

# My week at The Ranch Malibu — Hollywood’s favourite wellness retreat

The hiking centre is adored by the A-list. Madeleine Spencer checks in for a seven-day reset, but is it worth the minimum \$7,000 price tag?

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**ELLE MACPHERSON, REBEL WILSON, MICHELLE OBAMA AND JESSICA ALBA ARE  
FANS OF THE RANCH**

THE RANCH MALIBU

**MADELEINE SPENCER**  
**19 HOURS AGO**

“Let’s go around the table and each share something we’re grateful for,” says our guide Greg, as we sit down to eat a plant-based dinner on our first night at The Ranch. The table is huge, and around it sits a motley — and moneyed — group of around 20 of California’s most successful people (the NDA I signed prevents me from divulging more details than that). Frantically searching my mind for something to say I’m grateful for but which

doesn't make me want to dissolve in embarrassment, I vaguely, in a panic-stricken haze, hear the answers trickling in. "I'm so grateful for my partner, who is looking after my vineyard while I am here," says one man, perhaps partially in an attempt to tell the clutch of recently-divorced women around the table who've been talking about fancying some action that he is not looking for a romance while Ranching.

Others talk about their families, past travels, and a great many are grateful to be at the Ranch. I'm just formulating my response — something about being afforded a week away from my usual routine — when our guide offers his: "I am so grateful to have lost fat and gained muscle in the year I've lived here, it's been really humbling to see my body change." Enter earnest applause, and the first — but definitely not last — time during my trip that I feel cripplingly British and profoundly aware that I'm in the deepest clutches of LA excess.



### **TUCK IN: A SAMPLE MEAL AT THE RANCH**

THE RANCH

By excess, I of course don't mean of food or wine or any vices known to humankind. None of that is happening here. I mean an excess of wellness, of California-style, tucked away in the rolling hills of Malibu, Goop-approved group hugs and group hikes. The latter is why I'm here; I wasn't expecting the hugging, but the hiking was what enticed me to this celebrated retreat in

the first place. It sounded different to the proliferation of medi-spas I've been to (some great, some not so great), with the remit being to walk rather than lie and to push the body to greater fitness instead of giving it a break from challenges. This has enticed many a billionaire and celebrity over the years, and those who've put themselves through their paces at The Ranch include Michelle Obama, Jessica Alba, Elle Macpherson, Brooke Shields, and Rebel Wilson.

For me, the idea of a week centred around different daily trails appealed because I consider myself a fine walker who inherited my mum's sturdy Austrian legs, complete with calves that grow astonishingly muscly with the slightest provocation. So walking, I can do. And I do it often, usually around the park, easily sailing past that arbitrary 10k step count. I was therefore undaunted and booked in, only to be a bit taken aback by the contents of the missive I received from The Ranch six weeks prior to my stay. Detailing the kit list (think Camelbak rucksack, wool socks, and sweat-wicking tops galore) and how I should start to prepare, it suggested sit ups, press ups, runs. It sounded more intense than the nice rambles across California I'd imagined, and dread started to descend. A colleague who'd been to the Italian outpost assuaged my fears, telling me that I mustn't be put off by the term hiking. He equated it to the word picnicking, which he reminded me is essentially just eating al fresco with more equipment. The Ranch, he proclaimed, was a bit like that — just a very long walk, with some additional gear to make the process easier. Reassured, I didn't complete the suggested exercises and instead stuck to my usual gentle pilates routine and set off for The Ranch.



**CALI COOL: INSIDE THE RANCH**

THE RANCH

I quickly realised I was wrong. Emerging from my taxi after an hour's drive from LAX, I was hit by two things: the astonishing scent in the air (forest, flowers, Pacific oceanic breeze), and the

intense schedule which awaited me in my room. An average day at The Ranch looks like this: wake at 5:30am, stretch class at 6am, breakfast and be ready to set off by 7am, hike for anywhere between two-four hours, ice bathe feet, eat lunch, spend the afternoon engaged in massages or strength classes, have a group dinner, go to bed. And repeat. The hikes themselves are cleverly designed to cater to all abilities — phew — so I ease in and build up stamina as the week progresses, finding myself out of puff but never too far out my comfort zone. Those who are fitter simply hike faster and for longer, those who are less so slower and turn back sooner.



**ALL THE GEAR: MADELEINE SPENCER ON ONE OF THE RANCH'S HIKES**

MADELEINE SPENCER

For somewhere that's so beloved by the elite, it's definitely a departure from your usual celebrity bolthole. There's no TV in the bedroom, no cushy indoor spa in which to bubble one's aches and pains away, no cocktail hour. This is not to say it's spartan by any means: the rooms are comfortable, there is a daily laundry service to make sure you don't ever have to rewear anything sweaty, and staff are dotted around liberally.

Clearly some of Hollywood's most coddled expect something slightly more opulent, or perhaps less raw, for a week costing upwards of \$7,000. One guest sidles over to me on the way back to our cabins after dinner, horrified by the presence of bugs in her room, conspiratorially showing me a recording on her phone of a few little ones near her bed. An infestation it wasn't, more a collection of a few chaps who've clearly wandered in by mistake. Given that we're in the middle

of a forest, I find this far from extraordinary but she evidently doesn't, calling a taxi in the middle of the night and announcing over the communal walkie talkie that she was "going to the Chateau [Marmont]; I can't handle this."



**AND BREATHE: NATURE IS THE STAR OF THE RETREAT**

THE RANCH

For the vast majority The Ranch is a unique retreat, with at least five repeat visitors in my group. I ask them why they choose to spend prodigious amounts of money to hike and they tell me that there is a moment on each trip where it is just them and the hike, a return to the elemental self, and that clarity is very welcome. Their words in mind, I peel away from the group on my next hike, look out over the rugged horizon, breathe, and take it in. It's so cinematic that it's hard not to have a protagonist moment, though no epiphanies or appearances of a leading man materialise, but I do decide that the tangerine I greedily enjoy overlooking the vista is the most delicious morsel I've ever eaten, and learn that if you need to wee on a hike, you'd better be speedy lest a biker or hiker rounds the corner quickly — though what a meet-cute that would be.



## **IT'S THE CLIMB: MADELEINE SPENCER IN ACTION**

MADELEINE SPENCER

It was, however, irrefutable that by the end of the week my body had come to crave the movement, had inured itself to that level of activity, and I vowed to remember that the rhythm of walking absolutely did something good to my scattered thoughts, each plod plod plod creating order, until I felt centred, calm.

After dinner on our final night, Greg stands up and asks us to write a letter to our future selves, which will be posted to us in six months time. This time, I don't hesitate, grabbing a pen and writing to the Madeleine I'll meet in April: "go for a long hike; it'll make you feel really damn good." There is not a hint of cringe as I solemnly seal the letter, not a whisper of cynicism. That this immediately worries me is reassuring: yes, I may too have lost fat and gained muscle along with a hint of sunny Californian can-do, but clearly there's still a Brit somewhere inside my souped-up form.

### **My essential hiking kit**



UYN CHALLENGE WOMAN'S TRAIL RUNNING SOCKS

### **UYN Woman Run Trail Challenge Socks**

If there's one thing that becomes abundantly clear when hiking great distances, it's that if you have a single area that's not comfortable, chafing will occur. These socks served me very well throughout and I managed to get through the entire week without a single blister.

£21.90, [uynsports.com](https://uynsports.com)



COLUMBIA

### **Women's Peakfreak II Outdry Waterproof Hiking Shoe**

I can't overemphasise how important footwear is when hiking — and normal trail shoes just won't do the job on terrain that's more challenging. These saw me safely through valleys and peaks, and held my foot securely throughout so I dodged injuries. £80.50, [columbiasportswear.co.uk](https://columbiasportswear.co.uk)



KATHMANDU

**Kathmandu Ridge 100 Women's Primaloft Bio Jacket**

In honesty, I thought I wouldn't get much wear out of this, merely packing it because the kit list suggested it. I couldn't have been more wrong; it's lightweight, plenty of pockets, warm, zips up to the top of the neck, making it the perfect hiking companion. £80, [kathmandu.co.uk](https://www.kathmandu.co.uk)