

TATLER®

A woman with freckles is lying on a white towel, wearing a black headband with gold LV patterns. She is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a plain, light color.

SPA GUIDE 2019

IN ASSOCIATION WITH Healing  Holidays AND ESPA

HOT ON THE TRAIL

How does an already busy 21st-century man get fit? At Hollywood's most gruelling fitness retreat, of course

By JONATHAN THOMPSON

The first sign that this was going to be tough came when room service arrived after I checked in. Not to deliver a surprise welcome snack, but to lock my minibar and remove the Nespresso machine. These people meant business.

I was in Los Angeles to experience The Ranch 4.0 Westlake Village – Hollywood's go-to fitness retreat. In essence, it's a long weekend where the well-heeled and the wealthy drop in for four days of brutal exercise and a calorie-restricted vegan diet in the hope of a thorough physical reboot, or perhaps to fit into that special Oscars outfit.

From Olympic athletes and US presidents to models, musicians and movie stars, the A-list *worship* this programme – and for good reason. A strict diet of 1,400 calories a day, combined with eight hours of 'low-impact' physical exercise – predominantly in the blazing-hot Californian sunshine – adds up to serious results in a seriously short space of time.

My own goals were slightly less showbiz: 18 months after moving to the US from London, an intense work schedule and heavy travel commitments had resulted in a

dense waistline and even heavier midriff. With time at a premium, the prospect of significant change over a single weekend appealed – as it clearly continues to do among La-La Land's movers and shakers.

Having scrolled through Instagram beforehand, I was hopeful of at least one famous face in my group (recent social media-friendly guests have included Nicole Scherzinger, Rebel Wilson and Melanie Griffith). Sadly, despite signing the mandatory privacy agreement beforehand (welcome to LA!), there was ultimately no need. My 14 fellow guests, aged from 30 to 75, consisted primarily of lawyers, bankers and high-flying entrepreneurs from across the US and as far afield as the Middle East and New Zealand. All were trying to slot in a fitness boost between deadlines and family commitments; looking for a way to wipe the fog from the windows of their lives. (And all willing to pay a sizeable sum for the Windolene.)

The 4.0 programme, a spin-off from the established week-long retreat at the original Ranch, located in Malibu, is based at the nearby Four Seasons Hotel. While this makes perfect sense in terms of its cash-rich, time-poor clientele, who desire familiar comforts and want to dispense with the extra 45 minutes' drive into the Malibu Hills, it also opens a Pandora's box of temptations. These range from the hotel bar ('If You're Looking for a Sign That Says You Should Have a Glass of Wine, This Is It!' mocks a blackboard that I pass at





PHOTOGRAPHY: WIMMER / ART PARTNER LICENSING

least four times each day) to the wafts of sizzling meat coming from the kitchens (strangely, like cigarettes, your nose becomes more attuned to cheeseburgers once you've given them up).

Despite this gauntlet of temptation, we quickly settle into a routine. Each morning we're woken at 5.30am before a stretch class in the hotel's shiny basement gym. A light breakfast (perhaps a chickpea frittata or a small bowl of 'Ranch' granola and almond milk) is then served inside a grand pavilion in the hotel's garden – where we'll eat for the entire four days – before we're herded into blacked-out Mercedes vans and driven into the Californian hills.

The hikes are the heart of the programme: four hours of challenging terrain, covering between 10 and 12 miles each day. Largely weaving through the Santa Monica Moun-

tain back at the Four Seasons: an hour each of weights and core work followed by restorative yoga, and then the best part of the day – a massage to ease our aching joints and throbbing muscles. Each evening before dinner, these body-whisperers arrive at our rooms, armed with heated beds, to work their muscular necromancy, kneading us back into shape for the following day.

Dinner is a close second in terms of highlights. Despite the miserly low level of calories, all of the meals without fail are delicious, with standout stars including cauliflower 'pizza' and crispy kale 'chips'.

'Everything tastes like air,' mutters Anna, a thirtysomething from Toronto, as she chews. 'Good air, tasty air – but still air.'

By the fourth day, the change is apparent in everyone: thinner faces, looser T-shirts, brighter eyes and deeper tans abound. I get a surprise

I'VE LOST FOUR POUNDS – PLUS A COLOSSAL THREE INCHES FROM MY HIPS

tains, each trail contains some feisty inclines, but the gorgeous views – particularly those of the rugged Pacific coast – are enough to distract from the huffing and puffing.

Due to differing speeds, most of us end up hiking alone for a lot of the time, wrapped up in the vistas and our reasons for being here. Hiccups of information – details about the trail; a reminder to drink water or apply sunscreen – infrequently erupt from our walkie-talkies, but otherwise we're left with our own thoughts, the spectacle around us and the promise of a snack (a handful of nuts and a pinch of salt) at the halfway point.

Being out in such extraordinary nature has a deeper, calming impact, too. As if the searing Californian sun burns 'real-world' problems to ash and then blows them away on the ocean breeze.

Lunch (chickpea and quinoa veggie burgers, split-pea soup) is followed by an afternoon of workout classes

in the bathroom mirror on the final morning when I step from the shower and spot something I haven't seen for years: my abs.

Before leaving, we're weighed and measured as we were at the start. I've lost four pounds – one for every day of the programme – plus a colossal three inches from my hips. Perhaps more importantly, I feel sharp, awake and crackling with bouncy Californian energy as I hand in my walkie-talkie.

'You've seen how easy it is to reduce your waistline in a short space of time,' says Peter, one of the impossibly lean trainers. 'Now the challenge is to keep it up.' It's definitely something I plan to consider – over a celebratory cheeseburger at the pool. □

Double, from £3,225, full board (theranchmalibu.com; +1 888 777 2177). American Airlines flies from London Heathrow to Los Angeles daily, from £359 return (americanairlines.co.uk)