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SPA SPECIAL

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Happy *in my own* SKIN

Seven days of intensive exercise, detox eating and a bit of Californian touchy-feelness left **Saska Graville** feeling transformed – not to mention 8lb lighter. She describes how hiking and hugs changed her body and mind »

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SPA SPECIAL



The Ranch at Live Oak takes over the picturesque Santa Monica Mountains LEPT: Soledad Givens reaches the summit of Sandstone Peak

Comfortable in your own skin - it's the holy grail. Not feeling too big, too small, too tired, too stressed, too guilty... It's something I've never achieved - and I've tried.

An exerciser since my thirties, I've been fit (ish) and fat (ish) for most of my adult life. Not huge, but large enough for jeans shopping to make me cry and for a general sense of dissatisfaction to hit me every time I see myself naked. Losing two stone on Weight Watchers soon after I hit 40 was a turning point, but even that didn't get me to where I wanted to be. In recent months, I (like everyone else, it seems) have been 5:2'ing to lose those last few pounds, but both they and, more importantly, the critical voice in my head, won't budge. Until now, that is.

Six nights at The Ranch at Live Oak have shifted more than pounds (eight of them, to be precise). They've left me with a sense of peace, an appreciation of what my body can do rather than what it can't, and an optimistic calm about making smarter, healthier choices going forward. Comfortable in my own skin? I think I might have finally cracked it.

Backtrack to the week before my Ranch arrival, and it was a very different story. I was anxious. This is not, after all, a cushy spa holiday. The setting may be an idyllic 120-acre property in the Santa Monica Mountains, three miles inland from the gorgeousness of Malibu, but don't be fooled. Billed as an 'intensive, no-nptions, week-long endurance, wellness and nutrition programme', guests face 5.30am starts, daily 10-mile hikes, a further three hours of exercise classes in the afternoon (all of it compulsory) and a low-calorie vegetarian diet that has been stripped of all carbs, dairy, wheat, soy and gluten in order to give your system a thorough detox. Alcohol and caffeine? Forget it. I might be a regular gym-goer, but with dodgy knees that get sore from just going up and down the steps in the Tube, how the hell was I going to fare on those mountain trails? And 5.30am? The thought of it made me queasy.

It didn't help that I set off for LA with a hangover. Hardly the best start to a wellbeing week but, as so often happens, one after-work drink turned into a boozy dinner and I arrived at Heathrow feeling decidedly seedy. I was definitely a candidate for a programme that promises to 'jump-start a more conscious approach to healthy living'.

That jump-start begins 30 days before you get to the Ranch, when your pre-arrival instructions encourage you to up the exercise and cut down on artificial sweeteners, caffeine and alcohol. They should be eliminated entirely for the final week before the programme starts. I did okay with the caffeine and sweeteners, but the alcohol? Not so much. I did, however, manage to avoid 'toxic Tuesday'. Such is the power of the dietary detox that withdrawal symptoms during Ranch week can include not just headaches, but vomiting, irritability and dizziness on the hikes - and Tuesday is when the worst of it kicks in.

Seeing other guests suffer, I think I got away lightly with a mild 24-hour ache behind my eyes. Vomiting, as well as my creaky knees, would have finished me off.

I was more worried about the 5.30am wake-up call for the 6am stretch class. So when I woke up at 5.20am on the first morning, clear-headed and ready to go, I was astonished - and relieved. Going to bed at 8pm helps, but it was an early indication of the powerful physical and mental changes that were coming my way over the course of the week. It was pitch black, chilly and (almost) the >>

'I WAS ANXIOUS. THIS IS NOT A CUSHY SPA HOLIDAY'



Peaceful - the Great Room at The Ranch

AMBER LEWIS: RECEPTION; MARK LITTLE: BE; SHAWN HOPKINS: BEY; SERRIS: GAVAN; FRANK: GUY; SPAN: JIMMY; HUNTER: JIMMY

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AN INTERIOR DESIGNER, AKA THE DESIGNER, IN THE TRAILHEADS, N.Y.C. (PHOTOGRAPH BY JESSICA WILSON)



middle of the night, but I sat on the doorstep of my bungalow and gazed at the stars, feeling totally at peace. To say that was unlike me doesn't even begin to cover it.

And so commenced a daily routine of rise, stretch class, breakfast and bus to the hike start by 7.30am. And we were all in it together. The Ranch isn't an opt-in, opt-out programme. With a maximum of 16 guests, you do everything as a group. Which means, of course, that you get to know each other fairly quickly - helped along by

SPA SPECIAL



The pool has spectacular views BELOW, LEFT: All meals are low-calorie, delicious - and communal

a decidedly Californian ritual at the first night's dinner, of everyone 'sharing' their goal for the week, and what they're grateful for in life. (Being a Brit, this made me squirm - Americans are just better at that stuff than we are!) In fact, every dinner began with the group holding hands for a few moments of 'silent gratitude'. I know, I know, but being 'in the moment' is a core Ranch philosophy, and I liked it. Don't worry about how your body or fitness levels used to be, or how you would like them to be, we were told on the first day, just focus on how you feel right here and right now. In other words, stop chasing that elusive half stone, and concentrate on what your body can do for you today. It was liberating.

So how did my body do for me? It suffered. Daily hikes of between seven and 10 miles take their toll, and my knees weren't happy. And yet, I loved it. Every morning, after a group hug in the trail car park (no, I'm not kidding, but I got used to that, too), we set off into spectacular national park scenery. After one particularly hard-going, two-hour uphill slog, I actually felt a rush of euphoria as I strode across the mountaintop plains, with views over the peaks to the Pacific.

Trail etiquette was established early on. The same super-fit Ranchees headed off fast and furious for the peaks - and I joined the back-of-the-groupers bringing up the rear. It was always the same gang of us last off the mountain. And we had a ball. Only in California would you descend through a national park, discussing the merits of your guide's boob job - with her freely admitting the problems she'd been having with her implants. Not necessarily very 'in the now', but hugely entertaining.

Morning hikes completed, the afternoons started with a post-lunch sleep. Daytime naps have never been my thing, but my body felt so physically drained that they were a godsend. And you needed all the energy you could get for the afternoon's schedule. Kickboxing, body circuits, core and strength training... there was no let-up for two hours. And then an hour of yoga to finish the day off.

Nap aside, the one thing that made the intensity bearable was the afternoon massage. And when I say massage, I mean life-changing-body-fixing-sanity-saving therapeutic massage. An hour of it, every afternoon. I suspect it's the only thing that got many of us back on the mountain the next day.

It's in among this mix of physical exhaustion, compulsory routine and blissfully early nights (8.15pm was my average), that The Ranch's magic kicks in. By day three, I can honestly say that I have never felt more at peace with myself. Such was my focus on getting through the sheer amount of daily exercise, there was no time to worry about anything else. Was I thin enough, fast enough, fit enough? Who cares. Just putting one foot in front of the other on the mountain trails and being in the right place at the right time for the afternoon sessions was a massive achievement. I felt so proud of my body for getting me through it all - and >>

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The Santa Monica Mountains, where the daily 16-mile hikes take place. **BLOW:** Each of the 14 guests of The Ranch gets their own private room.



that's a much more powerful feeling than listening to a nagging voice in your head telling you to drop a jeans size. My body also felt supremely well fed. As someone who is pretty much always thinking about their next meal, I was expecting to be hungry on the low-cal regime. Not once. Nor did I miss any of the eliminated food groups. Ingenious and delicious dishes like beet bourguignon, sunflower seed risotto and faux crabcakes (with palm hearts) made every meal a treat. And I have renewed respect for kale.

Come the final day, I had an energy and sense of optimism that was entirely unexpected. I'd thought I'd probably lose weight (a total of 8.5 inches as well as those 8lb), but I hadn't anticipated such a mental shift. 'I like myself again,' I wrote in my final diary entry. Liking myself means that I want to take more care of myself, be more mindful of what I eat and drink, move more, sleep more. I'm not deluded, I know I'll never be the person who says 'no thanks' to one more glass of wine, but I'm optimistic that I'll be more vigilant, especially when it comes to 'fake' foods (the Müllerlight addiction has to go) and too much caffeine. The Ranch has inspired me, and for that I'm grateful. And I can even say that without squirming - now that's progress.

TRIP NOTES: The Ranch at Live Oak's seven-day programme costs \$6,200 (£3,850), all-inclusive; theranchmalibu.com. Virgin Atlantic flies twice daily to LA from London Heathrow, from £234 plus £382 tax; virgin-atlantic.com.

BEST THINGS
MIND/BODY CLARITY:

The combination of physical exertion and dietary detox leaves your mind and body feeling utterly calm. **THE FOOD:** Executive chef Rob Dalzell makes detoxing easy. If I could eat his food 24/7, I would. I'm still dreaming about the sunflower seed risotto - shouldn't work, but it does.

MY FELLOW GUESTS:

Friendly, funny and rebellious (sneaking in an espresso machine in your suitcase - you know who you are...), we struggled, triumphed and lost inches together. As a group, we got each other through it.

WORST THINGS
EVERYTHING HURTS:

Sore knees, creaking joints, tight calves - my body suffered to lose those 8lb. (Totally worth it!)

DISTURBED SLEEP:

The downside of drinking a lot of water every day? Multiple night-time trips to the loo.

My detox diet - why The Ranch's food plan works, plus recipes from executive chef Rob Dalzell at... REDONLINE.CO.UK/BLOGS



PHOTOGRAPHY: JAMES HARRIS/GETTY IMAGES; THE SUNSET: JAMES HARRIS/GETTY IMAGES; THE MOUNTAINS: JAMES HARRIS/GETTY IMAGES; THE ROOM: JAMES HARRIS/GETTY IMAGES; THE FOREST: JAMES HARRIS/GETTY IMAGES