, Cindy Crawford. 818/222-6900; theashram.com; one week from \$4,500 per person, all-inclusive.

FLORIDA

Pritikin Longevity Center & Spa at the Doral Golf Resort
This new Miami facility with world-class golf courses uses Pritikin's strict regimen of weight loss through detox.

800/327-4914; pritiakin.com; one week from \$3,950 per person, double, all-inclusive.

BAHAMAS

Physique 57 at One&Only Ocean Club
New York City and Los Angeles gym rats swear by Physique 57's program of exercise, stretching, and interval training to turn their bodies into lean, mean, muscle machines. The four-day program is now offered twice annually at the One&Only Ocean Club. 866/552-0001; physique57.com; four days from \$1,450 per person, double.

SPAIN

Sha Wellness Clinic
A macrobiotic holistic spa on the Mediterranean that focuses on weight loss and kick-starting a healthy lifestyle. The saltwater floatarium and organic, locally sourced wines are favorites of Kylie Minogue and Naomi Campbell. shawellnessclinic.com; one-week detox program from \$3,260 per person, double, all-inclusive.

MALAYSIA

V Integrated Wellness at the Andaman, a Luxury Collection Resort

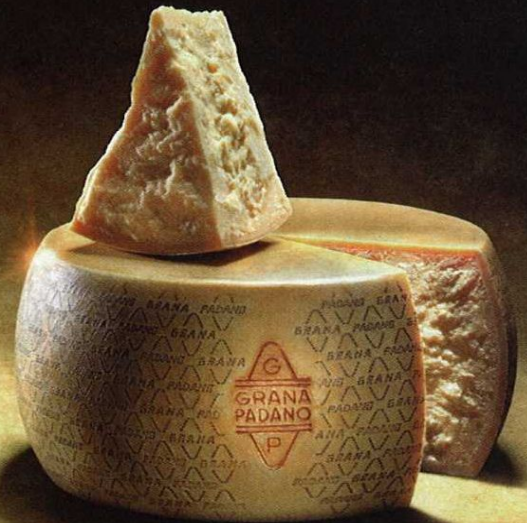
Set on Datai Beach, on Langkawi, VIW emphasizes yoga and mind-body connections. A butterfly garden and outdoor bathing rituals put guests in touch with Mother Nature. vintegratedwellness.com; from \$359 per night, including spa treatments and yoga.

THAILAND

Chiva-Som
Popular with European fashionistas who come here to detox. 66/3253-6536; chivasom.com; one week from \$3,873 per person, double, all-inclusive.



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