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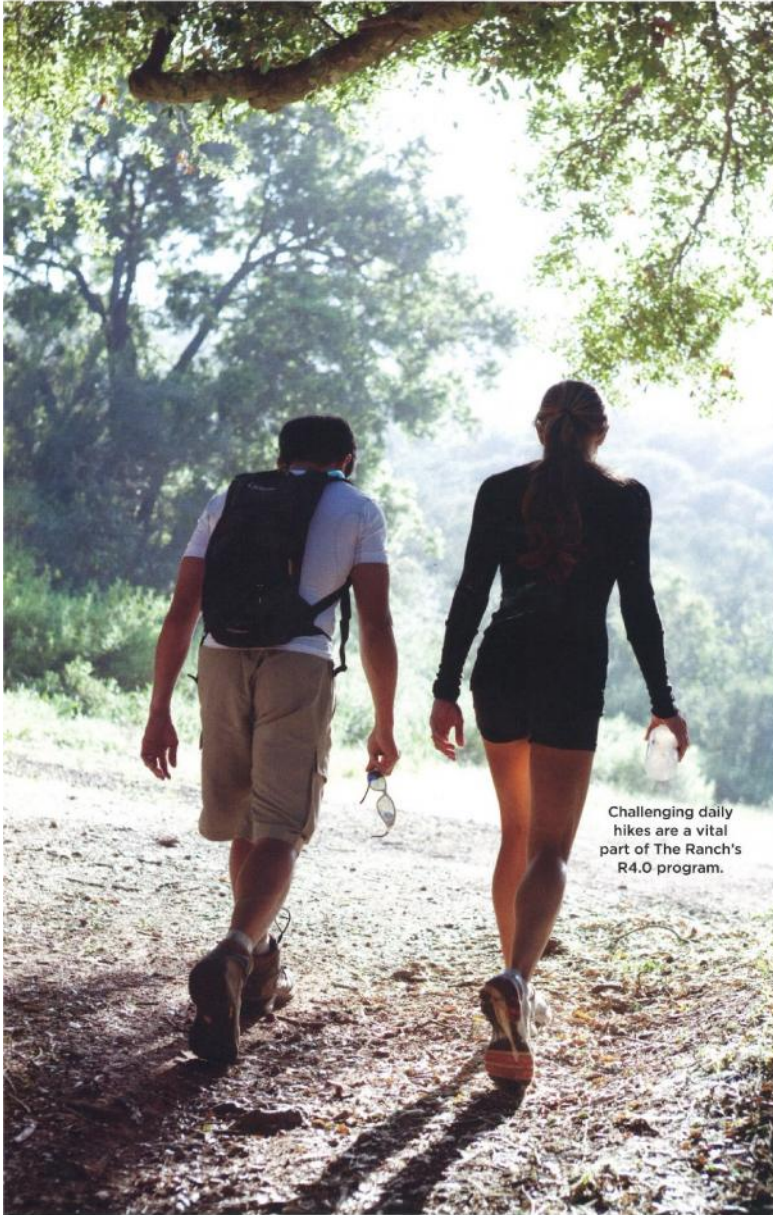


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## Health & Fitness



Challenging daily hikes are a vital part of The Ranch's R4.0 program.

## Inside The Ranch

Our intrepid reporter manages to find peace and good health (despite getting lost twice) on a four-day quest for wellness in California. **By Lindsey Wheat**

CHANCES ARE YOU'VE HEARD murmurings about the hot new place for getting in shape: The Ranch. The most frequent comparison I've heard is that The Ranch is an updated, upscale version of an ashram. Meaning you head West to sunny California to diet and exercise your way to a cleaner, leaner, healthier you. No cell phones. No gimmicks. No gluten.

The Ranch offers two options, a seven-day program at their Live Oak Malibu location, and a new R4.0 four-day program, which delivers all the benefits of the week-long stay in a more intensive package at The Four Seasons Hotel Westlake Village. Being the busy and important lady that I am, I opted for the four-day butt kicking I so very much deserved after spending the holidays stuffing my face with tacos and margaritas in Cabo San Lucas. Life is hard, people!

### PRE-PROGRAM PREP

I spent the month leading up to my upcoming retreat in a state of mildly toxic denial. Another glass of chardonnay? Don't mind if I do. I'll "fix it" at The Ranch. It wasn't until the emails from The Ranch coordinator starting rolling in that I regretted some of my choices. Turns out, just as important as your actual stay, is the preparation for said stay. Anyone who's done a Blueprint cleanse knows that if you have a steak and martini dinner the night before starting, you're going to be one unhappy camper. Same thing here. Chugging coffee with a side of booze is going to leave you experiencing some rather undesirable withdrawal symptoms a day or two into

COURTESY OF THE RANCH

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The greenhouse behind the hotel is the perfect place for a post-hike, pre-massage lunch.

your boot camp-style exercise routine and caffeine/sugar/meat/dairy-free vegan diet.

These emails suggested weaning off naughty treats, starting with things like wine. By the last week you aren't even supposed to be nibbling a cube of cheese. Can't figure out what to eat if it doesn't involve livestock and dairy? No problem. The emails come with Ranch-approved recipes, some of which have become new favorites of mine. The dairy-free "creamy" vegan soup really is creamy!

You also get a fancy pedometer, which is meant to encourage increasing your overall movement. That first week they suggest finding a local yoga studio, and before arriving for the program you should be doing yoga twice weekly.

So, naturally, by the time I pulled up to the Four Seasons Westlake with a duffle bag full of essentials like hiking shoes, wool socks, bandanas and a CamelBak, I was a vegan, sober, master yogi. Ahem, sort of.

### ROOKIE ADVENTURES

Upon arrival at the hotel, I quickly changed into my hiking gear and attempted to fill

my CamelBak (this proved more difficult than I expected, and my ineptitude resulted in a rather wet bum after that first hike). We loaded onto our little bus and drove 15 minutes for our stunningly beautiful first hike.

The whole thing felt like summer camp, even down to getting to know the other campers. There's nothing like meeting someone in spandex and openly sharing fitness levels to enable the kind of unself-conscious bonding that only 12-year-olds

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can usually engage in. By the end of that first hour-and-a-half hike we were having conversations like “So, tell me about your relationship with your father...”

I quickly realized that the majority of the guests were repeat customers (eight out of 14, in fact), which speaks volumes for the program. The consensus about what keeps people coming back is the strength of being with a group, united by a common goal. That it is a vacation combined with a focus on fitness and nutrition. And that all you have to do is show up — everything else is taken care of.

That afternoon, things got science-y. I promise I'm not a total idiot; I had some strengths in school, but science was not one of them. This made the BOD POD and VO2 testing we were subjected to both confusing and impressive. The BOD POD is a space shuttle looking capsule that I had to sit in wearing undies and a swim cap (a look I do not plan on recreating). My ensemble for the VO2 testing (for cardiovascular health) was equally upsetting in that it involved running on a treadmill wearing Darth Vader's mask.

Later that night, following a surprisingly delightful vegan meal of cauliflower “steak” on a bed of green bean olive pesto, we received our results. Good news: my fitness level is superior. Bad news: I'm only “moderately lean.” I considered taking this up with the authorities before falling asleep face down on my vegetables. I would soon learn that by around 8:15 each night you can barely keep your eyes open. The Ranch really takes it out of you.

### HITTING MY STRIDE

Our second day began with a soothing doorbell chime at 5:30 a.m. Five. Thirty. AM. Truth is, with the time change in my favor, and how good I felt after just one day of fresh air, exercise and healthy food, I practically sprang out of bed. At 6 a.m., I was on a yoga mat for a gentle morning stretch. Afterwards, we were offered foot-wrapping services, which I scoffed at that first day but later took full advantage of.

Breakfast was a yummy spread of fruit, oatmeal, granola and smoothies. It's the only meal you're allowed free rein at (despite suggested serving sizes), so since I'm prone

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to getting hungry — like a wolf — I loaded up on to-go snacks in case the six almonds they serve on the trail didn't fill me up.

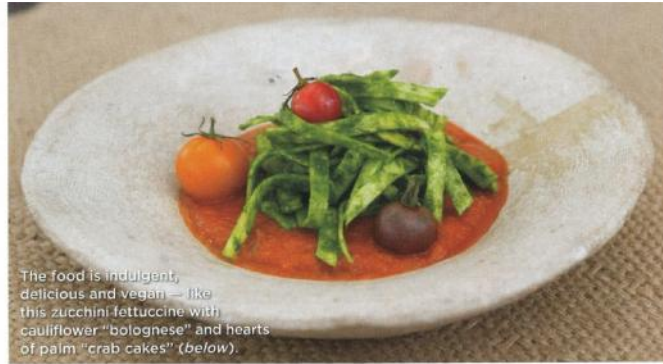
By the crack of 8 we had set off on a truly spectacular hike: A challenging four-hour climb with breathtaking views of mountains, ocean and cloudless sky. It was one of those "wait, why do I live in the land of the polar vortex?" moments. To keep the sentiment going, we stopped at the beach in Malibu on the way back, wiped the dust off our faces with chilled lavender-scented towels, sipped fresh coconut water, and watched dolphins leap through the water.

Like everything else at The Ranch, hiking is beautifully orchestrated and expertly managed by the staff. After a moment of silent gratitude at the base of the trail (a practice I came to revel in), you check one another's radios to ensure that should anyone get lost, they're able to contact the group for help.

As I'm wont to do, I laughed at the thought of someone being stupid enough to get lost on a single file trail, surrounded by 13 other hikers, with a guide at the front and back. Then, I proceeded to get lost not once, but twice, in one day. I was the only guest to issue frantic distress calls informing the group that I'd somehow wound up on the other side of the mountain, and, later, outside the Native American Cultural Center.

Upon our return, lunch was served in the lovely little greenhouse behind the hotel where we were also given the most important information of the day — the time of our massage. Following a much-needed hot shower, I slipped onto the massage table in my room for one of the strongest, most detoxifying experiences ever.

After my massage, I suited up in workout gear and head to the gym for two hours of weights and yoga. Workouts are meticulously planned so that each and every muscle is targeted, but not overworked. I was floored by the precision and passion each of our trainers have for what they do. Still, by the time I was able to enjoy a bit of free time by the pool, I was too tired to even peel the contraband orange I'd stolen from the spa.



The food is indulgent, delicious and vegan — like this zucchini fettuccine with cauliflower "bolognese" and hearts of palm "crab cakes" (below).



Dinner followed the same schedule as the first night, which is to say I was passed out cold when it was practically still light out. It was both comforting and invigorating having the next few days follow this exact schedule, and the trip began to take on a somewhat meditative feel. It was also really freeing to roll around in sweats and no makeup without even glancing at my phone for four full days. Honestly, when was the last time you went four days without texting and mascara? Or even four hours?

### EMERGING A PRO

I've been told that one of the many things that differentiates The Ranch from other programs is the food. From artichoke "crab cakes" to zucchini "spaghetti bolognese" I was delighted to find each recipe satisfying and delicious. So, I was thrilled to spend the last day with our adorable blonde chef learning the tricks of the vegan trade.

The rest of the day involved being weighed and measured, and comparing those results

with the information from our first day. Each and every one of our group of 14 leapt gleefully off the scale, gasping at pounds and inches lost. Again, the sole exception, I managed to gain both, which mandated a rather involved pep talk from a staff trainer about how much more muscle weighs than fat and how, undoubtedly, the weight would drop right off when I returned home.

They weren't kidding. And two weeks after I returned home, my skin and hair still glowed like a happy little reminder of my time in Cali with some of the most interesting and kind-hearted people I've ever met. The whites of my eyes were whiter, my nails stronger and my soul lighter.

I understand why people make the pilgrimage back to The Ranch year after year. It was an uplifting, glorious experience that felt utterly self-indulgent in the best, most productive way. I am still not a vegan, sober, master yogi, but I do feel the positive reverberations of my retreat and, like so many of the friends I met, I can't wait to go back. ●