

EUROPE

Welcome to the Ranch: the A-list boot camp comes to Rome

Michelle Obama's favourite US fitness retreat has a new outpost an hour from Italy's capital. The spa is gorgeous but the daily hikes are hardcore, says Sharon Walker



The Ranch at Palazzo Fuggi

Sharon Walker

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It was clear from the off that the Ranch meant business. This would not be the type of spa that involved lying prone on a massage table for a week straight. There was

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stuff to give up: alcohol (oops) and smoking, obviously, coffee, processed foods, diet drinks, sugarless gum, sweets and “any ingredient you can’t pronounce”. This was **STRONGLY RECOMMENDED** (its capital letters) or I would probably suffer. In the month before departure I upped my step count and took a haphazard stab at the rest.

The Ranch is the luxury American boot camp in the Santa Monica mountains, beloved of affluent A-list types. Michelle Obama, Jessica Alba and Rebel Wilson are said to be fans. But I was heading to the Ranch Italy, the new European off-shoot — a small slice of boho California sequestered within a purpose-built annexe in magnificent Palazzo Fiuggi, a glamorous medical spa hotel just over an hour from Rome in Fiuggi, a town known for its healing mineral waters.

At the arrival dinner I was joined by 22 guests who had flown in from Saudi Arabia, the UK, Canada and the US. Many were seasoned Ranchers, and four had checked in for the whole month. We were each encouraged to say what we were grateful for and what we were looking forward to that week. Facetiously I said I was grateful for dinner — we had at least been fed — and was looking forward to breakfast.



Dining at the Ranch

We had tucked into a miniature vegan aubergine “parmigiana” with macadamia ricotta. It hardly seemed enough for a fully grown woman, but then we were all here for the kind of radical transformation the Ranch achieves through a strict plant-based diet and exercise, plenty of it, chiefly hiking. The Malibu hikes

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in case we needed to call for assistance (yikes), or stuck us on the electrocardiogram machine to check the state of our hearts.

The alarm call came at 5.30am. After a thorough limbering-up before a granola breakfast we drove off down sinewy roads in a presidential-style motorcade of black Mercedes vans, deep into the Apennine mountains. After a moment of silence and a quick motivational quote it was off up the trail, following the red flags that marked the route.

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The Ranch hikes are measured on time, not distance, and we are always encouraged to go at our own pace. Nevertheless, I set off like a skittish racehorse, determined to keep up, thankful for

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minutes in my Ranch walkie-talkie crackled to life. “Good job, Ranchers, you should be warmed up now ready for the incline. And don’t forget — acqua, acqua, acqua.” *Ready* for the incline? They’d got to be kidding.

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Guests on a hike

When I finally tore my eyes away from my feet, it was beautiful. Ancient beech trees covered the mountain slopes, tiny yellow-and-blue butterflies fluttered over wild orchids, a group of gangly foals emerged shyly from the forest. At base camp our four hours of effort were rewarded with a cool, lavender-scented towel and a “snack” of six almonds. Six. I swallowed them in one gulp, only to learn later that the point was to chew them “mindfully”.

Survival instinct soon kicked in and, back at the hotel, I found one Canadian guest switching the bowls to get a bigger lunch portion. “I gotta eat,” she shrugged. As the week wore on we spoke endlessly of food with a kind of wistful nostalgia as we eked out our snacks and squabbled over a minute spare bag of popcorn like boarding school pupils tussling over the tuckbox. The rule-breakers who demanded more food soon found that extra portions were more easily extracted from the Italian staff — “Oh yes, why not? Eat! Eat! It’s so small!” — while the Americans warned that such blatant disregard for the programme would likely affect our results.

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Making the Ca



Get a taste for t

At lunch we ate quinoa and kale Caesar salad with a delicious chickpea focaccia; for dinner roasted carrot and fennel with harissa and black lentils. The snacks improved, a berry oat cookie winning the prize for the best mouthful.

The food is all gluten-free and vegan, chosen for its anti-inflammatory properties. Like the fitness programme, the diet is a carbon copy of that followed in Malibu. After all, why mess with a trusted formula? That said, some guests felt that the Ranch had missed a trick by not embracing more Italian flavours or making more of the Palazzo's three-star Michelin chef. In spite of our griping the meals were a highlight, not so much for the food (which was in fact 1,400 calories a day, so not quite a starvation diet), but for the company of our delightful new "family". We had bonded deeply in our self-imposed adversity. "It is so deeply nurturing to eat together; we need it, but we so rarely make time for it," one guest noted.



The yoga studio

There were casualties. One poor girl stumbled and injured her knee and, after spending the night in A&E (in the company of Ranch staff who stayed with her and her mother until 4am), was forced to quit the programme. I got off lightly with a growing patchwork of blister plasters, yet thanks to the Ranch's expert foot care — who knew that wool in a boot could work such wonders? — I didn't ever really hurt.

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by a massage, a fitness class and yoga, dinner at 7pm, then bed. And we had the run of Palazzo Fiuggi's glamorous spa, with its seemingly endless pools and knot-defying therapists.

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With each hike my strides grew bolder, my breath steadier, the views and conversation more engaging. Could it be that I was enjoying myself? I was always the last to return, scuttling down the hill sideways like an arthritic crab because of my old-lady knees, but I soon stopped fretting. The Ranch staff are not in the habit of losing their gilded charges, and I was never far from help. "Oh no, you are not slow. I run to keep up with you," my guide, a young Monica Bellucci lookalike, sweetly lied.

On the final morning came the moment of reckoning. We'd come hoping for transformation, but how much is really possible in a week? Well, quite an astonishing amount, it turned out. Everyone had lost weight and inches. Some more than others. One man had lost more than a stone. Yet it wasn't all about weight loss: my Canadian friend had reached the top of a viewpoint, an extraordinary achievement considering that six months earlier she'd been signed off by her consultant after heart surgery. We all high-fived her.



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View from the spa

As for me, I'd barely noticed my body changing, but one night in my hotel room I caught sight of the back of an arm in the wardrobe mirror and it stopped me in my tracks. Something was definitely happening. My bingo wings were history. I'd lost a gratifying inch and a half from my waist and three from my hips, plus 7lb in weight. And was it my imagination or had the hikes been getting easier? I certainly felt better, lighter and energised.

The next group of Ranch guests was arriving as I checked out. A handsome American couple, dressed entirely in white, wanted the lowdown. How were hikes here compared with those in Malibu? "I've never been to Malibu, although I really want to go." I told them truthfully. "But are they very hard?" they persisted. "Nah," I said. "Piece of cake. You're going to love it. I didn't throw up once."

Sharon Walker was a guest of The Ranch Italy and Healing Holidays. Seven nights' full board from £7,226pp, including flights, transfers, daily massage and some medical testing; healingholidays.com. For more information visit theranchmalibu.com

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