

AFAR

No Wine, Rigorous Hikes, and Quinoa Bowls: This Wellness Retreat in Italy Will Test Your Limits

At the Ranch Italy, participants trade in Italian wines and pastas for quinoa bowls and workouts at this seriously tough (but worth it) wellness retreat.



The daily, four-hour long hikes are a highlight of the program at the Ranch Italy. Courtesy of The Ranch Italy

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In August 2022, while other travelers were sipping crisp Aperol spritzes by the sea on the Amalfi Coast or tucking into al dente *cacio e pepe* at *trattorie* in Rome, there I was, sweaty, starving, and taking my last steps to reach the peak of a mountain in the Lazio region of Italy, having just hiked four very steep miles to get there.

I was walking with Gary, a fellow Californian who called excitedly to his husband, already at the top with most of our 12-person group: “I got lost! But then I found my way back to the trail, *on my own*.” Meanwhile, I could make out the voices of

our two last stragglers—one of whom, an actress from New York, had hiked most of the way up with me, alternating between chatting and belting out Broadway-worthy renditions of “The Hills Are Alive” whenever we passed a particularly stunning vista. As I reached for the tiny paper bag with precisely six almonds we were given as a trail snack, I gazed at the postcard perfect rocky alpine meadows below—definitely worthy of breaking into song, I thought. The moment was interrupted by a crackle on the walkie-talkies we had each been given, followed by one of our guides saying, “OK, Ranchers, it’s time to turn around if you haven’t already. And please remember: *acqua, acqua, acqua!*”



The Ranch Italy is located in Fiuggi, and many of the daily hikes take place in the nearby Apennine Mountains. Courtesy of Jessie Beck

Although most people wouldn’t normally associate Italy—land of porcini and prosciutto—with “weight loss” or “detox,” I was part of a small group of wellness seekers who had that goal in mind at the Ranch Italy. I was especially interested in how the newest location for the famed California-based retreat, the Ranch Malibu (also referred to as “the Ranch”), might translate in Fiuggi, a small town in the mountainous countryside outside Rome.

In the wide-ranging world of luxury wellness retreats, the Ranch has a reputation as the boot camp of the bunch. Started in 2010 and popular among Hollywood

celebrities and wellness enthusiasts, the retreat invites guests to spend a week eating vegan and gluten-free food, eschewing alcohol and caffeine, and following a daily regimen that includes a rigorous hike and several workout classes (though it does build in time to unwind and recover as well). The program is designed for participants, aka Ranchers, to lose weight, detox, reset their digestive system, and build strength. In 2022, the Ranch Italy in Fiuggi became their first permanent international retreat, and the team also announced plans to open the Ranch Hudson in New York in 2023.

While the early wake-up calls and technical trails are certainly challenging, I was surprised by just how enjoyable the overall experience was. From the nourishing meals and convivial company, to the incredible Italian landscapes dotted with medieval architecture, the Ranch Italy was a wellness experience unlike any—in Italy or otherwise—and (shh) I only cheated once. Read on for a breakdown of the what it was like.

Fiuggi and the Palazzo: A location with a reputation for wellness

When the Ranch opened its doors in Fiuggi, partnering with the Palazzo Fiuggi for accommodation and amenities, it joined a long tradition of health-minded travel in the area. For centuries, Fiuggi has been known for its healing, mineral-rich waters, which many believe help to rebalance the immune system and restore kidneys. For just as long, it has welcomed travelers wishing to cure ailments—most famously among them Michelangelo and a number of Italian royals—by drinking its water. These days, Fiuggi water is sold throughout the world (and even on Amazon), but it continues to draw international and Italian visitors alike to drink the water straight from the source, where the healing qualities are said to be more potent.

At the heart of it all sits the five-star hotel and wellness resort Palazzo Fiuggi, on a peaceful, 20-acre, park-like property with tree-lined pathways and expansive gardens. Originally built in 1913, the palatial hotel was the first on the European continent to have a swimming pool and was a place to see and be seen in the early 20th century—Italy's King Vittorio Emanuele III and his family came here for an extended holiday in 1914. Today, it remains a luxurious retreat focused on health and relaxation, now with not one, but two pools, as well as a new spa wing with indoor and outdoor lounge areas, a salt room, and three saunas—my favorite was a steam sauna with floor-to-ceiling windows framing a picturesque view of Fiuggi's old town.



The Ranch Italy's program is located at the Palazzo Fiuggi, a historic wellness retreat and five-star resort. Courtesy of Jessie Beck

In each of the 102 guest rooms, velvet textiles and marbled bathrooms give it a sumptuous look and feel, while large picture windows—in some rooms, they're floor-to-ceiling doors that open onto a petite balcony—let in enough natural light to make the space feel bright, airy, and fresh. (If you can, request a room with a view of the old city.)

The Palazzo is both a highlight of the Ranch Italy and a departure from the experience at Malibu. Unlike the Ranch Malibu, which is located on an isolated property with limited cell service and only used by Ranchers, in Fiuggi guests mix and mingle with other visitors, many of whom are there for one of the Palazzo's separate wellness programs. Ranchers can also easily walk into the town of Fiuggi, which is at once a source of temptation and a pleasant break from the program. While some may prefer the distraction-free focus of Malibu, I loved the atmosphere of the Ranch Italy's charming, small town locale and feeling like European royalty while indulging in the Palazzo's world-class spa facilities. The Kneipp, a knee-deep, zigzag-shaped pool in which you walk in and out of alternately hot and cold water to revive tired legs, became a particular favorite among our group.

The program

Relaxing as this sounds, make no mistake, a week with the Ranch Italy is still a challenge. Without the help of any caffeine, all of us Ranchers began our day with a 5:30 a.m. wake-up call, followed by a half hour of stretching and breakfast. At 7:30 a.m., we gathered into vans to drive to a trailhead for that day's hike. Although each day brought a different trail, we generally stayed in and around the Apennine Mountains—sometimes with an endpoint in mind, and sometimes without. "It's not about the distance," said one of our guides, Viviana. "It's about the time. We want you to get your heart rate up while being outdoors."

Despite the early, coffee-free mornings, I woke up excited at the promise of time outdoors in this stunning corner of Italy, curious about what we'd encounter. Depending on the day, our trails led us past gruff, chain-smoking men with delicate straw baskets brimming with porcinis, and archaeological ruins such as an old mill and a centuries-old bell used by religious pilgrims to announce their entry to the town below. Views often featured dramatic cliffs or medieval hill-top towns, and along the pathways, we came across bushes upon bushes of plump blackberries that I stopped to devour.

On the trail, Ranch staff encouraged us to challenge ourselves but also to go at whatever pace we needed. Case in point: On one of our more leisurely days, two other participants and I fell to the back of the group. "I'm not in the mood to race eight miles today," said Ari. "Same," I replied, "I'm just happy to be outside." As we walked and chatted, Simona, one of the Italian guides with us, noted our relaxed pace and began to point out things along the trail. Mushrooms. An old bridge. And eventually, a quick detour scrambling over rocks to reach a cool enclave of moss-covered caves.

After lunch back at the Ranch, our afternoons were filled with a weight-lifting class, yoga, and—thankfully—a relaxing massage and an hour or two of free time. As the sun went down, we gathered at our dining table for dinner, tea, and a preview of the next day's itinerary.

The schedule, and programming, was the same as that at the Ranch Malibu. However, according to Laura, who has done both programs, "The hikes in Italy are more technical but it's also a bit more laid-back. The Ranch Malibu felt much more like a boot camp." Other veteran Ranchers agreed, also noting that the landscapes in Italy were more awe-inspiring and the main reason why they would recommend someone choosing Italy over Malibu.

The food



This lentil bowl is an example of a typical lunch at the Ranch Italy. Courtesy of the Ranch Italy.

“I really want to know what the Italian chef said when someone from Malibu came and told him this was supposed to be pizza,” one of the veteran Ranchers joked as we collectively stared at the cauliflower-based, vegetable-topped “pizza” that had been placed in front of us for dinner.

While workouts were a major focus of our week at the Ranch, the food was just as much a core part of the program. Often credited with making the six almond snack a thing, the Ranch is famous for its 1,400-calorie per day menu focusing on irritant-free, vegan, and gluten-free meals that are nutrient-dense and balance proteins, complex carbohydrates, healthy fats, and taste. The team has even released two cookbooks that dive deeper into this food philosophy, along with recipes for recreating their dishes at home, *Food Food Food* and *The Ranch at Live Oak*.

Staples of the Ranch Malibu, such as the cauliflower pizza and a quinoa bowl with pickled vegetables, made an appearance on our table throughout our stay. However, it was the more Italian-inspired dishes that our group raved about the most: a flavorful vegan eggplant “lasagna” with macadamia nut cheese in a clear tomato broth, buckwheat ravioli alongside porcini mushrooms, and a rich, creamy *zuppa al carciofi* (artichoke soup) that perfectly captured the vegetable’s earthy flavor.

However, “how much you need to eat to stay healthy while losing weight isn’t the same for everyone,” says Michelle B, a primary care nurse practitioner in San Francisco. “Depending on your age, sex, size, and many other factors, you may need more (or less) than that.” For this reason, additional portions are available upon request and fruit is readily available as a supplement. While the team will do their best to accommodate at any point, it is ideal to let the kitchen know you may want a larger portion at least a day before.

Still, the food is different from what you might eat on a typical Italian vacation, and I’d recommend planning your trip to include a few days in Rome, ideally before your time at the Ranch. I didn’t do this, instead traveling directly to and from Fiuggi from the United States, with no additional stops in Italy like the rest of the Ranchers. FOMO got the best of me toward the end of my week there so, in lieu of our final dinner, I slipped out to a nearby trattoria focused on local and organic products, to indulge in a bowl of house-made *fini fini*, a thin linguini pasta, baked figs and porcini, and a glass of red wine. I regret nothing.

The results



At The Ranch Italy, Ranchers eat all three of their daily meals communally in the program's light-filled dining room. The Ranch Italy

At 6:30 a.m. on the last day of our program, those of us who hadn’t already left—onwards for postdetox debauchery in Rome, truffle hunting in the Italian countryside, or back home, having front-loaded the wine-and-pasta portion of their journeys—gathered around the long table that had become so familiar over

the past week. One by one, over bowls of oatmeal with currants and house-made almond milk, each of my fellow Ranchers, now friends, announced their results from this arduous retreat. “Five pounds!” one announced. “Eight!” said another, among congratulatory responses. “Two for me!” I said. “Must have been the pasta.”

“That’s still good!” said Laura, one of the veteran Ranchers. “And actually, you’ll continue to lose more once you’re home.”

She was right. All in all, I wound up losing five pounds. More importantly, though, I left feeling inspired to resume lifting weights regularly, to stretch alongside my coffee each morning, and to be more mindful of how much alcohol I drink. Per the Ranch’s recommendations, we were all also encouraged to slowly reintegrate foods back into our diets, paying attention to how our bodies react. In my case, I was surprised by how much more full I felt after eating a seemingly reasonable amount of pasta, and the immediate headache that came with eating a processed protein bar. The intense, week-long program is often seen as a jumping-off point for many Ranchers, a way to jump-start healthy habits that are continued long after we return home—with unforgettable memories of the Apennines, Fiuggi, and moments of laughter (and suffering) we shared with our fellow Ranchers to boot.

Book now: theranchmalibu.com; *The eight day, seven night program costs \$9,100 per person for a double occupancy room and \$10,650 for single occupancy. Starting in December, the retreat will launch the Ranch 4.0, a five-day, four-night program that costs \$4,950 and \$5,800 per person for double and single occupancy, respectively.*