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Not I'M A CELEBRITY, GET ME OUT OF HERE

Hollywood's ultimate boot camp attracts stars and CEOs alike. Daniela Elser swaps her ugg boots for hiking boots to find out how to get fit, A-list style

Is this it?" the woman next to me whispers. We are standing in front of a dining table, staring down at what appears to be our dinner: one teeny bowl of green salad. "Is this all we are going to get?" she says, her voice rising with panic. She has every right to be concerned.

We, along with 16 other salad-stunned guests, are about to sit down for our first dinner at The Ranch 4.0, an exclusive four-day wellness retreat near Malibu, which just happens to be Hollywood's worst-kept weight loss secret. It boasts a cult-like following of A-listers and rich-listers, including Elle Macpherson, Selma Blair, Rebel Wilson and Mandy Moore, thanks to its notoriously punishing (but apparently highly effective) program.

In the half a day since our arrival, we have been weighed and measured, had a safety whistle attached to each of our backpacks ("just in case you get lost") and handed walkie-talkies. At which point we are piled into two vans and driven off into the mountains for an "introductory" 14km hike in the mud, four litres of water bulging on our backs.

By the time we arrive at the dinner table, we are aching, hungry and in various degrees of minor shock. Having flown in from Australia only that morning, I am

also hungover, jet-lagged and deeply regretting not reading the packing instructions more closely.

There is a collective sigh of relief when a main course does appear (a roast sweet potato with Mexican beans and avocado) but it is small comfort. Today was only a brief taster of The Ranch's signature brand of exquisite, expensive deprivation. Over the coming days, we have 5:30am wake-up calls, more endurance hikes along with hours of daily circuit training and yoga to look forward to, all the while subsisting on about 1400 calories of organic vegan food. Of course alcohol, caffeine, gluten, soy and sugar are strictly forbidden.

There was once a time in my life when I bounded out of the house for a cheerful run, had three varieties of quinoa and collected work-out singlets. Then I quit my job to go to Europe - think less "Eat, Pray, Love" and more "Booze, Snack, Nap". Re-establishing some sort of grudging acquaintance with exercise and consciously uncoupling from wine seemed like a reasonable idea. So I signed up for The Ranch, spent \$110 on specialist hiking socks and flew for 14 hours.

But the distant promise of wellness and the reality of achieving it via brutally hard graft are two very different things.

We're not at Fitness First anymore, Toto. >

HOLLYWOOD

RIGHT Crisp linen and natural surrounds feature at The Ranch.



The Ranch Malibu is regularly named as one of the best retreats in the world and originally consisted only of a seven day-long program. For their clientele of time-poor celebs and CEOs, they later launched a four-day version, based out of the nearby Four Seasons Westlake.

The Ranch 4.0 guests are housed on one floor of the hotel, although in a cruel twist, we exist in a rarefied parallel universe to the tanned holiday makers guzzling margaritas next to the hotel's pool. We eat, congregate and have our blistered feet tended to inside a vast private greenhouse full of linen couches and orchids in the hotel's manicured grounds.

The Ranch has built up an impressive reputation as the go-to refuge for Hollywood's great and good in need of R and R. In my group of Ranchers is an actress, who has an Oscar nomination to her name, and a musician, who was a member of a world-famous band, neither of whom I am allowed to identify. Both are absolutely lovely. Throughout the weekend they nonchalantly chat to everyone, trade childhood anecdotes and, I'm pretty sure, pee behind bushes like the rest of us on the trails.

WORD SPREADS THAT A RANCHER HAS SECRETLY SCOFFED A CROISSANT. WE ARE THRILLED AND SCANDALISED BY THE THOUGHT OF SO MANY REFINED CARBS

Of the rest of the group, lawyers, bankers and doctors are heavily represented. What unites everyone is their ability to afford the price tag – the 4.0 costs \$6300, not including flights or equipment. About one third of this intake have been here before (some even twice) while one keen female guest, who permanently wears diamond stud earrings the size of five-cent pieces, comes biannually. When pressed about why they attend the gruelling retreat, the word "grateful" is expressed a lot, though one woman admits to me conspiratorially, "I just want to lose some pounds."

Day two starts with a knock on our doors while it is still pitch black outside. First off is a stretch class followed by exquisite bowls of almond milk, granola and organic berries.

And then it's time to hike! Again! I had thought that "a hike" meant something like an extended country walk with undulating hills, maybe the sort of bucolic undertaking *Pride & Prejudice's* Elizabeth Bennet might have enjoyed. Hiking in Ranch parlance means spending hour after brutal hour slogging it out on vertiginous, unyielding mountain trails that are anywhere from 14km to 22.5km long. This is categorised as an endurance exercise for a reason.

If the first day's introductory hike was tough, the second day's is gruel-

ling. With every step, the psychological wherewithal needed to push on is unlike anything I have ever experienced before. We hike in small groups, united in our pain as we slog our way up. Every so often I can hear the actress' voice as she sings camp songs further down the trail. God help me.

Among our number is a father-and-son duo – the elder of the two has been here before and becomes a cheerful, paternal figure encouraging us mid-torturous hike. ("I lost 2.5kg last time I was here!" he tells me, looking thrilled. "And I've kept it off!") His broad-brimmed floppy hat belies the fact he is a world-renowned scientist. His thirtysomething son is a banker who spent our day one induction firmly glued to his phone, mid-conference call while trying to simultaneously rip all the tags off his haul of brand-new hiking gear.

Then there is the CEO from California. As we slog our way up a hill, she wistfully tells me about the last retreat she went on, this time in Arizona. "There was wine. At lunchtime!" she says, a far-off look in her eyes as she forlornly sips water from her hydration pack. She and her close friend, who is a former high-powered marketing-executive-turned-mum, regularly go on spa breaks together. They both love the 4.0, but I get the impression that nothing can trump lunchtime wine.

Conversations on the trails veer from the various brands of cauliflower-crust pizza everyone prefers (ah, the bounty of Whole Foods and Trader Joe's!) to the eternal conundrum of Whistler versus Big Sky for skiing. Fitting into ball gowns for charity shindigs and the wonders of owning a \$700-plus Vitamix blender are other relatable topics.

When we all finally reach the crest of the mountain after more than two hours of climbing, I feel exultant, powerful and truly wonderful. (This, I later learn, is called the "hiking high".)

I find the father and son on a huge rock eating today's designated snack, an apple. The father is looking out over the Pacific Ocean taking in the glorious view while the son sits with back to glorious view and conducts another conference call with the London office. Not sure he's reached peak hiking high.

After four hours of hiking, we arrive back at the vans, where staff wait for us with lavender-scented cooling



ABOVE Our intrepid reporter feasts on her daily water and snack allocation.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Daniela Elser trekking; a typical lean lunch at The Ranch; and new participants hug it out.



towels. Afternoons involve lunch, an in-room massage (oh sweet Jesus thank you) and, wait for it – more exercise! There are two 45-minute strength training sessions followed by 45 minutes of yoga. By the time 7pm rolls around it is all I can do to drag myself to dinner.

By day three we are all starting to get used to aching muscles and mud. "I had the worst hangover on the first day," the woman sitting next to me in the van says. She works in finance and I hadn't pegged her as the renegade type – I'm secretly impressed. "I had three cocktails and half a bottle of wine at dinner the night before," she continues, "but I couldn't tell anyone." Another woman, a journalist from a high-profile website, pipes up, "We shared a bottle of wine the night before, too!" Like a group of naughty school kids, we all admit that despite the admonitions from The Ranch team to follow the strict 30-day pre-retreat plan, we had all vainly struggled. ("If they had a margarita bar at the top of the mountain, we would all go much faster," a fortysomething lawyer mournfully says during one hike.)

But later that day, something shocking happens: I start to enjoy hiking. Taking on one particular beast of a mountain, I make it to the top a good 10 minutes before anyone else and immediately take a series of sweaty, earnest selfies.

That night, the financier with the secret hangover arrives at dinner in a particularly giggly mood. Word soon spreads among the Ranchers: SHE HAS EATEN A CROISSANT. We are both thrilled and scandalised by the sheer audacity of so many refined carbs.

Day four, our final big hike, sees us climb one of the highest peaks in the Santa Monica mountain range. I breathe deeply and realise I am grinning. I can honestly say I have never felt healthier or happier in my life. Dear God, I wonder, is this how you feel when you join a cult or give up your Dan Murphy's top-tier status?

When we finally descend, the mood around the vans is emotional. "I think I'm going to cry," the Californian CEO says. "I feel amazing!" the mum exhorts. We all awkwardly lurch into a group hug. Elsewhere, there are high fives and cheers. "This has been life-changing," an East Coast lawyer says through tears, and most of the group nods in agreement.

On the last morning, we are weighed and measured again. Pretty much everyone has lost at least a couple of kilos, if not more. More interesting is how I feel: I have an unexpected, unprecedented amount of energy. I am clear-headed, shockingly cheerful, and despite all the endurance exercise, feel amazingly well-rested. Unquestionably, it is the happiest and healthiest I have felt in years, if not ever.

"IT IS THE HAPPIEST AND HEALTHIEST I'VE FELT IN YEARS"

With a final series of hugs, we drift off to pack up and return to the real world. I have made a secret pact with the CEO and the mum to join them for a Bloody Mary in the bar downstairs. An hour later the three of us furtively and guiltily sip our drinks. Weirdly, I realise I don't even want it that much. Who am I?

On the drive back to Los Angeles, I struggle to make sense of why The Ranch was a profound experience. On one hand, what we did is straightforward – put one foot in front of the other for nearly 75km – however there is something affecting about the hours spent in nature, all that sleep, abstaining from the vices we know slow us down and forging connections with your fellow ranchers.

One month after I'm home, I'm still sleeping better, have lost contact with the staff at Dan Murphy's and have rejoined my gym.

Most terrifyingly of all? I kinda miss the hikes.



She did it! Daniela reaches the peak.