

ForbesLife

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TRAVEL ISSUE



Chill Out!

**TALES OF
THE COCKTAIL**

**CHASING
SHAKESPEARE**

CANADA WILD

**SHANGHAI
ESSENTIALS**

**LIFE-CHANGING
SPAS**

ESCAPES

Head 2 Head Life Changers

Miraval, Tucson

Miraval's middle name is "balance," and it takes a gentle approach to reshaping guests' lives. At every turn, you're encouraged to slow down, breathe deeply, and practice "mindfulness"—i.e., being in the present moment. It's not uncommon to see people in bathrobes simply sitting and contemplating the desert.

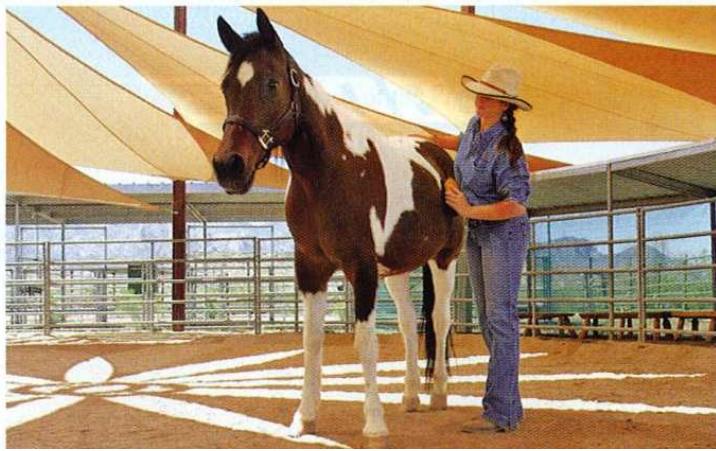
For all that, the choices can be overwhelming. Guests can "chill out" with 93 spa treatments, "clue in" with 97 lectures and classes, book sessions with more than a dozen specialists from psychologists to psychics, hike, play golf, or just lie by the pool. The 44-page program guide reads like a college course catalog.

That abundance extends to the food. It's nutritious and tasty, but while dinners are portion-controlled, breakfast and lunch are copious buffets. The snack bar serves pastries in the morning and cookies in the afternoon, and the cocktail lounge opens at 3:30. The beginner-friendly fitness classes aren't likely to work it all off. I heard a restaurant manager say the typical guest gains 2 pounds during their stay.

Of course, life change isn't necessarily measured on the scale. Miraval's stock-in-trade has long been its "challenge" program, which includes mind-over-matter tests such as jumping off a 25-foot pole (wearing a harness); its signature Equine Experience, in which guests learn about themselves by grooming a horse; and healing sessions like shamanic journeys and holographic memory resolution.

But last summer Miraval got as serious about the physical as the metaphysical. The Andrew Weil, M.D., Integrative Wellness Program includes private consultations with a doctor, dietitian, and exercise physiologist to improve physical, emotional, and mental health. The specialists are affable, knowledgeable, and motivating—a month later, I was still "breathwalking" to work and following the interval-training routine I was prescribed. The gentle suggestions sank in.

➤ From \$525 per person per night. 800-232-3969, miravalresorts.com



The Ranch at Live Oak, Malibu

Tough love is the rule at this luxury boot camp—don't call it a spa—in the Santa Monica Mountains. The challenges are daunting: 5:30 a.m. wake-up calls, 10-plus miles of hiking each morning (rain, shine, or 114 degrees), four hours of exercise classes every afternoon, and a no-options policy that renders seven days of participation mandatory.

The deprivations are many: no sugar, meat, dairy, wheat, alcohol, caffeine, processed foods, cell phones, or watches. In their place are a vegetarian diet that's 1,200 to 1,500 calories a day and an exhaustion that encourages napping through any downtime. Guests receive a 30-day pre-arrival plan for weaning themselves from their vices, and those

who don't follow it end up in a world of hurt. Migraines and vomiting are common, and no, you won't be excused from the hikes.

Live Oak's life change comes via physical challenges like TRX (top); Miraval's through mind openers like its Equine Experience.

The program is similar to that of the Ashram, the famously spartan retreat in nearby Calabasas that has drawn A-listers and type As for three decades. Many of my fellow guests were Ashram alumni who were drawn by the ranch's relative comforts: Its 15 private rooms have cushy beds and big limestone bathrooms.

The food, what precious little there is, is beautifully presented and intensely flavorful. Chef Kurt Steeber, whose résumé includes San Francisco's Zuni Café, avoids health food clichés (though it must be said that the kale breakfast smoothie was a low point), instead celebrating the deliciousness of fresh produce, much of it grown just yards from the kitchen. It's not a diet to stick with, but a mandatory nutrition lecture offers solid real-world advice. (Dr. Andrew Weil's anti-inflammatory eating plan shows up here, too.)

Unsurprisingly, the ranch promises detox and weight loss. Although *detox* has no scientific meaning, cutting the garbage from our diets left us feeling fantastic by the time we left, though some joked that we felt great *because* we were leaving. The men on my stint each lost 7 pounds, and the women between 3 and 10.

But there are saner ways to lose weight, and ultimately, I don't think that's the point. People—ambitious high-achievers—come to test themselves. Like running a marathon or summiting a mountain, hiking 60 miles in a week while adhering to an ascetic diet is a chance to prove what you're made of. I felt euphoric by the end because I'd met a formidable challenge—and more confident because I'd discovered I'm tougher than I thought. —ANN ABEL

➤ \$5,600 per person per week. 888-777-2177, theranchmalibu.com