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MAY 2014

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Body Builders



Luke Kearns, assistant program director

Trish Mazure, garden manager

Judd Faircloth, chef at the Ranch

Meredith Haaz, chef at the Ranch 4.0

Stephanie Williamson, general manager

Ted McDonald, yoga director

The Ranch at Live Oak is a sort of alternate universe, where the hikes are tough, the kale is tender, and some of the world's most high-powered control freaks learn to let go. By Judy Bachrach



On Williamson: Cotton top from Velvet by Graham & Spencer. On Gerasimova: Supplex Lycra top and pants by Beyond Yoga. On Newman: Cotton-blend top from Velvet by Graham & Spencer. Groomer: Kendra Richards. Sitings editor: Kelly Atterton. Details, see Shopping Guide.

Steve Schwartz, massage director

Alex Glasscock, cofounder and co-owner

Kate Hamm, program manager

Model Cassey Gerasimova

Sue Glasscock, cofounder and co-owner

Melissa Newman, guest-relations director

Marc Alabanza, program director

Every week, 16 resolute, ambitious, type A individuals, the majority of them usually women, find themselves hiking the Malibu mountains at a smart pace for up to four and a half hours. Their backpacks contain 100 ounces of water, and their muscles engage in a frenzy of protest. These morning ascents, many of them steep, are punctuated midclimb by six almonds. Then the climbing resumes.

As actress Carey Lowell noted last spring during a challenging slog: "You say to yourself, 'I cannot take another step!'" A pause. "And then you realize you've hiked 53 miles in a week!"

Sloan Barnett, a prosecutor turned writer, says, "Everything at the Ranch is quite extreme—it is not for the faint of heart. It's the amount and length of those exercises that make it hard." Hard or not, she flies there every year, always in January. "Because that's the new year," she explains. "The new me!"

These women are not alone in their jumbled feelings of frustration, exhaustion, astonishment, and pride. Television directors, venture capitalists, authors, models, health advocates—all of them flock to the Ranch at Live Oak/Malibu, a luxurious boot camp where \$6,500 pays for the privilege of rising at 5:30 A.M. every day for a week. After waking, guests perform, as instructed, around 45 minutes of stretching or yoga. Breakfast is possibly leafy (kale slipped into a fruit smoothie), possibly crunchy (granola doused with almond milk).

Afternoons provide little letup. Ranch guests exercise for about three to four more hours: There's TRX, a form of body training used by Navy SEALs, along with an arduous type of yoga that requires holding poses for up to three minutes. Release comes only when their names are called out (four at a time) for massages—a long wait for those,

like New York City event planner Norma Cohen, who quickly discover that until called, they are expected to continue exercising. "I was crying, tears running down my face. I said to myself, 'What am I doing here? This is torture!'" Cohen recalls.

Release comes swiftly, however. Before he massages any guest, says Steve Schwartz, the massage director at the Ranch, he inquires about a variety of issues with the goal of correcting problems that predate those long hikes. "We tailor our massages based on guests' answers," he says. Kinks kneaded, the exhausted all dine—on, say, crabless "crab cakes" (artichoke patties spiced with Old Bay). Or vegan chili made with quinoa that tastes, as Dallas exercise fan Julie Lieberman puts

it, "like it's not quinoa. The food there is just delicious."

But it's also restrained. The Ranch is a compilation of nos: no caffeine, no wine, no gluten, no dairy, no sugar, no cell-phone activity (in theory), and, to the horror of certain guests, no TV. Guests aren't offered distractions. They have a schedule. "A huge aspect of the Ranch is gaining our VIPs' trust on every level," says Alex Glasscock. "All of our guests are leaders. Some are in charge of making life-or-death decisions. The way we gain that trust is we don't sugarcoat the process. We spell it out." Those who skip an exercise discover fairly soon that all truancy is written down ("I didn't get a medal," one yoga-averse guest observes. "I got that noted on my report card." Yes, guests receive a report card at the end.)

"I'm a director," says Tricia Brock, a director of episodes of TV series including *Girls* and *The Walking Dead*. "In my job, I have to make millions of decisions every day, and at the Ranch, it was at first jarring to have everything planned, but ultimately it was nice to have someone else in charge." From the start, she adds, guests are told they will have the most successful time if they trust the program.

Which doesn't always come easy.

"I cheated my first year; my friend brought along a protein bar," says Juliet de Baubigny, a venture capitalist who arrived at the Ranch in its early days and then, like a fair number of the alumni (35 percent, say the owners), returned for more—in de Baubigny's case, every year. Nonetheless, she recalls, that first time was tough: "I felt really underfed. There was very little food at the Ranch," she says. De Baubigny found herself, as she puts it, "so hungry and grumpy" that she and Barnett (who helped smuggle in the protein bar) cut it into tiny slivers, which they nibbled in the ensuing days. But over time, the fare improved to such an extent that snacking is now rarer.

(Regardless, most misbehavior is ignored by Ranch authorities. "We don't check bags on a guest's arrival, and we don't check body cavities," says Alex Glasscock. "We're building a relationship with the guest. If someone feels the need to bring food, that's their journey!")

Happy Returns

If a guest happens to have a birthday during her stay, chef Meredith Haaz marks the occasion by making "my own kind of ice cream. It's a cup of almond milk, six dates, and one banana blended in a Vitamix and poured into ice cream molds. Each pop has 15 to 25 calories.

Or we make a truffle with dates, almond butter, and half a teaspoon of vanilla, blend it in a food processor, and then roll it in coconut. That's 40 to 50 calories each."

But the fastidiousness governing life at the Ranch should really come as no surprise. The rules are handed down well before any guest arrives. Melissa Newman, who runs guest relations, sends upcoming visitors a battery of emails, asking, for example, "Those 12 Diet Cokes you've been drinking—where are we now with that?" Sometimes these nudges strike home: "The week before, I cut out all alcohol and caffeine," says Holly Parmelee, a freelance writer, "because I heard they are the hardest to withdraw from." But just as often, Newman's prompts are ignored. "Oh, of course some people lie about what they're eating or drinking," she acknowledges. "Some of them say, 'No, I'm not drinking caffeine, and I exercise every day.'"

The result of such blatant mendacity? The phenomenon known at the Ranch as Toxic Tuesday, so named because on the second full day of a delinquent's visit, there may be nasty consequences of withdrawal from all sorts of transgressions: utter exhaustion, even occasional vomiting.

"There hasn't been a time I've been at the Ranch when there wasn't someone suffering from Toxic Tuesday," says Barnett. "You have to get to Wednesday." On the other hand, there are those who have sinned but escape retribution. "When I was there last time, there was actually a woman who stopped smoking just days before she came," Lieberman recalls. She signed up for one week but liked it so much she ended up staying two.

This kind of instant exuberance, however, is rare. Cohen dutifully replied with a resounding yes to all the well-meaning Ranch questions regarding health and exercise. "They asked, 'Do you exercise every day?' I said yes. 'Do you run?' 'Yes!' I lied; I lied," says the former dedicated runner without an ounce of guilt. "I lied about everything." The results, Cohen says: "Seven inches off my body. I made tons of friends. And," she adds proudly, "I've been a vegetarian ever since."

It is the kind of testimonial the Ranch is used to. The Ashram, a deliberately Spartan, more rigorous forerunner in Calabasas, California, had been around for decades—indeed, as Alex Glasscock recalls, he had been a guest there and was distracted by having to share a room with a snorer. By 2010, there seemed to be space for a more lavish environment where those in need of leafy vegetables and fierce exercise could relax in plush robes in their private rooms—and without roommates. Of course, the question still remains: What compels them?

"A majority of these successful, in-control, type A people have to face up to the fact that if they are so in control, why are they lacking or why do they need a challenge?" says Ranch program director Marc Alabanza, who worked at the Ashram for seven years before switching allegiances. "If nothing is wrong with their lives or themselves, why even come to us? Clearly they want some new perspective."

In fact, many of the guests acknowledge as much. Their moods, their cholesterol, their life decisions: They can be

Water, Logged

Rigorous exercise demands equally rigorous hydration. Marc Alabanza says, "We tell people to pack 100 ounces of water in a CamelBak while hiking. For each pound of body weight you have, you should be consuming one ounce of water per day." And at home, you should be consuming about half that.

altered during a stay, especially during the last endless hike, accomplished in utter silence. Guests often have experienced recent losses, such as the death of a parent, or a struggle with illness. "You just start talking to complete strangers," says Parmelee. "It's like you have to get through all this pain by talking. It does become intimate there right away."

De Baubigny arrived on her first visit after separating from her husband. Brought up in Britain, she wasn't used to confiding in strangers. Nonetheless, "the first night we were all sitting around a table, and I just burst into tears. Someone said to me, 'You just had your Oprah moment.' I had put myself out there with shocking vulnerability. And some woman I had never met

held my hand. It's just"—she pauses, searching for the right words—"you're suddenly in a very safe place. I was scared and not sure what the next chapter of my life was going to be. And the Ranch makes you comfortable confronting vulnerability."

Somehow or other, say Ranch alumni, between the arduous hikes and the strenuous stretches, between the butternut squash soup and the herbal tea, certain emotions and perspectives fall into place.

Almost everyone returns home with an assortment of new acquisitions: new friends, new menus, and new habits, some of which linger. "You see, the Ranch is all about the nos when you're there. But the takeaway is moderation—and less," says Barnett. "Do I think all that is sustainable at home? Not at all. I don't think it's meant to be." But

Afternoons provide little letup. Post-hike, Ranch guests exercise for about three to four more hours.

there are differences, she adds. "Oh, I realize, I need to drink less red wine and eat more vegetables."

Most important, say the alumni, they acquire new ways of viewing their own lives.

"At the Ranch, you write yourself a letter to read six months later. I asked, 'Are you happy?'" says Lowell.

Are you happy now, a year later? the actress is asked.

"I have to say, yes I am. I am getting there," she replies.

"My letter to me said, 'Never go back!'" Cohen says. She isn't kidding. Within months, however, Cohen was back at the Ranch, this time with her 16-year-old daughter. "And the second time I went, I also wrote 'Never go back,'" Cohen continues. A sigh.

"I'm already signed up for May." ♦