

# spa business



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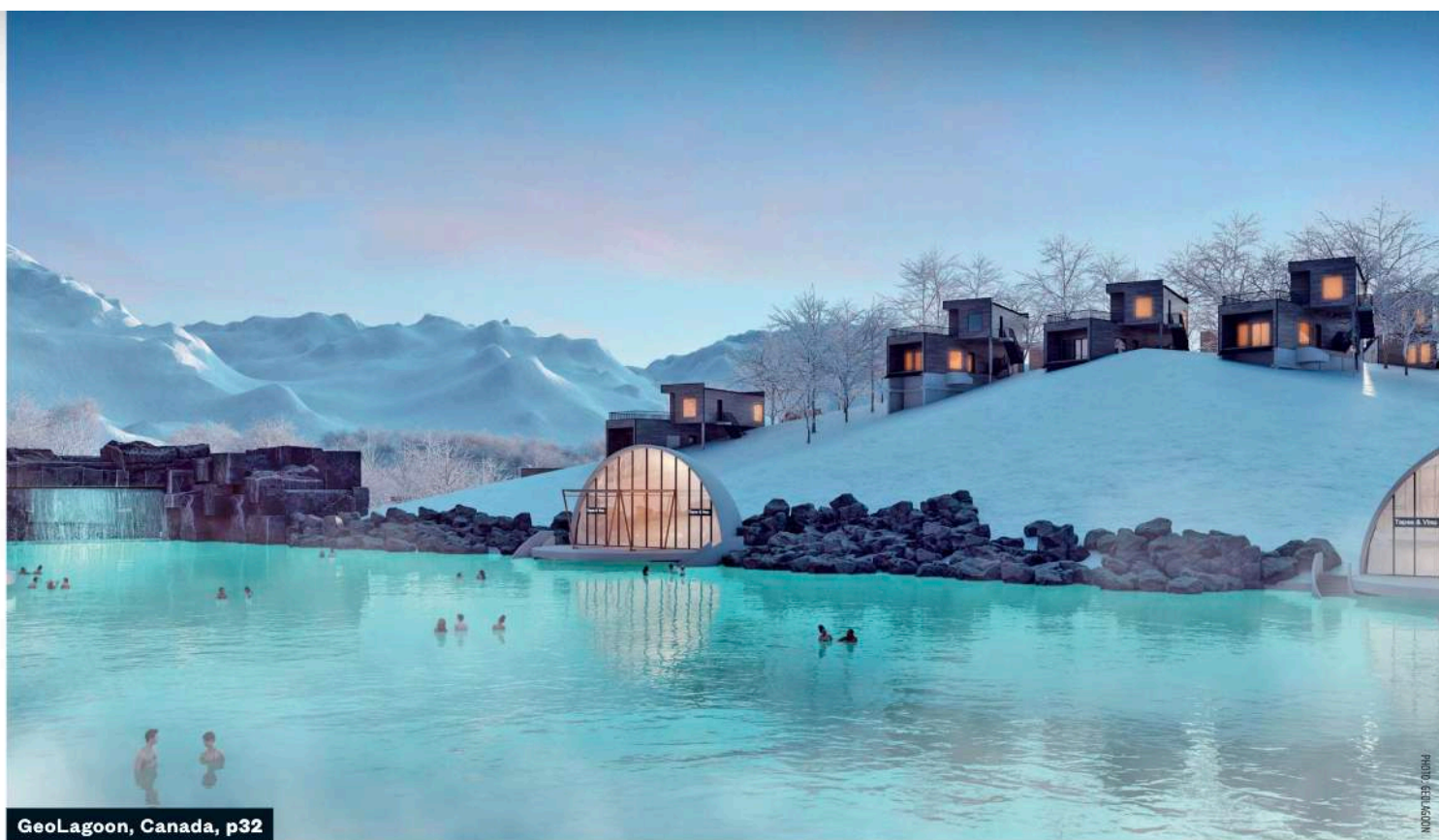
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The Ranch is a business,  
but it really helps people  
– the programme truly  
changes people's lives

Alex Glasscock, owner

# Alex & Sue GLASSCOCK

The Ranch Malibu has gained loyal followers with its seemingly simple programme of long hikes and limited calories – with a hefty price tag of US\$10,000 a week. Jane Kitchen visits its new outpost in Italy and catches up with the owners

Alex and Sue Glasscock  
started the business in  
California 12 years ago



When I tell people I'm going to spend a week in Italy, hiking four to five hours a day and eating a very limited diet – no gluten, caffeine, dairy, meat or alcohol – the first question I get is: "why?" It's a question I will also ask myself at various points – when the alarm buzzes at 5.30am each morning, when my legs scream at me back down the mountain we've spent two hours climbing up, when a man I barely know pops a blister for me, when I face yet another bowl of something with chickpeas in it.

But why does anyone do anything remotely challenging? To see if they can. Or because they can. Or to remind themselves that they can. Or to feel proud that they did. In my case, there's one more reason: to find out what keeps people coming back to do this again and again – and to pay roughly US\$10,000 (€9,699, £8,383) for the privilege.

## ADDING NOT SUBTRACTING

I am set to visit The Ranch Italy, the newest offshoot and first European location for the very successful The Ranch Malibu. Started in California

12 years ago by Alex and Sue Glasscock, The Ranch boasts A-list celebrities among its clientele – Rebel Wilson, Mandy Moore and Lea Michele are all alums – and has a limit of 25 guests each week, who must adhere to the strict 1,400-calorie vegan, gluten-free, caffeine-free, sugar-free, alcohol-free menu while hiking four to five hours each morning and attending fitness and yoga classes in the afternoon. Lest you despair, daily massages and nap times are also programmed in.

"What we say to guests is: don't think about subtracting. It's about adding better things: more plants, more water, more sleep," says Alex.

I've brought my husband, Christian, with me – a man who has a penchant for getting hangry – a quality I'm concerned about as we head into our week-long programme. The Ranch Italy has set up shop at the newly opened Palazzo Fuggi, a medical wellness destination located just under an hour from Rome. We arrive on Sunday and slide into the obligatory orientation meeting and I'm surprised to be greeted by so many American accents. There are 11 of us this week and everyone is from New York or LA, it seems. We're all weighed and measured and



## INTERVIEW



Daily hikes deep within the Apennine Mountains last four to five hours

► hooked up to an ECG – a requirement of the Italian government before participating in the programme.

During a tour, we're introduced to Fiuggi's natural mineral waters and its many benefits – it's been found to lower blood pressure and is great for kidney health; Michelangelo, who suffered from kidney stones, was a frequent visitor to Fiuggi. The newly built Roman Spa has a station where you can drink the healing waters, though we're warned that it can have a diuretic effect. The spa – which was created with support from GOCO Hospitality – also includes a sauna and cold plunge in the changing rooms, as well as a coed infrared sauna and a Kneipp path to help recover from hiking. Additionally, there's a thalassotherapy suite that can be booked for €70 (US\$74, £60) an hour, where guests can float in pools filled with Fiuggi water combined with dense salt and magnesium for an even deeper recovery.

### REPEAT CUSTOMERS

After the tour, we are hustled into an hour-long fitness class, where I discover everyone – including two women who are recent grandmothers – is much fitter than we are. I'm worried about exhausting my legs before we even start the hiking, so I spend some time in the Kneipp walk and the thermal pool afterwards, where I meet a mother-daughter combo from New York who are also part of our group. The daughter, a 30-year-old doctor who started her career in the midst of the pandemic, needs a break, mentally and physically, and the mother, who has been to The Ranch Malibu multiple times, thought

The Ranch Italy would do the trick. This seems to fit with a pattern the Glasscocks are seeing.

"The majority of our guests are in their 40s and 50s, but now with their kids we're getting the next generation," says Sue. "Typically half the guests have been here before and 35 per cent have been referred by other people who've been."

With a maximum occupancy of 25 guests each week, the Malibu location is fully booked four months in advance. "It just stays full, with a waiting list all the time," says Sue. The Ranch Italy has been more than 50 per cent occupied in the first few months of opening, and is about to launch a Ranch 4.0 version of the stay, where guests settle in for a long-weekend programme of four days rather than a full week. There's also a new location planned in upstate New York, just an hour outside of Manhattan, where the Glasscocks hope to expand with incentive travel, corporate meetings and companies which are infusing wellness into their work culture.

### RELINQUISHING RESPONSIBILITY

At 7pm, we gather again in the room where we will be served all our meals, which features an impressively long table surrounded on three sides with views over the ancient hill town of Fiuggi. Dinner is a beautifully presented aubergine parmesan stack with macadamia ricotta so creamy, I don't miss the fact that it's not real cheese.

Afterwards, one of our Ranch guides checks in to see how we're all feeling. "We don't want to starve



Most guests are in their 40s and 50s and the majority are from the US



Jane Kitchen tries out the dense salt thalassotherapy

**"You'll hate it, and it's like torture at times, but at the end, you'll feel incredible. And like you've accomplished something"**

you," she says. "If you ever feel like you need more food, let us know." She looks at Christian and at another tall, fit man from LA. "Do you need double portions?" she asks. She tells us we'll feel hungry throughout the week – we're only eating 1,400 calories a day, after all – but if it's hunger like we don't feel like we'll make it through the night, then we should ask for a second portion. The men both agree they feel like they'll make it through the night. Everyone does.

Alex says they hire employees for character over experience at The Ranch. "The most important thing is the quality of the staff and the way we communicate with the guests," he explains, and staff must be both nurturing and professionally intimate in order to create the kind of trust you need to complete the programme. To be sure, each day starts with footcare, where Ranch guides slather our feet with a white, anti-chafing cream,

wrap any twisted knees or ankles and even pop our blisters for us. Professionally intimate indeed.

On that first night, the guides remind us that they can take care of everything for us and that we don't have to think about anything. This is an option-free programme, designed for busy executives – or any of the rest of us – who suffer from decision fatigue and the idea of relinquishing responsibility is first on the list of Ranch values stencilled on the wall of the fitness studio along with other mantras like: "Be honest with yourself. Get off the grid and focus on yourself. The world will still be there when you get back."

Sue explains: "We really wanted to create something so all you need to do is show up – you've got this positive, nurturing staff and you'll have positive results at the end of the day. We all make so many decisions all day, it was important not to have to make decisions here."

The hope is that this approach will give guests a reset – access to a clear mind and a pathway to creativity, says Alex. "We focus on a framework and a programme and then people figure out what they need to get out of it," he explains.



The Ranch Italy has been over 50 per cent occupied in its first few months... and now there's a new location planned in upstate New York

Palazzo Fiuggi is the sister site to spa destination Forte Village in Sardinia

#### ► 'YOU'LL FEEL INCREDIBLE'

On that first night, however, my mind is full; we are loaded with information: how to use our Camelbak, advice on hiking posture, how to use hiking poles, the benefits of forest bathing, a request not to use headphones while hiking (both for safety and for mindfulness), information on how the walkie talkies we're required to keep with us in case we get lost work, details on how the paths will be marked with flags to tell us which way to go. We're told the hikes will be for time, not distance and advised to go at our own pace. Four guides will hike with us: one each at the beginning and end and two in the middle. I ask about toilet breaks, and am told we'll be given a small plastic bag with toilet paper in it that we need to use in the woods and bring back with us. I'm somehow stunned that people who pay US\$10,000 a week will gladly pee in the woods.

We go around the table and introduce ourselves, and say something we're thankful for. The one other British woman at the table looks awkward. "We don't do this kind of thing in England," my husband offers helpfully. Most people have been to The Ranch Malibu multiple times. Two people give the same answer when asked what brings them back: "You feel incredible at the end of the week." One explains further: "You'll

hate it, and it's like torture at times, but at the end, you'll feel incredible. And you'll feel like you've accomplished something." Tall, fit LA guy and his partner have not been here before and the partner raises concerns about him being hangry. "Do you have many divorces afterwards?" he asks, mostly joking.

In the morning, we're told, we have the option to do bloodwork and urinalysis before we go and then meet with Palazzo Fiuggi's on-site doctor later in the week for a broader picture into our health. And at 9pm it's bedtime, as we have an early start. I have difficulty falling asleep that night, my mind racing at all the information we've been given. And I think I'm a little bit nervous about what the week will entail.

#### AT YOUR OWN PACE

At the 5.30am wake-up call, a very chipper Ranch guide wishes me good morning. We begin at 6am with a stretch class, followed by breakfast of Ranch granola, before we pile into vans that will take us to our first day's hiking spot, deep within the Apennine Mountains.

We're given hiking poles and asked to test our walkie talkies – it's an out-and-back hike, so when we've hiked roughly two hours, the guides will make an announcement to turn around and head back. We

Guests enjoy views of the village of Fiuggi

Fitness, yoga and massage sessions take place in the afternoons



## INTERVIEW

At the last dinner we share thoughts about our week and the awkwardness we felt at the beginning has vanished

Bonding with fellow guests is listed as one of the benefits of the programme

► In the same spirit, our snack is something easily replicated at home: seven almonds, something The Ranch has become known for. The idea is not to starve you, they say, but to make you aware that sometimes a small amount is enough to offer satisfaction. Just before the two-hour mark, we stop to eat our almonds with a view down the valley. It does the trick, giving me enough energy to turn around and walk back.

When we return to Palazzo Fuggi, we hobble straight to lunch, sweaty and tired and aching, where we check the massage schedule, sign up for afternoon fitness and yoga and shovel down mouthfuls of healthy food. My body is too sore for the fitness class, but I happily join in for yoga and make use of the Kneipp paths, infrared sauna and cold plunge pool in an effort to help my muscles recover. I'm entirely convinced that these contrast bathing therapies are what allows me to continue with the hikes, day after day.

### MEASURABLE RESULTS

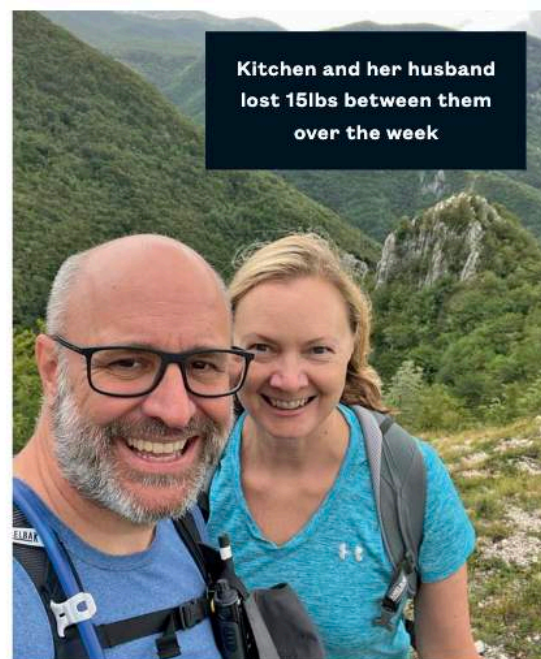
We meet again for dinner, then do the whole thing over again the next day. And the next and the next and next and the next. The hikes are different each day, but little else changes. We titter with excitement over a small cauliflower pizza, or when the afternoon snack involves something approximating chocolate (but which in reality is mostly dates). And we get to know each other, little by little.

At the end of the week, we're all weighed and measured again and, not surprisingly, there are real, measurable results (I am down five pounds, Christian is down 10). On the last dinner, we go around the table to share some thoughts about our week and all the hesitancy and awkwardness we felt at the beginning has vanished. Almost everyone speaks with real feeling about the sense of accomplishment

they have from the programme and, in particular, about how grateful they are for the amazing group of people that they've spent the last week with.

"Bonding with fellow guests" is listed as one of the benefits, or results, at The Ranch (alongside improving overall health, gaining strength, increasing mental clarity, losing fat and inches, jump-starting a healthy lifestyle, spending time in nature, losing weight, unplugging from daily life, increasing metabolism, improving cholesterol levels, and finding a sense of accomplishment) – and indeed, that sense of connection is one of the most important.

"It reminds people how we're really the same at our core, and brings us back to our humanity," concludes Alex. "The Ranch is a business, but it really helps people – the programme truly changes people's lives." ●



Kitchen and her husband lost 15lbs between them over the week

PHOTO: JANE KITCHEN

PHOTO: MARTINO DINI @ HEAD REPRESENTED