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"The Ranch fuses high luxury with high activity to bring about a longer, healthier, happier life."



TRAVEL // ITALY

RANCH DRESSING

Italian elegance topped with lashings of American enthusiasm, The Ranch Italy delivers a heady mixture, says **DUNCAN MADDEN**

TO WALK THE marble floors of the Palazzo Fiuggi is to tread in the footsteps of history. This grand art nouveau villa set in 20 acres of landscaped gardens atop the unassuming and classically Italian town of Fiuggi is as storied as it is luxurious. The preferred retreat of the last Italian king and of movie stars and artists through the ages, it was also the headquarters where Allied leaders sweated over maps of Europe under Murano chandeliers, planning the defence against fascist forces during the second world war. Today, the feet treading those same marble floors are more likely clad in crisp white slippers than black army boots.

Unless, that is, you're staying with The Ranch Italy, newly incumbent within the Palazzo's luxurious environs, in which case sturdy hiking boots will be your footwear of choice. The first European arm of the famed Malibu Ranch wellness resort, Ranch Italy is bringing a touch of American verve to the European wellness market, fusing high luxury with high activity to bring about a longer, healthier and happier life. It's quite the sell.

I'm here to put the new Ranch Italy 4.0 programme to the test: a shorter, more accessible version of the award-winning eight-day, seven-night programme that attracts the rich and famous to its Malibu residence. That's four days of 6am starts, four-hour hikes, exercise and yoga classes, spa sessions, and a purely plant-based diet limited to 1,500 calories a day, bookended by medical tests, weigh-ins and essential measurements. The effort, a friendly and enthusiastic Ranch team assures me, will be well worth it.

I remain unconvinced as I'm awoken at six sharp the next morning, the shrill call of my room's phone dragging me from slumber with skies still black outside. I head down through deserted corridors of the Palazzo to the Ranch's dedicated area – a loungier, more contemporary setting than the rest of the hotel, but no less luxurious for it. In the lamp-lit parquet-floored exercise room, some fellow Ranchers are already in the zone, mostly prostrate, following team member Francesca's gentle stretch routine to wake sleepy muscles and limber up for the day ahead. Behind her a wall is daubed with Ranch Values encouraging us to 'always give your best', 'focus on you' and 'get a little dirty'.

Breakfast is promising. A huge bowl of homemade granola with berries and almond milk is far more than I had expected and sets the tone for the rest of the stay. Lunches and dinners follow suit with more plant-based magic – Mediterranean, tasty and as fresh as it gets. From a simple tomato and lentil soup to a turmeric hummus with quinoa and pickled vegetables, to cauliflower pizza or eggplant parmigiana and macadamia ricotta,



EARLY RISERS: Days at The Ranch Italy start at 6am sharp and include four-hour hikes as well as exercise classes.

everything is carefully designed to keep calories low but deliver enough nutrition to fuel our active schedule.

Meals are also communal – we dine as a group, often with the Ranch team, at a long table in a glass-walled room with sweeping views of Fiuggi – but separate from the Palazzo's guests while still benefiting from the skills of in-house three Michelin-starred chef Heinz Beck who curates every menu.

The foundation of The Ranch's methodology is activity – and in particular the epic daily hikes into the surrounding wildernesses, planned in terms of time rather than distance. Our first excursion takes us high into the Apennine Mountains and the Cammino di San Benedetto. We're joined by a couple of local guides, one of whom has already marked the entire route with tiny orange flags ahead of us. This means we can each move at our own pace, individually or →

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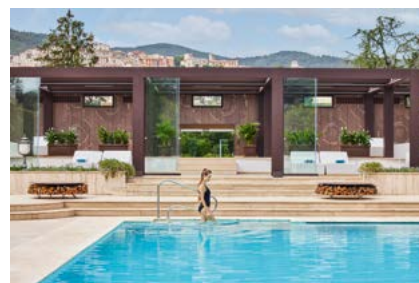
→ in groups, according to our own agenda. A lively few steam ahead keen to live out those Ranch values while others take a more cautious approach to the rocky terrain, preferring to stroll and chat – all approaches are equally welcomed and no judgments made.

I wander somewhere in the middle, working hard but taking time to drink in the surroundings – remote medieval villages camouflaged against their mountainside settings, a 2,000 year old Roman archway still sturdy enough to walk under, a chapel with bell that shepherds would ring to alert villagers of their approach. I get to know my fellow Ranchers too, an eclectic mix eight in number who, with me along for the ride, soon begin drawing eerie comparisons to Liane Moriarty's *Nine Perfect Strangers* (minus the microdosing). I share my descent with a herd of wild cattle gently grazing the river banks, their bells a perfect soundtrack to the surroundings. It's all very bucolic, and demonstrates the logic of the Ranch's location within easy reach of such prized landscapes.

Over the coming days, the walks vary dramatically – testimony to the experience and enthusiasm of the Ranch team as they think on their toes and deal with crazy weather conditions. Huge overnight snowfall sees us don snowshoes and head high into an ancient forest of beech trees to pad in silent awe and hug one particularly huge trunk said to have been standing for more than 400 years. Other days see us take on tricky descents to impressive waterfalls, and long ascents to drink in the huge views of what locals call “the gateway to paradise”.

With such demanding mornings, I'd hoped for some afternoon chilling but our strapping Spanish fitness instructor who bore the unmistakable air of a drill sergeant had other ideas. Post lunch, hour-long fitness sessions took in circuits, core and weight training but thankfully were followed with altogether more agreeable hatha yoga sessions designed to restore some calm to my currently-in-shock heart and set me up nicely for the jewel in the Palazzo's (and thus the Ranch's) crown – its enormous medical retreat and spa complex.

Descending into the bowels of the Palazzo brings you into a sprawling marbled tangle of medical assessment and massage rooms,



TACTICAL RETREAT: From the stunning surroundings to the sprawling spa, The Ranch Italy delivers on every level.

hammams and thalassotherapy pools, steam rooms and saunas, a Roman therme and a room built entirely of Himalayan rock salt. There are three swimming pools, two of which are connected indoor to outdoor via a swim-through corridor and supermarket-style sliding glass door. Between activities, it becomes routine to flock to the spa like proverbial flies for our daily massage and to soothe well worked muscles.

The final morning brings with it medical results and measurements, to see if and how our bodies have changed over four short days. The good news – I have somehow lost four kilos. The bad news – I have slightly high

cholesterol. Swings and roundabouts, but knowledge is power and my Ranch consultant has advised on the best course of action. I leave feeling fantastic and strangely energised (despite having had no caffeine for five days), and head directly for Rome, just an hour away, certain in the knowledge that my pledge to stick to my Ranch way of life may encounter some serious challenges in the cafés and trattorias of the Eternal City. ■

Duncan attended the Ranch Italy 4.0 fitness and wellness programme, which costs from \$4,950 per person and includes all food and activities, medical diagnostics and transfers. Find out more at THERANCHMILIBU.COM