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JUNE/JULY 2019

DESTINATION: NORTHERN ITALY

The Ranch Dolomites takes health
and fitness to new heights.

BY JILL LAYMAN





PHOTO: RANDY J. BRAUN



Tucked beneath the soaring Dolomite spires, the picturesque village of San Cassiano serves as base camp for The Ranch program. A hybrid between ski chalet and Italian farmhouse, the charming Rosa Alpina Hotel, a Relais & Chateau property, provides guests a luxurious respite after the daily climbs.

With nearly a decade in the fitness resort industry, Alex and Sue Glasscock decided to up their game in hopes of keeping the program fresh for their frequent return guests. With that goal in mind, the founders of The Ranch endeavored to bring their much-lauded wellness program to new heights—quite literally.

Their newest brainchild, The Ranch Dolomites in Northern Italy, is modeled after The Ranch's signature seven-day stay based in Malibu, which combines an intense fitness regimen with a highly structured, 1,400-calorie-per-day, plant-based diet.

"Sue and I love to travel," Alex enthuses with a nod to his co-founder and wife of 20 years. "With our returning guests in mind, we thought it would be fun to find other locations around the world to run our program, giving our alumni a reason to travel and experience other cultures."

The Ranch Dolomites has one objective: to inspire transformational change in the mental and physical health of its participants while immersed in the natural splendor of the Italian Alps. "Our goal has always been to provide health and wellness advice that will give people more energy and vitality," boasts

Alex who, as CEO, is responsible for the strategic planning and evolution of The Ranch brand.

Increased energy and vitality resonate with me, so I am quick to secure my reservation to attend one of the initial six week-long sessions in September 2018. While the thought of uphill hiking for miles greatly intimidates me (and my exercise-induced asthma), I couldn't resist the experience—the chance to travel to parts unknown, lose a little weight, and spend a week away from the monotony of my daily obligations (consider it a severe case of FOMO, a fear of missing out).

Pronounced *dol-o-me-tees* by locals, the Dolomites region is part of the Italian Alps, located in the country's northeastern corner bordering Austria. Just a two-hour drive from Venice, the region—with hundreds of miles of trails and multiple ski resorts—is a popular summer and winter playground for locals and tourists alike.

"We've hiked the Swiss Alps, but we were introduced to the Dolomites region just over a year ago," Alex explains. "We were impressed by its beauty and how untouched it seems relative to so many tourist destinations. It's like stepping back in time."

Indeed, the region is striking. Having grown up in Denver, I thought the Rocky Mountains were majestic, but the Dolomites



PHOTO: ALEX FILZ



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take “rocky” to the next level. Sweeping lengths of sheer-faced stone resemble the Boulder Flatirons but greatly magnified in size. Rising against a cerulean sky, the jagged peaks slice through puffy white clouds, seeming to end behind the cloud cover. But as my gaze scans higher, their end points cut through the clouds once more, stretching that much closer to the sun.

A MOUNTAIN VILLAGE

At the foot of the Lavarela and Conturines peaks lies the charming mountain village of San Cassiano, which would serve as “basecamp” for The Ranch’s six-week stint. San Cassiano lies

just over 5,000 feet above sea level, the starting elevation for our daily hikes.

In the heart of the village is the Rosa Alpina Hotel, a distinguished Relais & Chateau property that would more than comfortably house The Ranch guests. Owned and operated by the Pizzanea family, the Rosa Alpina is perfectly situated next to a popular pedestrian thoroughfare brimming with an array of specialty shops, bakeries, cafés, and bars.

Both The Ranch and Rosa Alpina are members of Virtuoso Travel, a network of luxury travel agencies with more than 17,500 advisors worldwide and a portfolio of nearly 1,700 preferred partners, including hotels, cruise lines, tour operators, and more. The Glasscocks were first introduced to the Pizzaneas at a Virtuoso membership event. The synergy was obvious, says Alex. “The Pizzanea family has owned Rosa Alpina for 70 years and, as members of Virtuoso Travel with us, we were confident they’d have the same luxury standards as we do.”

The Rosa Alpina’s exterior is quintessential alpine ski chalet, yet its interior, in my humble opinion, is even more luxurious than Aspen’s Little Nell. Indeed, the Rosa Alpina boasts one of two Michelin-starred restaurants in San Cassiano (unfortunately, fully booked during my stay). My queen-size room was spacious with a fireplace, sitting/dining area, separate bedroom, and a bathroom adorned in Italian marble, of course, with an enormous steam shower to rival any Turkish *hamam*.

The room’s decór is tasteful and casually elegant. Beamed ceilings are hand-stenciled in pleasing hues of soft blue, muted pinks, and white. A private balcony overlooks the river (and an “udderly” idyllic daily parade of cows with bells clanging around



PHOTO: IDM SÜDTIROL MARKETING

their necks, escorted by modern-day shepherds with cell phones).

Wanting to acclimate and secretly indulge in a bit of wine, pasta, and gelato before the official detox began, I arrived the Thursday prior to our Sunday start. My arrival day was lost to sleep. No pasta dinner, just 12 hours of blissful dreams, leaving me only two decadent dinners before giving up alcohol, gluten, and sugar in exchange for a plant-based diet.

With my free evenings, I chose to stay at the hotel, starting in the lounge to enjoy a full-bodied local red wine. I nibbled on delicate yet tasty *hors d'oeuvres* (served without a request) and listened to an Italian “piano man” crooning “Wild World” by Cat Stevens. I thought to myself, this world is not merely wild, but becoming perhaps a bit too small. With the music, the lounge filled, voices rising, I listened to a cacophony of English, Italian, Austrian, and what I came to learn is a local dialect called Ladin. I dined at the hotel’s casual grille, ordering a lamb *sugo tagliatelle* for my first indulgence and a simple burrata pizza with the lightest/crispiest crust imaginable the next night.

THE VEGAN GOURMET

To their credit, The Ranch culinary team collaborates with the hotel’s Michelin-starred chefs to serve incredibly delicious (and nutritional) meals for The Ranch guests, resulting in a creative plant-based menu inspired by local Italian flavors. Typical breakfasts include oatmeal, granola, or vegan versions of artichoke quiche and avocado toast. For lunch, it’s a veggie burger with guacamole, minestrone soup, salad, or hummus wraps in a cab-

bage leaf with a side of kale chips. My favorite dinner of the week was the vegan eggplant parmesan, followed closely by the veggie pizza.

Committed to providing a true “Ranch” experience, the Glasscocks elected to bring not only their culinary crew from Malibu, but also a team of Ranch staffers to Italy for the entire six-week stint. The Ranch’s experienced hiking guides, fitness instructors, and masseuses are complemented as needed with local alpine experts, yoga instructors, and sous chefs.

“The relationship and bond between our Ranch team and our alumni is really special,” says Alex. “We want to maintain that trust and connection.”

THE ASCENT BEGINS

I meet my fellow hikers Sunday afternoon during our introductory low-impact hike. In a group of 19, 16 are alumni. Only two of us are traveling alone. The others come in sets of best friends, sisters, brothers, spouses, and one group of four Ranch alums who chose to meet up again—clear evidence of the connection The Ranch inspires.

Our mornings start with a 5:30AM wake-up knock on our doors followed by a stretch class in the hotel’s private yoga room and a fortifying breakfast. Adorned in layered clothing, hydration backpacks, and trekking poles, we load into three vans for a short drive to the trailhead. After a group huddle and inspirational words from our guide, we all set off as a herd that quickly dis-

perses with the fittest among us briskly leading the uphill charge.

As the trail steepens, I fall to the back of the group. I stop often but briefly, just to catch my breath before trudging once again, encouraged by the kindness of the Ranch staffer assigned to bring up the rear. In other words, my private hiking guide!

Given my diminished lung capacity, I expect to be last. In one sense my weakness bothers me and in another it really



Ascending an average of 3,000 feet and 10 miles long, the daily hikes are challenging yet breathtaking. Encouraged to traverse at your own pace, each hike represents a personal journey offering plenty of time for contemplation, introspection, and photo ops (of course).

PHOTO: RANDY J. BRAUN

doesn't. I am actually having fun—enjoying the challenge, the indescribable view, and the quiet conversation with my new friends. This isn't a competition but a personal journey. And I am totally immersed in mine.

Our group stops for a photo op (the scenery is truly breathtaking) and a small snack—typically six raw almonds with a dash of black salt, a small apple, or homemade date bar. Doing my best to shorten the gap between myself and my fellow hikers, I hustle on the downhill stretches, hoping I don't keep anyone waiting too long for me to join the last departing van back to the hotel. Hiking 10 miles each day (for four to five hours), averaging a 3,000-foot climb in elevation, is an accomplishment I relish, even at my slowpoke pace.

Each hike is extraordinary but, as a history buff, my favorite occurs on Day Three, when our trail leads us past the remnants of a rock-walled hospital built during World War I and past several man-made caves created with dynamite to protect soldiers during battle. My least favorite, yet perhaps even more extraordinary, takes place on Day Five, as crumbling stone steps give way to a precariously narrow path across a sheer mountain face leading us through a crevice to the other side of the peak. I never

knew I was afraid of heights until taking those tiny mountaineering steps while turned sideways, allowing my body to lean more securely into the mountain. This must be what climbing Mount Everest feels like, I assume, ever grateful to my private Ranch guide for keeping me calm.

Upon arriving back at the hotel, we gather for a well-deserved lunch. Our daily afternoon routine includes time for a nap, back-to-back fitness classes (one focused on cardio intervals and the other on strength training), another yoga session, plus an in-room massage to revitalize those tired legs. Each day ends with dinner around a long harvest table—me swapping stories with 18 strangers (two from Norway) about our hikes, our lives back home, and our plans for the future. I may be last on the hikes but at this table I'm an equal.

“Over the years, The Ranch has attracted more people who may be less fit, but are intrigued by the promise of measurable health and fitness gains and are willing to overcome their fears for the intended results,” says Alex.

“A certain magic happens when you have group randomness with no judgment,” he believes. “We can all learn empathy from observing others and learn to appreciate wherever you are in your journey. We host some people who have been sedentary their whole lives and others who use The Ranch as an annual tune-up and reset.”

It's this latter group that inspires the Glasscocks to keep looking for new ways to spice up the program. In addition to a second year in the Dolomites, the Glasscocks are researching such exotic locales as Argentina, Morocco, Bhutan, and Africa, in addition to riverboat and small cruise partners.

“Clearly, the success of The Ranch has exceeded our expectations,” Alex affirms. “We have seen a countless number of people's lives improve from the program experience. They take a certain percent of knowledge back to their family and professional lives so the program actually has a wider impact than just the people who come here.”

My week at The Ranch Dolomites last fall certainly has been long reaching. I've shed some 15 pounds by gradually shifting to a more plant-based diet. I've started a daily meditation practice with the aid of an app. And, I am still in touch with the two sisters I met, and will see one again later this month at The Ranch 4.0 down in L.A. As time and budget allow, I hope to be a frequent Ranch alumnus. After all, I have more weight to lose, muscles to tone, and, most importantly, memories to make. ♦

The Ranch Dolomites will be offered exclusively this summer from August 24 – October 19, 2019. Starting at \$8,700/person, this includes 6 nights and 7 days (Sunday – Saturday) of daily guided hikes, fitness and exercise classes, daily massages, private accommodations for each guest, all meals and some evening elective nutrition talks, and an afternoon cooking demonstration, along with a return airport transfer (Venice Marco Polo Airport). Suite upgrades also are available at an increased rate. For further information or to make a reservation, please email inquiry@theranchmalibu.com.