

Relaxing and Recharging at The Ranch at Live Oak

By Fiona Argyle, January 31, 2013



It's like a Lululemon hallucination. The lobby at the **Fairmont Miramar Hotel** in Santa Monica is filled with fabulously fit kale fanatics. Everyone is chatting excitedly with introductions and anticipation. We are all here for a weeklong mental health, nutrition and weight loss retreat located at **The Ranch at Live Oak** in Malibu; a heavenly locale nestled within acres of hiking trails and mountaintops. For the past month, we've been instructed to wean off sugar, alcohol, caffeine and processed foods in preparation for the program: a total detox of mind and body. Most of us listened; some of us, ahem, did not.

On just two hours of sleep, I curse myself for being talked into sharing that bottle of wine last night with some Parisian bon vivant I met on OKCupid. It seemed like such a good idea at the time.

The point of the program is to not only heal your body from daily toxins, but also to give your mind a rest by detaching from the rest of the world. Goodbye tweets, tags, texts, status updates. Hello nature, fresh air, and deep breathing.

We pile into a car that transports us to the mountains above the beaches of Malibu. The type-As seem nice enough. Everyone sips from water bottles; I hide my Splenda-sweetened Earl Grey under the seat. Upon arrival, we are weighed, measured head-to-toe (even our wrists!), and given some nuts and dates to snack on—with the understanding that today is the only time we'll have the freedom to eat as many as we want.

The rest of a day is a bit of a blur. Mark, the seemingly (and later confirmed to be) wonderful program director, leads a short hike, gives a tour of the property, and explains to us about the ranch's values. "We are here for you!" he says. "All you have to do is put one foot in front of the other, and let us do the rest. All decisions will be made. You will learn to trust, to let go, to live in the moment."

We share individual goals for the week while enjoying an amazing dinner of fresh salad—from the on-site organic garden, where most ingredients for the week will come from—and a mouth-watering squash dish.

After falling asleep after dinner (around 8 PM, I think), I wake to the sound of soft chimes outside my cottage door. The room is simple yet luxurious, bed cozy and surroundings silent. A follow-up wake up message comes through on the walkie-talkie (we're told to have this on us at all times throughout our stay) announcing our morning stretch class in fifteen minutes.

After class and a breakfast of house-made granola with almond milk, we head out to our first four-hour hike of the week. *Yikes.* As we climb, our guides remind us through our walkie's, "water, water, water!" We walk, sip, pee, pant, sip, pant, try to talk, and pee some more.

Back at the ranch, we have an amazing carrot curry soup—I don't know how the chef does it. Glorious naptime follows, and afterwards we head into our afternoon workout classes (TRX, weights, then yoga) and a daily afternoon massage. Surprisingly, I'm not at all hungry and I feel good. The new environment and friends are energizing.

The following days will follow much of the same pattern: rise at 5:30 AM, an hour of stretch class, breakfast, four-hour hike, lunch, hour-long nap, two or three daily workout classes, afternoon massage, dinner, sleep.

On Tuesday, we get six almonds during our hike. Exciting! I'm grateful for this snack as I woke up feeling a bit weak, which is apparently normal. We're told that during the first 24-48 hours of this kind of detox, our bodies are likely to respond in weird ways. Some people apparently puke. Others feel spaced. It's completely normal for fingers to swell and tingle. Dizziness is expected.

I gain most strength back by the afternoon, especially after my session with a massage therapist/healer. When he asks how I am pre-massage, everything pours out. I'm emotional, fuzzyheaded, and unsteady feeling. He listens wholeheartedly as I purge through my life history and some personal challenges. This is so much more than a massage. With this stranger's love and support behind me, I walk out of the session feeling whole again. Better than I have in a long time. I don't know what just happened but I'll take it.

Wednesday comes around and I wake up so sore. Getting out of bed is a struggle, let alone stretch class. And the hike! Clean mountain air and some self-meditative talk help get me through. I repeat over and over a mantra the masseuse helped me create yesterday having to do with being strong and powerful. And I practice gratitude. How lucky am I to have a whole week to devote to me, myself and I.

I wonder if the French gentleman has emailed me. What are my friends doing back home? Top news stories? Re-focus, Fiona. Here and now. Just be.

Thursday's hike is the hardest. My limbs are still sore and the hiking routine feels even more intense now. Another four hours. "Put one foot in front of the other, that's all you have to do" rings in my head. I can do this. I will do this. I did it.

Friday is our last full day of the boot camp routine. It's been as challenging as it has been invigorating. The inspiring folks who run the Ranch have made it exciting and have taken us in with open arms. You can literally say anything—and we have. By now, our group has bonded over bathroom talk, boyfriend problems and business ventures. There are no boundaries.

We all glow as a group. Our skin is clearer, eyes are brighter and heads happier. Not only do we look better, we all feel a huge sense of accomplishment. This was not easy.

By Saturday, our journey here has come to an end. We get weighed and measured; some of us lose anywhere from one to eight pounds! We are told that the real measure of success weight-wise is the amount of inches we lose. At 12 inches lost, mostly around my torso, I'm a happy rancher.

We say our goodbyes. Sharing in this experience has not only brought a group of strangers together in the most intimate way, but has also powerfully transformed us as individuals. Some of us pledge to continue the gluten-free, dairy-free, alcohol-free, sugar-free, fun-free eating plan. The Ranch made it simple for us in that regard with such outstanding and fresh food.

Back at the Fairmont, surrounded by life's temptations, I vow to drink more water, reduce my processed food intake, meditate daily for five minutes and, most importantly, live more mindfully. I walk a block to a spin class at SoulCycle in Santa Monica. I pedal, close my eyes and think of the mountains.