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Back in the SADDLE

A visit to a legendary Malibu ranch helped this city slicker lose some pounds and find her bliss. *By Kate Betts*

IT COULDN'T HAVE BEEN much worse. The last time I'd visited the Ranch at Live Oak Malibu, a boot camp based on a program of daily 12-mile hikes, I had struggled mightily with what they like to call "detoxing." Blithely ignoring the Ranch guidelines to ease off caffeine, diet soda, sugar and alcohol before my visit, I had spent the better part of a week gasping for air and vomiting along the trails that ring the Santa Monica Mountains. The physical price I had paid was as steep as those damn trails. And yet, the Ranch's "no options" program worked: By week's end I was 10 pounds lighter and 12 inches smaller.

Of course I went back. But the second time around my intention was to do the Ranch right: no vomiting, no cursing at the guides and no peeking at my iPhone. Part of the Ranch program includes getting off the grid—generally disconnecting from the outside world. Upon arrival, guests are asked to hand over their watches, cellphones

and any sense of pride they might have previously possessed.

Set on 120 acres with an organic garden, a massage "village" and a saltwater pool, the Ranch is the brainchild of Sue and Alex Glasscock, two former Malibu developers who became fitness junkies after living in the area for nearly 20 years. Once home to a kids' camp called the Lazy "J" Ranch, the place is now a coveted destination for stressed-out urbanites who can't seem to unplug from their iPhones and Blackberys, but are desperate for some solitude and some weight loss. Guests each get their own cottage designed by Sue Glasscock and decked out in reclaimed wood, Alta Pampa blankets and limestone bathrooms.

Thanks to resident chef Rob Dalzell, a veteran of Aman Resort Group, guests are also treated to a vegan menu that is

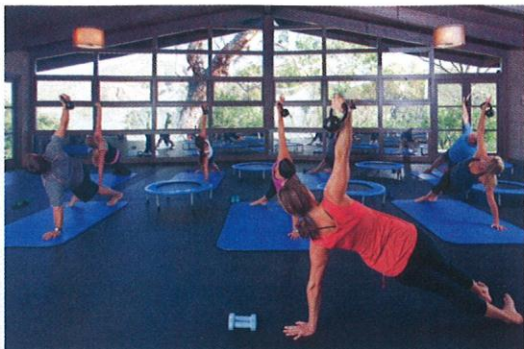
both spare and delicious. On both of my trips to the Ranch, I found myself constantly scanning the table settings in an attempt to estimate how many courses would be served. To say the portions are small is an overstatement, although on my second visit I noticed that the meal now included a salad and the portion size had increased somewhat. The Ranch menu

works because it infuses dull vegetarian staples like kale, quinoa and cauliflower with spicy flavors.

The fitness program, which the Glasscocks developed with Marc Alabanza, a veteran of the Ashram in nearby



“Upon arrival, guests are asked to hand over their watches, cellphones and any sense of pride they might have previously possessed.”



Ranch at Live Oak's ab-busting "plank pose" at morning yoga; La Roma guest room exterior

Calabasas, consists of early morning yoga or stretch class, six hours of hiking, several hours of TRX class, circuit class and water aerobics or circuit training, all capped off by a luxurious hourlong massage. In the course of a week guests log more than 60 miles of hiking, countless crunches and pushups, and

sun salutations—all on less than 1,500 calories a day. Since it has been open, the Ranch has hosted more than 725 guests from 16 countries, many of whom lose an average of five to eight pounds in a week.

More than weight loss, though, the real goal of the Ranch is to allow guests to get as far away as possible from their overscheduled, stressed-out lives. In a small leather-bound journal next to each bed, a list of “Ranch Values” encourages guests to relinquish responsibility and let the guides do all the planning. They also suggest guests heed the “unplugged” policy. “The world will still be there when you get back,” it says. At meals and on the trail, Marc continually encourages everyone to remain in the present and to remove words like *won't* and *can't* from their vocabularies. This last bit is a lot harder than it sounds.

Surprisingly, my second trip to the Ranch was easier than the first. On

Day 1, as we hiked through a grassy valley of undulating hills toward Sandstone Peak, Marc explained that he constantly updates and tweaks the program. “If we don't, then people come back a second and third time and game it,” he said.

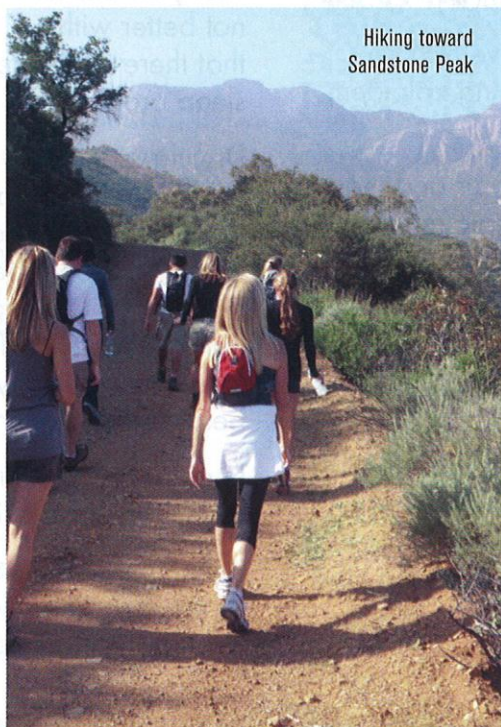
The hike that day, which had been close to 14 miles long on my first visit, had been changed to what they call an “out and back” in hiking parlance—meaning individuals hike as far as they can and turn around, instead of continuing for 14 unforgiving miles. The Ranch had also added another exercise room—called the “romper room”—and filled out

the program with nutrition talks as well as acupuncture sessions and meditation.

Some things haven't changed. Deprivation remains an underlying tenet of the Ranch program. By Day 4, after many meals of chickpea and celery root purées, oatmeal with almond milk, and pumpkin purée with sunflower seed risotto, I was craving something salty and crunchy. And yet I didn't feel as sluggish as I had when I arrived. The detox process worked. And daily wrestling matches with the TRX machine helped strengthen my abdominal muscles, nothing short of a miracle.

By the end of the week, I was ready to go home. On the last day I woke up with the roosters at 5:20 a.m. and sat down to write a letter to myself—an exercise that is also part of the program.

Thinking about what I'd accomplished and how much stronger I felt after a week at the Ranch, I wondered if I would return. Our group—both men and women from New York, Chicago, Dallas and Los Angeles—had gotten along so well we discussed reserving spots the same time next year. For \$5,600 there are many other places I would love to go—Rome, Paris and the Galapagos Islands. And yet, there's no price for the sense of clarity and calm one can achieve through intense physical exertion and silenced iPhones. ■



Hiking toward Sandstone Peak