

THE STARVATION VACATION

At a luxurious and super-strict retreat in Malibu, you can lose weight—and maybe even your mind

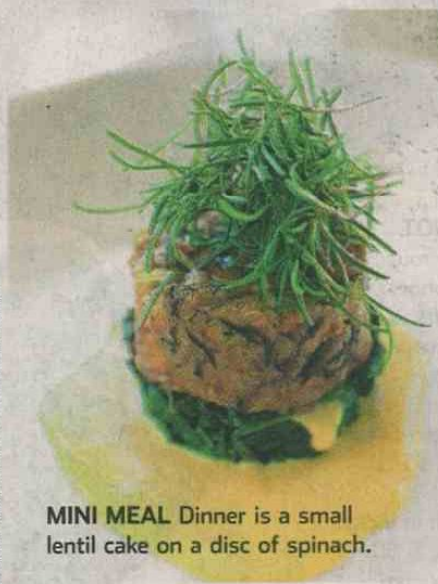
BY CHRISTINA BINKLEY

THREE ALMONDS, TWO CASHEWS,
 plucked from a green cloth bag.

The snack given to me and 10 other guests of the Ranch at Live Oak during a strenuous several-hour hike in the Santa Monica Mountains was hardly satisfying. But after the half-cup of oatmeal with almond milk we'd had for breakfast, we were grateful for any food at all.

Starvation hadn't been my goal six weeks earlier, when I'd booked a \$5,600 week at the Ranch. I'd been seduced by the promise of daily massages and invigorating hikes, not to mention the cuisine from renowned slow-food chef Kurt Steeber. Pork belly, I imagined eating. Foie gras. And at the same time, I'd retrieve a

Amanda Marsalis for The Wall Street Journal



MINI MEAL Dinner is a small lentil cake on a disc of spinach.

bit of my former fit self, from back when I spent weekends hiking rather than parked on bleachers at my kids' tennis matches and soccer games.

But foreboding set in when a preparation plan arrived by mail. For 30 days in advance of my week, I was to prepare with daily hikes and yoga (yes!), and to abstain from caffeine, alcohol, sugar, artificial sweeteners and meat (eek!).

The six-month-old Ranch isn't one of the drug-rehab centers that dot the Malibu hills. But it is rehab of sorts—a luxury boot camp that aims to detoxify up to 14 (mostly middle-age) guests a week from the daily routine of cellphones, email, Diet Cokes and steak dinners washed down with Cabernet. Located on a 120-acre ranch tucked into the Santa

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Monica Mountains, it caters to wealthy A-listers with Spartan but perfectly appointed private cottages, and niceties such as laundry service and a daily aphorism placed on pillows ("Lack of money is no obstacle. Lack of an idea is an obstacle"). Yet the Ranch doesn't kowtow to its heavy-hitting clientele: The exercise is mandatory—with a vengeance.

As my week approached, I obsessed about what I would miss most. Coffee? Meat? Wine? My BlackBerry? The recommended prep activities nagged at me while my resolve to comply slid. I went on several hikes in my hilly Los Angeles neighborhood. During my final week of freedom, I gave up coffee and wine...mostly.

I wasn't alone in my noncompliance, it turned out. None of the week's guests who arrived from the likes of New York, Atlanta, Dallas and New Orleans had entirely adhered to the preparatory regimen. For this, we paid dearly.

The knock on my door came at 5:30 a.m., followed by reminders on my standard-issue walkie-talkie (we'd been instructed to carry them at all times): "Attention Ranch guests: Morning yoga will begin in 10 minutes." An hour of not-terribly challenging stretches was followed by a thin slice of frittata—egg being the only animal protein we would eat all week. Shutting away our iPhones and watches, we filled our Camelbaks with water, packed Ziploc bags with toilet paper, and started hiking before 8 a.m.

The scenery was gorgeous—Malibu in full bloom, rocky peaks, grassy meadows, birdsongs. After the fourth

hour of hiking, I stopped noticing any of it. Over six hours and 12 miles of hilly terrain, withdrawal from every possible bad habit kicked in. Several guests vomited—repeatedly. "I'd rather have a tummy tuck," gasped one heaving hiker.

This was almost certainly caused by hypoglycemia, or a low-blood-sugar event, program director Marc Alabanza—a former "full-contact" kickboxer—told me later. When under extreme stress and low on blood sugar, the body shuts down unnecessary metabolic processes—like hearing and digestion—in order to keep the heart pumping. Vomiting and diarrhea are common side effects of Monday's hike, he added cheerfully.

I, for one, stumbled drunkenly through the final miles, deafened, seeing only the stony path ahead. My hamstrings felt wound on a spool. At lunch, nauseous, I forced myself to eat Chef Kurt's toy-size salad of chickpeas and onions.

By nap time I was comatose in my cottage, convinced I couldn't rise again. An hour later came "Attention Ranch guests" for the mandatory afternoon classes—foam rollers, TRX weight-training work with suspended ropes, yoga and a wildly necessary deep-tissue massage. Dinner, I barely recall. Bedtime came blissfully at 8 p.m.

Tuesday—and in fact, each day—was much the same. Snack that day was one crisp, green apple served with red Hawaiian sea salt we pinched out of a bag for electrolytes. On the trail, we compared food cravings.

Kathryn, from San Francisco, wanted ice cream topped with olive oil and sea salt. Nick, a well-known New York chef, described his signature Mallomar-like dessert in excruciat-



VIEW LAGOON The Ranch at Live Oak's saltwater pool, set in the Santa Monica Mountains.

THE RANCH REGIMEN

5:30 a.m.: Wake up
5:45 a.m.: Yoga
7 a.m.: Breakfast
8 a.m.: 12-mile hike
1 p.m.: Lunch
2 p.m.: Nap
3 p.m.: Exercise class
4 p.m.: Exercise class
5 p.m.: Yoga
6 p.m.: Massage
7 p.m.: Dinner
8 p.m.: Sleep

Cost: \$800/day
Calorie allowance: 1,500/day

ing detail. I desired In-N-Out Burger with feelings bordering on lust.

Dinner was a lentil cake served on steamed spinach: delicious, had it been the hors d'oeuvre. Keri Gross, one of our guides, estimated our daily intake at 1,100 calories. She looked apologetic. That night, upon smelling a groundskeeper's steak grilling, I was overcome by a rebellious rage, as though Marie An-

toinette herself had waved cake under my nose.

By Wednesday, we had devolved into cranky children, jealous of minor injustices and overly sensitive to decisions made by "adults." I snarled at being shorted a few minutes of personal time before morning yoga, and furtively checked fellow guests' portion sizes at the communal table.

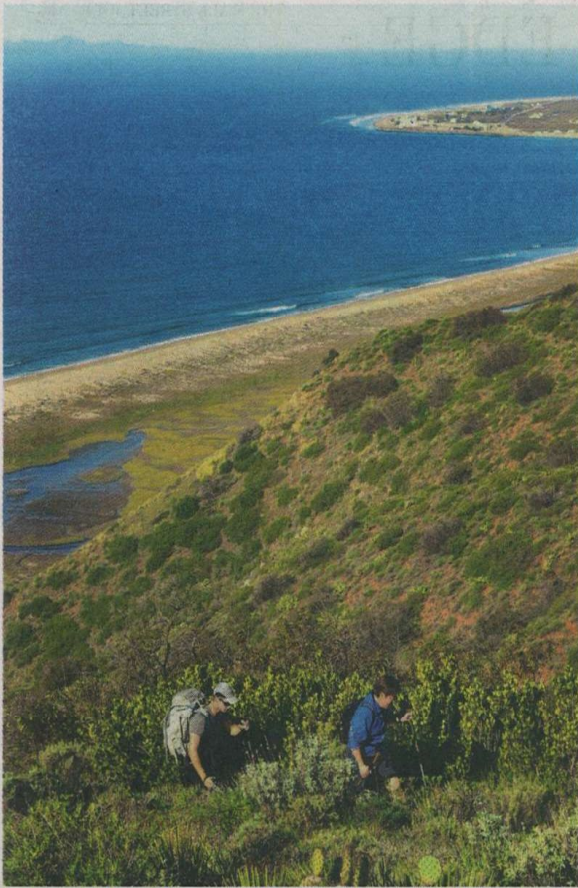
"There's a lot of Type A's who

sign up for this," Mr. Alabanza said later, explaining that many guests struggle with the loss of control they experience at the Ranch. Our high-powered group included a London mergers-and-acquisitions attorney, business owners, the wife of a famous musician and a well-known singer. "They want to compete and push forward," Mr. Alabanza contin-

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Photographs by Amanda Marzulli for The Wall Street Journal

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BOUGIE BOOT CAMP Clockwise from above: Morning hike at the Ranch; inside the main house; an outdoor eating spot; a guest cottage.

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ued. "But when you're on the trail, the hill always wins. It's an incredible equalization situation."

Our equalizer was that damned green cloth almond bag. For it, we lined up like Pavlov's dogs.

On Wednesday morning, Nick identified wild fennel growing alongside the trail. "Don't eat too much," a worried looking guide warned as we munched. After lunch, bowls of lemon slices were set out with the herb tea. Guests devoured them, rinds and all.

Virtually vegan now for four days, I couldn't stop thinking about beef.

We bonded as conditions intensified. We made up nicknames: The Ranch was "Assisted Starvation Camp." Luke Kearns, a former boxer with the face of a choir boy, was dubbed "Luke Skywalker." Lyndie was



"the Dealer" for sharing goji berries, a dried fruit known for its high energy content. "We can't be responsible for the results if people are supplementing," Luke chided.

Yet by Thursday, a bizarre change overcame me. The Ranch's rooster



awakened me before light and I popped out of bed for morning yoga. I trotted through the four-hour hike, added an extra-credit mile to keep moving, and skipped down to the beach's edge for lunch: a yummy celery-root soup. I resolved to make shadow boxing—an exercise we'd tried—part of my home routine. Life was improving.

Simultaneously, we all grew less docile, even as our newly detoxed bodies became oversensitive to taste and smells. When an instructor arrived pungent with body odor one afternoon, we formed a plan of action, appointing people to discuss this crisis—as it seemed at the time—with the administration. Simultaneously, we

became less inclined to accept our captors' rules.

The Kale Smoothie Insurrection occurred Friday morning, with the appearance of ominously dark green—and bitter—breakfast drinks. Several guests irately demanded a substitute. Offered apples, we groused nastily about nutritional content and the guides' relative youth. Only the appearance of a finger bowl of grainy homemade almond butter prevented bare-knuckle revolt.

Yet my food cravings vanished that day. I decided to forego a burger and instead have sushi as my first meal "out" of the Ranch. My journal reflects that I found the day's nine-mile hike to be "terrific." Feeling fond of everyone including the

rooster, I hugged the guide, Keri, during a tour of the kitchen garden.

D-Day came with Saturday's weigh-in and fitness tests. I did 47 knee-down push-ups—up from 27 the previous Sunday; had lost 6½ pounds; my lower quadriceps were 1¼ inches narrower and my waist 1½ inches trimmer. I craved exercise.

The previous night, I had called home from one of the Ranch's two guest landlines. My husband ran through our busy schedule for the weekend. "Don't ruin my glow," I yawned. He laughed, "Well, welcome back to the planet."

► See photos from the Ranch at Live Oak at WSJ.com/Travel.

TASTY—BUT TEENSY

Ranch chef Kurt Steeber uses seasonal ingredients to help guests forget how small the dishes are



BREAKFAST: 170 calories
One poached egg, three baby heirloom tomatoes, gluten-free banana bread, bloomsdale spinach.



LUNCH: 310 calories
Two roasted baby beets, a baby turnip, sprigs of red-ribbon sorrel and micro-arugula, domestic truffle.



DINNER: 430 calories
Artichoke heart with fava bean puree, a glazed cipollini onion, pea shoots and tendrils.