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THE BEST BURGER IN DALLAS (WITH A DUCK EGG)

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RUSTIC CHARM AND TORTURE: (left to right) Lobby at The Ranch; lunch is a vegetable medley; campers using the TRX system to get more exercise



REBOOT CAMP

Hiking 60 miles, eating fewer than 1,500 calories, and cutting out meat, alcohol, and sugar may seem like torture. To those at **The Ranch at Live Oak Malibu**, it's a vacation.

By **Krista Nightengale**

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AS WE SAT ON THE BEACH LITERALLY LICKING our bowls, which minutes before had contained a cup of delicious kale and white bean soup, our eyes wandered to the seagull walking by. "You know," said the gorgeous mother of three from Singapore, "we could roast him over a fire." The seagull never suspected a thing as 15 pairs of hungry eyes turned to him. "Oh, and he'd be healthy because he eats fish!" said the mom from Wichita. Our

jokes turned a little more serious. "There's a rock right there," piped in the 31-year-old from Omaha.

Just then, our program director, Marc Alabanza, walked up and scared the bird off. The hungry eyes scowled at the always-peppy camp director. "Would anybody like more coconut water with lemon?" Alabanza asked. Though he sounded like a waiter, he was anything but. We all looked into our empty glasses and then said yes, because at The Ranch at Live Oak Malibu, the opportunity to score an additional morsel of food is not something you want to pass up. The goal is to help you lose weight, and the staff hands out calories as if they were two-carat diamonds.

WORKING ON MY FITNESS: The idea of controlled calorie intake didn't bother me much when I signed up for The Ranch, a \$5,600, seven-day boot camp "retreat" started

by Dallasite Alex Glasscock. I understood there would be a lot of hiking, a 1,200- to 1,500-calorie-a-day vegetarian menu, and afternoon exercise classes. I was well aware of the rigorous, almost 10 hours a day exercise regime. I did hear them mention something about snacking on almonds, but the "only six" part didn't sink in until it was too late. To prepare myself for the weeklong program, I read through a packet of information that instructed me to cut out sugar, caffeine, and alcohol, and go for long walks for the 30 days prior to my arrival. Caffeine, alcohol, and exercise were no problem. Sugar, well, that was a tough one for me. But I did my best.

Almost fully detoxed, I reported to the camp on a Sunday and met with Alabanza for a formal consultation. He cautioned me that Monday would be tough. I listened to him, but I didn't really hear him. I was feeling pretty good about my self-control. I'd already



proved that I could go without caffeine for a month. I exercise a lot at home and was confident that I could handle a strenuous program. Boy, was I delusional.

NO WALK IN THE PARK: Monday is the most difficult day at The Ranch. It doesn't matter that the views of Malibu are striking from the top of the hill. What matters is how high those hills actually are. It also matters that the first hike you do on the program is 12 miles and takes campers from a valley of about 500 feet to nearly the highest point of the Santa Monica Mountains, right around 3,000 feet. Then came the shocking realization of how small six almonds and a pinch of salt look as your only snack.

You discover a lot about yourself on that first hike. One thing you learn is that throwing up while overlooking the Pacific Ocean can be a positive experience. I know a few who certainly felt better after their little incidents. Another lesson is that complete strangers make good hiking companions; you can distract yourself for long stretches by listening to others talk about the details of their lives. I also learned that crying in front of strangers, if done with grace and style, is another form of detox.

Not only did we form a common bond, we somehow managed to survive Monday. From Bill, the best-selling author (whom I'd see months later being interviewed by Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show*) to Ellie, the 60-year-old woman with more tenacity than anyone I'd

FAST FACTS

HOW TO GET THERE:

Take American Airlines to Los Angeles International Airport, grab a cab, and head to the Fairmont Miramar. Take the shuttle to The Ranch from there.

WHERE TO STAY:

Cost is \$5,600 for six nights and seven days. theranchmalibu.com



TAKING IN THE VIEW: (clockwise) Sitting area; a camper and guide hike along the ocean; even the pool is used for exercise; (opposite page) entrance to a cottage

ever seen, the campers climbed every inch of that trail. And we talked about food the whole way.

The next few days my schedule was basically the same: get up, slowly eat breakfast, have the blisters on my feet wrapped, fill the CamelBak, jump into a van, and grill the guides about the day's hike. Then we'd hike for four to six hours. (Don't think that hiking fast will reduce the amount of time you're out there. You get "bonus" hikes if you finish early, because it's all about keeping you moving.) Along the trail, we'd eat miniscule snacks. (We thought we'd hit payday when we were given a—whole!—apple for a snack on the second day. By this time, we were

so hungry that one of the campers, a young and very skinny woman, ate every bit of her apple, including the core.) After the hike, we returned to the vans and talked about lunch, which was followed by nap time and

an afternoon of exercise classes. The best part of these classes was that, every hour, a massage specialist interrupted and took someone to his or her daily massage. After the massages, there was dinner, followed by lights out.

GETTING BACK TO NATURE: As the days of exercise progressed, we all realized there was a subliminal rearranging of priorities taking place. We were gradually disengaging from all forms of technology. Well, almost. Some of the hikers took phones up the mountain so they could grab a few seconds of service to make a call home or check email. But for the most part, not focusing on emails, tweets, or phone calls was another release. We also realized it's possible to exist on fewer calories, no meat, no alcohol, no caffeine, and very little sugar. And it didn't hurt that our clothes were also looser.

Since food was so coveted, the flavor of every bite was intensified and fully appreciated. Credit for this revelation goes to The Ranch's "nutritional alchemist," Kurt Steeber. He chose the ingredients for each meal



from the sustainable garden at The Ranch. Steeber also incorporated a meat-like element into his meals. One night, we had cauliflower “steak” with quinoa. Trust me. You have not lived until you’ve tasted Steeber’s cauliflower steak. We were given a chance to tour the garden with Steeber and got a cooking lesson from him. No one at The Ranch expects you to go home and spend your days the same way you did at boot camp, but they do try to give you the tools to make better choices when you return to reality.

The people who run The Ranch don’t follow the same diet as the campers, as one pitfall of their chosen career is that they tend to lose too much weight. But that doesn’t mean they don’t participate. They are willing to open up and talk about anything. Also, they’ve had a lot of experience getting people through the tough parts of the hikes.

The Ranch itself is gorgeous. The property, which once belonged to William Boyd, a silent-film star who played Hopalong Cassidy, has been updated with rustic cottages (each camper gets his or her own cottage with a bathroom) and state-of-the-art exercise equipment. These little touches go a long way. When you show up at your cottage, you’ll find the picture of your loved ones you submitted with your registration framed and resting by the bed. You also get daily inspirational messages. And, most important, your laundry is done every day.

ALL GOOD THINGS MUST COME TO AN END:

Like so many great adventures in life, once you think you’ve figured out the program at The Ranch, the experience comes to an end. The penultimate day turned out to be my favorite. The staff sent campers out one minute apart for the first hour of the hike. You are to spend that time reflecting and meditating—and preparing for a return to the real world. At the end, there’s one last challenge, and a choice. Take the long hike up some massive hills. Or take a more leisurely, shorter trail. With aching bodies, blisters,

and empty stomachs, the choice is a tough one. I chose the longer route. My rationalization was that the next day it was time to step on the scale, and I wanted to lose those last few pounds.

Weigh-in day at The Ranch is like Christmas. There’s a festive mood as people come back from their turns at scale and the tape measure with smiles on their faces. “I lost 12 pounds!” declared the camper from Hong Kong who wore long sleeves the entire week to help speed up the process of losing weight. “I lost 8!” said a woman who didn’t have 8 pounds to lose. (She was there to see if she could get rid of her daily headaches. On the way to the airport, she announced she’d been headache free for two days.) I was excited when it was my time. I had my measurements taken first. “You lost 2.75 inches off your abdomen, 1.25 inches off your hips, and 1.75 inches off your waist,” a staffer told me. In all, I’d lost 11.75 inches. Not bad, I thought. But I was more interested to see my new weight. After six days of eating somewhere around 1,500 calories, climbing 60 miles, and exercising for more than 50 hours, I was dying to see the results, the payoff for killing myself for a week. So when I stepped up to the scale, I was expecting magic.

I lost 3 pounds.

I wish I could tell you that, five months later, those 3 pounds have stayed off, meat is gone from my diet, and caffeine is a four-letter word. Unfortunately, that would all be a lie. But that’s not to say that I didn’t learn a great deal while I was at The Ranch. I have a few new recipes, some new exercises, and a fond memory of eating a date off the dusty ground. And I’ve made small changes. I drink less caffeine and climb more hills. And I now know that, should the need arise, I can hike for six hours. All I need to get me through is six almonds and a pinch of salt. And perhaps an unsuspecting seagull. **D**

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