



Healthy Escape

Women's Running's founder and president spent seven days hiking in the hills of Malibu, fueled only by fresh fruits and vegetables, to see what a difference a week could make.

By Dawna Stone with Jessica Sebor

Like many working moms, “vacation” sometimes feels to me like a four-letter word. While I occasionally daydream about a break from daily stresses, with two small children to raise, a magazine to run and a race series to organize, I can barely imagine going away for a few hours—much less an entire week.

When I had the opportunity to do just that last August, I wasn't sure I could make it happen. My husband and business partner had read about a seven-day health and wellness retreat in Malibu. On my birthday week, he encouraged me to go for it. “You're so stressed,” he said. “Take the time off and you'll come back fresh.”

I decided to trust him and signed up for a week-long stay at The Ranch at Live Oak/Malibu. The Ranch offers a cleansing and fitness retreat that mixes Spartan structure with luxurious accommodations. Attendees partake in hours of hiking and exercise programs each day while fueling with only fresh vegetables, fruits, nuts and grains. Cell phones and computers are banned from the premises. For a workaholic with a serious sweet tooth, I knew this wouldn't be easy, but I had no idea exactly what I was in for. Take a peek inside my seven-day diary to see how I fared . . .

From top: Getting ready for a hike with my fellow Ranch guests; perched atop the Malibu hills midway through the first day's hike.



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Day One

I arrived at The Ranch today; however, my experience truly started one month ago. Thirty days prior to the retreat, I received a package that gave me a taste of what I was in store for. To prepare our bodies for the rigorous demands of the purified lifestyle we would experience at the camp, the packet instructed us to ramp up our exercise routine while cutting back on caffeine, processed foods, alcohol and sugar. While I was okay with reducing my intake of the first three items, sugar is my downfall. This is horrible, but I continued to eat chocolate up until the very day I got on the plane.

When we arrived at The Ranch, there was a big platter of nuts and dried fruit there to greet us. “Enjoy it,” warned the camp directors—this would be our last opportunity to graze. From now on everything from our snacks to our sleep will be regimented. We'll be challenged to complete five to seven hours of exercise each day while eating only the whole foods provided at mealtimes.

I'm nervous about how my body will react, but I'm also excited to get started. This evening, I was able to meet all of my amazing fellow guests and relax during a wonderful dinner before the real work starts tomorrow. I can already tell that the next seven days are going to be like nothing I've ever done before, and they're going to be great for me!

Day Two

As I'm writing this, I'm feeling a little dizzy. After a breakfast of granola with almond milk this morning, we left for our six-hour hike. The path was a beautiful out-and-back course. At three hours, everybody was instructed to turn around, regardless of where they were.

At first, I stayed with the main pack, but after an hour, the competitive athlete in me kicked in and I decided to run part of the hike to catch up with the lead group. In retrospect,

this wasn't the best idea. When I reached the turning point, I started to feel shaky. I didn't want to ask for any special treatment, but the six almonds we received as a snack weren't enough for me.

On the way back to the van, I felt very nauseous. Two minutes after getting out of the vehicle, I couldn't hold it in any longer. I threw up violently—"fire hose" would be the best phrase to describe it. I've run marathons and completed Ironman-distance triathlons without feeling that sick. I think my body was reacting harshly to the total detox. One of the program directors gave me a few packages of electrolyte powder, and I started to recover. Hopefully tomorrow I'll feel a bit stronger.

Day Three

Oh man! Getting out of bed and walking to the bathroom this morning was harder than the six-hour hike yesterday. But once I started moving around, my muscles warmed up.

Today's hike was a little shorter (three-and-a-half hours), followed by a 30-minute walk on the beach. I started to feel a little dizzy again at the two-hour mark, but not quite as bad as yesterday. Our mid-workout snack today was an apple—I've never seen people (including myself) get so excited over a piece of fruit!

After a noontime nap and four fitness classes (foam rolling, upper-body work, core strengthening and yoga), I enjoyed an incredible massage. Dinner was one of the best meals I've ever had in my life: pea and truffle risotto. Who knew something so healthy could taste so good?

Day Four

Even though my body is sore—it was hard to walk to the bathroom this morning!—I'm started to feel really good today. Some positive changes include breathing better through my nostrils, feeling more relaxed and



noticing all of the flavors in my food. This was the first day I finished the hike feeling strong. I wasn't nauseous at all but invigorated.

One aspect of the camp that's been tough to get used to is the complete release of control. A large part of The Ranch's mission surrounds living in the present. To achieve this, guests are not provided with any sort of itinerary. We don't know what our next meal will be or where we will report to until a few minutes before each activity. I'm a natural planner, so this was a challenge for me at first, but over the course of the last four days I've tried to remind myself to stay as present as possible.

After every hike, we jump right in the pool for some light aqua aerobics. This is a great way to relieve muscle tension. Today we were allowed some free time after the class to lounge in the hot tub. The weather has been perfect and my spirits are high. The energy promised from the detox has finally arrived—it comes upon you when you least expect it!

Day Five

I woke up this morning with my stomach rumbling. Luckily, breakfast was a big bowl of granola. I snuck a few of the chunks in my pocket for later. It was a good thing I did because the hike was the most challenging yet. We started with a full 40 minutes of uphill climbing, followed by three hours on undulating terrain.

A pleasant surprise today came in the form of a chiropractic treatment. For the last few months, I've noticed some pain and discomfort in my right hip and IT band. The chiropractor worked on these areas, and I already feel better.

From top: Guests participate in a tough TRX fitness class; the breathtaking Malibu coast; enjoying a well-deserved lunch after our hike; one of chef Kurt Steeber's delectable creations.

While I've had a great time this week, today is the first day I started to feel truly homesick. I miss my husband and children so much! Tomorrow is our last full day, and I can't wait to see my family.

Day Six

Today's hike began with a solitary hour of meditation. Hikers were released one by one and asked to stay silent and present for the first leg of the journey. I loved this idea, and it came at the perfect time. The final day of any vacation is often overshadowed by impending stress. I tried to wash away thoughts of work and responsibilities and to simply enjoy the beautiful views of the Malibu coastline.

Instead of the normal afternoon fitness classes, we were able to take a tour of The Ranch's kitchen. Although we're on a strict cleansing diet that eliminates meat, dairy, gluten, sugar and additives, every single breakfast, lunch and dinner has

been incredible. It was eye-opening to see how chef Kurt Steeber transforms fresh produce from The Ranch's own gardens into decadent meals.

At dinner that night, we shared our experiences at the camp. One of the women had written a short paragraph on why she would remember each person who attended, and it made me grateful to have spent time with such wonderful people.

Day Seven

This was our last morning on The Ranch, so there was no hike scheduled. After the grueling workouts of the past six days, I was secretly relieved to get the morning off and enjoy a gentle yoga class.

Before our departure, we completed health assessments. The clean eating and exercise had an effect on every person's body. My goal during the retreat was to feel healthier (not lose weight), but I ended up dropping nearly four pounds. One of my fellow

guests, a man from London, lost an incredible 13 pounds. My digestive system now feels restored, and my skin is noticeably glowing.

I can honestly say that this was one of the most amazing trips I have ever taken, but I was happier than I can remember seeing my family at the airport. One of the greatest gifts this week has given me was feeling refreshed and thoroughly excited to re-enter my role as wife, business woman and, of course, mommy.

Taking one week to recharge my body, mind and spirit was a true blessing, and I know how lucky I am to have had this experience. While seven days won't change your life, it can help to restore thought patterns and energy levels. Full disclosure: I ate a huge piece of chocolate cake the night I got home, but I did finish more work in the five days following my return than I had in the three weeks prior. ■



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From left: Warming up before a hike with a cup of hot tea; shaved black truffles make healthy eating a luxury; serene cabins create a cozy retreat.