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BEAUTY AND THE FEAST

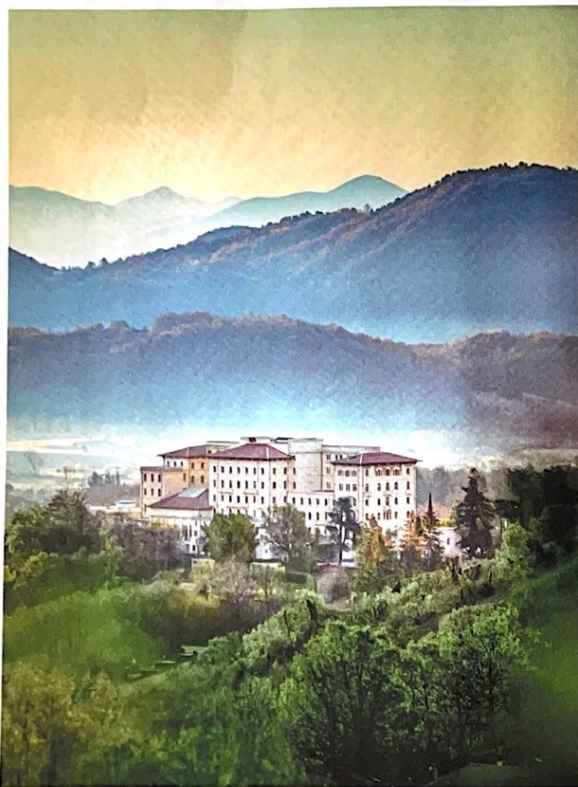
Magical GARDENS, incredible INTERIORS and Christmas ENTERTAINING



This colourful lentil salad is typical of the plant-based meals served at The Ranch Italy, where the focus is on low-calorie, nutrient-rich food



Daily four-hour hikes allow guests to take in the breathtaking scenery of the Apennine Mountains while enjoying the fresh air and exercise



Palazzo Fiuggi is set within the verdant hills, valleys and meadows that surround the small spa town of Fiuggi, after which the palace was named



After a day of rigorous activity, guests can retreat to the Palazzo Fiuggi spa to soothe their aching muscles in the indoor swimming pool

Get a real kick out of bootcamp

PAMELA GOODMAN experiences the pleasures and privations of the new Italian outpost of exclusive health, wellness and fitness retreat The Ranch Malibu

The bootcamp – a concept of hell and damnation in the minds of some; of restorative, life-enhancing necessity in the minds of others. Certainly, the idea of a wellness holiday, be it yoga, fitness, detox or medi-spa, is growing more fashionable by the day. So it seems like a logical step that Californian wellness gurus Sue and Alex Glasscock should bring their Ranch Malibu programme to Europe – Italy to be precise, an hour's drive from Rome.

If the concept is the same – a limited calorie intake of 1,400 per day, intense hiking and fitness schedules, blood tests and ECGs, and pampering post-activity massages – the locations are very different. Malibu is, by all accounts, rustic and disconnected. Italy is smart and luxurious, principally because it is run in collaboration with the glistening, newly refurbished Palazzo Fiuggi, a grand spa hotel in the small town of the same name, known for the curative powers of its natural spring water.

A flight cancellation (woe the wretchedness of travel in 2022) necessitates arriving a day early – time enough to preload on calories and indulge in some Italian home cooking. Somehow the idea of a week of restricted eating in Italy feels sacrilegious.

We dine at delightful La Locanda in Fiuggi's hilltop old town on a table next to a dozen glowing Americans – Ranch guests, it transpires, who have finished their programme and have jumped ship for a last evening of wine and pasta before leaving the next day.

At The Ranch, we are a group of 24 – maximum capacity bar one – with an age range of 26 to 80. It is an unexpected mix of couples, mothers and sons (especially unexpected), single women, friends and even some newlyweds. (I'm aghast this might be their honeymoon but, they tell me, it is a post-wedding detox.) Four of us are Brits, the rest American – many of them Ranch Malibu devotees who are combining this with a longer stay in Europe.

Seated around a large dining table in an area of Palazzo Fiuggi dedicated to Ranch guests, we introduce ourselves and, awkwardly for reserved northern Europeans not used to this type of thing, we are asked to say what we are grateful for. This is repeated at the end

WAYS AND MEANS

Pamela Goodman stayed at Palazzo Fiuggi (palazzofiuggi.com) as a guest of The Ranch Italy (theranchmalibu.com). Programmes run from Sunday to Sunday throughout the year and cost from £7,226 per person, all inclusive, based on two sharing, excluding flights and extra spa and medical treatments. In 2023, The Ranch will open a new retreat in New York's Hudson Valley.

of the week, when we squirm a little less; by now, we are all buddies, have Googled each other and have exchanged email addresses.

And we have shared experiences: the daily 5.30am wake-up call; the journeys in a cavalcade of minibuses to the start and end of each walk; the four-hour mountain hikes (undertaken to be done over time not distance, with everyone walking as far as they can in two hours before turning round and returning to the starting point) through woods of beech and oak; the afternoon exercise classes (optional, so not everyone attends); and the food. The latter is the overarching favourite topic of conversation that binds us together and drives The Ranch programme from start to finish.

Plant-based – a less contentious way of saying vegan – is the premise of all Ranch meals, which prove surprisingly satisfying, particularly at the start of the week before the hunger grows. A courgette and banana muffin or a bowl of granola does the job at breakfast, salad or soup with perhaps a little cornbread is lunch, while grains and more vegetables are assembled for a two-course dinner. No pudding, no alcohol, no caffeine, no chocolate.

No one in our group is especially overweight but weight loss or, to put it another way, a gut cleanse, does seem to be the main (often unspoken) objective. By day three, the purge sets in, helped on its way by bountiful amounts of Fiuggi water, a known diuretic, which we are wisely advised not to drink at bedtime. Hunger inevitably follows. We are weighed and measured (chest, waist, hips, thighs, calves) when we arrive and leave, and our statistics are discreetly emailed to us, along with our medical results after a brief consultation with one of the presiding doctors.

Palazzo Fiuggi is, after all, a medi-spa as much as a pampering spa, with copious facilities and a hefty 34-page guide listing treatments – diagnostic, aesthetic, therapeutic, cleansing – all of which come at extra cost to the programme. By the end of the week, most of us have dabbled, if only with something as simple as a holistic bathing ritual in a mineral-enriched pool.

So what, in Ranch speak, was I most grateful for? Yes, I shed a few pounds (my husband, like most of the men, shed a few more) and it felt good to do this as much through exercise as diet. I was pleased to feel fitter and stronger, pummelled to a new leanness by excellent massage therapists. And, oh hell, it makes me cringe to say it, but I enjoyed the company of my fellow Ranchers.

I wonder slightly who the guests will be, how the walks will work and what it would be like to wake in darkness and never feel the warmth of the Italian sun on your back in the depths of winter (the programme operates all year round). But Italy is beautiful whatever the season. And post-Christmas, in the midwinter gloom, aren't we all in need of a bit of wellness? □