

Welcome to the Ranch: the A-list

Michelle Obama's favourite US fitness retreat has a new outpost an hour from Italy's capital. The spa is gorgeous but the daily hikes are hardcore, says **Sharon Walker**

It was clear from the off that the Ranch meant business. This would not be the type of spa that involved lying prone on a massage table for a week straight. There was stuff to buy — lots of stuff: proper hiking boots, a three-litre hydration system, anti-blisters hiking socks. And when it came to the 30-day pre-arrival programme there was even more stuff to give up: alcohol (oops) and smoking (obviously), coffee, processed foods, diet drinks, sugarless gum, sweets and “any ingredient you can't pronounce”. This was STRONGLY RECOMMENDED (its capital letters) or I would probably suffer. In the month before departure I upped my step count and took a haphazard stab at the rest.

The Ranch is the luxury boot camp in the Santa Monica mountains beloved of affluent A-list types. Michelle Obama, Jessica Alba and Rebel Wilson are said to be fans. But I was heading to the Ranch Italy, the new European offshoot — a small slice of boho California sequestered within a purpose-built annexe in magnificent Palazzo Fiuggi, a glamorous medical spa hotel just over an hour from Rome in Fiuggi, a town known for its healing mineral waters.

At the arrival dinner I was joined by 22 guests who had flown in from Saudi Arabia, the UK, Canada and the US. Many were seasoned Ranchers, and four had checked in for the whole month. We were each encouraged to say what we were grateful for and what we were looking forward to that week. Facetiously I said I was grateful for dinner — we had at least been fed — and was looking forward to breakfast.

We had tucked into a miniature vegan aubergine “parmigiana” with macadamia ricotta. It hardly seemed enough for a fully grown woman, but then we were all here for the kind of radical transformation the Ranch achieves through a strict plant-based diet and exercise, plenty of it, chiefly hiking. The Malibu hikes are legendary; I'd read about people throwing up on precipitous inclines under the fierce California sun. So I was quaking in my boots — and that was before they handed out the walkie-talkies, in case we needed to call for assistance (yikes), or stuck us on the electrocardiogram machine to check the state of our hearts.

The alarm call came at 5.30am. After a thorough limbering-up before a granola breakfast we drove off down sinewy roads in a presidential-style motorcade of black Mercedes vans, deep into the Apennine mountains. After a moment of silence and a quick motivational quote it was off up the trail, following the red flags that marked the route.

The Ranch hikes are measured on time, not distance, and we are always encouraged to go at our own pace. Nevertheless, I set off like a skittish racehorse, determined to keep up, thankful for the walking poles as I scampered over the loose rocks and a series of small wooden bridges. Pretty soon, how-



The Ranch at Palazzo Fiuggi

ever, it was just me, the red flags and the sound of my panting. About 45 minutes in, my Ranch walkie-talkie crackled to life. “Good job, Ranchers, you should be warmed up now ready for the incline. And don't forget — acqua, acqua, acqua.” Ready for the incline? They'd got to be kidding.

When I finally tore my eyes away from my feet, it was beautiful.

Ancient beech trees covered the mountain slopes, tiny yellow-and-blue butterflies fluttered over wild orchids, and a group of gangly foals emerged shyly from the forest. At base camp our four hours of effort were rewarded with a cool, lavender-scented towel and a “snack” of six almonds. Six. I swallowed them in one gulp, only to learn later that the point was to chew them “mindfully”.

Survival instinct soon kicked in and, back at the hotel, I found one Canadian guest switching the bowls to get a bigger lunch portion. “I gotta eat,” she shrugged. As the week wore on we spoke endlessly of



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boot camp comes to Rome

TYSON SADLO



food with a kind of wistful nostalgia as we eked out our snacks and squabbled about a minute spare bag of popcorn like boarding school pupils tussling over the tuckbox. The rule-breakers who demanded more food soon found that extra portions were more easily extracted from the Italian staff — “Oh yes, why not? Eat! Eat! It’s so small!” — while the Americans warned that such blatant disregard for the programme would likely affect our results.

At lunch we ate quinoa and kale Caesar salad with a delicious chickpea focaccia; for dinner roasted carrot and fennel with harissa and black lentils. The snacks improved, a berry oat cookie winning the prize for best mouthful.

The food is all gluten-free and vegan, chosen for its anti-inflammatory properties. Like the fitness programme, the diet is a carbon copy of that followed in Malibu. After all, why mess with a trusted formula? That said, some guests felt that the Ranch had missed a trick by not embracing more Italian flavours or making more of the Palazzo’s three-star Michelin

chef. In spite of our griping the meals were a highlight, not so much for the food (which was in fact 1,400 calories a day, so hardly a starvation diet), but for the company of our delightful new “family”. We had developed a strong bond in our self-imposed adversity. “It is so deeply nurturing to eat together; we need it, but we so rarely make time for it,” one guest noted.

There were casualties. One poor girl stumbled and injured her knee and, after spending the night in A&E (in the company of Ranch staff who stayed with her and her mother until 4am), was forced to quit the programme. I got off lightly with a growing patchwork of blister plasters, yet thanks to the Ranch’s expert foot care — who knew that wool in a boot could work such wonders? — I didn’t ever really hurt.

Each day followed the same reassuring routine: alarm call at 5.30am, stretch, breakfast, hike at 8am, lunch at 1pm followed by a massage, a fitness



class and yoga, dinner at 7pm, then bed. And we had the run of Palazzo Fuggi’s glamorous spa, with its seemingly endless pools and knot-defying therapists.

With each hike my strides grew bolder, my breath steadier, the views and conversation more engaging. Could it be that I was enjoying myself? I was always the last to return, scuttling down the hill sideways like an arthritic crab because of my old-lady knees, but I soon stopped fretting. The Ranch staff are not in the habit of losing their gilded charges, and I was never far from help. “Oh no, you are not slow. I run to keep up with you,” my guide, a young Monica Bellucci lookalike, sweetly lied.

On the final morning came the moment of reckoning. We’d come hoping for transformation, but how much is really possible

in a week? Well, quite an astonishing amount, it turned out. Everyone had lost weight and inches. Some more than others. One man had lost more than a stone. Yet it wasn’t all about weight loss: my Canadian friend had reached the top of a viewpoint, an extraordinary achievement considering that six months earlier she’d been signed off by her consultant after heart surgery. We all high-fived her.

As for me, I’d barely noticed my body changing, but one night in my hotel room I caught sight of the back of an arm in the wardrobe mirror and it stopped me in my tracks. Something was definitely happening. My bingo wings were history. I’d lost a gratifying inch and a half from my waist and three from my hips, plus 7lb in weight. And was it my imagination or had the hikes been getting easier? I certainly felt better, lighter and energised.

The next group of Ranch guests was arriving as I checked out. A handsome American couple, dressed entirely in white, wanted the lowdown. How were hikes here compared with those in Malibu? “I’ve never been to Malibu, although I really want to go,” I told them truthfully. “But are they very hard?” they persisted. “Nah,” I said. “Piece of cake. You’re going to love it. I didn’t throw up once.”

Need to know

Sharon Walker was a guest of the Ranch Italy and Healing Holidays. Seven nights’ full board from £7,600pp, including flights, transfers, daily massage and some medical testing (healingholidays.com). For more information visit theranchmalibu.com

Michelle Obama