

Wellness

Walk of fame

Anne Fullerton survives four days inside California’s notorious boot camp to the stars.



THE FIRST thing you should know about The Ranch (theranchmalibu.com) is that its almonds are famous. Not quite as renowned as the boot camp’s A-list clientele but close. Though the luxury Malibu retreat has garnered a cluster of illustrious travel awards and attracted Hollywood devotees from Rebel Wilson to Mandy Moore, it’s the signature snack – six protein-dense nuts, doled out with monk-like asceticism – that has become the stuff of spa legend. “The purpose of counting your almonds is not deprivation,” states the website unreassuringly. Instead, it’s “a mental exercise that is meant to bring awareness to how much your body truly needs to feel full”.

Located one hour’s drive west of Los Angeles, The Ranch has become the weight-loss retreat of choice for CEOs, celebrities, entrepreneurs and influencers who want their perspiration with a side of aspiration.



The Serenity Pool at Four Seasons Hotel Westlake Village (left); the area surrounding The Ranch is perfect for hiking (above)

In fact, the gruelling week-long program – eight to 10 hours a day of physical activity coupled with a calorie-restricted diet – has proven so popular that the company offers The Ranch 4.0, a four-day version of the retreat, which runs out of the Four Seasons Hotel Westlake Village (hotel.qantas.com.au/fourseasonswestlake).

The premise is simple: deliver the same exhausting regimen and measurable results (Rebel Wilson says she lost nearly a kilogram per day) but with all the five-star frills the elite guests have come to expect. Eager to discover what has American entertainment and business leaders clamouring to spend \$US3900 (about \$5300) on four days of blood, sweat and smoothies, I enrol apprehensively in The Ranch 4.0.

The Four Seasons is located in the picturesque Santa Monica Mountains and, as with the seven-day version, the program consists of a rigorous schedule of 5.30am wake-up calls, marathon hikes and fitness classes on a 1400-calorie-a-day (5857 kilojoules), organic, vegan diet. The austerity is tempered by plush accommodation, daily massages and attentive staff. There’s no alcohol, caffeine, sugar or gluten – and no opting out.

“When we went to spas, they would have a menu of several hundred different treatments,” explains Alex Glasscock as to why he co-founded the retreat with his wife, Sue, in 2010. “We really wanted a place where we could get out of our heads and be in the present and have everything choreographed for us.”

Attending a detox program in a five-star hotel would be challenging at the best of times. Doing it during party season requires weapons-grade fortitude. While other Four Seasons guests down their cocktails in the lobby, I virtuously sip a welcome juice and mingle with my fellow “Ranchers”. We’re all first-timers: a Canadian retiree stopping by on her way to Kuwait; a hedge-fund manager from New York hoping to atone for 12-hour days in the office; an LA-based actress on a hit TV show and her mother; and a softly spoken Texan lured under the false pretence of a relaxing, spa-like experience.

To remove temptation, the minibars in our rooms have been locked and the headquarters for our meetings and meals throughout the four days is an airy, stylishly decorated greenhouse in the hotel’s lush gardens. As we settle in on the first day, each of us is invited to remove our watches and replace them with an empty leather strap in a symbolic casting away of earthly concerns such as time. We needn’t burden ourselves with these anxieties: the Ranch’s tanned, glowing staff coordinate everything for us using walkie-talkies, which we are to keep on us at all times. The devices are generally used for wake-up calls and scheduling information but also act as a safety measure lest we fall off a cliff or into a self-loathing Netflix spiral.

Next, we get our height, weight, fitness and muscle-to-fat ratio measured in high-tech ways, one of which involves sitting inside a small contraption called a Bod Pod, which looks like the Soviet spacecraft that took the first dog into orbit. This is followed by an exhausting combination of spin and weights under the supervision of a twentysomething instructor who is confounded by my inability to do basic upper-body exercises.

After a short, steep, introductory hike, we sit down to a dinner of delicious mushroom ragout. The portion is on the smaller side but not stingy. It's a breakthrough moment: this is what they mean by "comfortably full". In fact, the food is a highlight of the stay – and not simply because it's the only time we get to sit down. The richly flavoured meals, along with the massages, become the centre of our little, wholesome universe.

Despite being a chronic snacker and natural night owl, I find it surprisingly easy to stick with the routine over the next three days, largely because there is no alternative. The lack of wi-fi and mobile phone coverage on hikes makes it easy to disconnect from work and I start to experience the kind of deep sleep that can only be achieved through caffeine withdrawal and sheer physical exhaustion. Life seems simpler. Eat, hike, work out, repeat.

"I live less than an hour away but I hardly ever have time to get out of LA," observes the actress one afternoon. We pause to watch the Pacific Ocean sparkle in the distance and I realise that I've started looking forward to the hikes. It's relaxing to be away from the constant din of the city but mostly it's pleasant to spend time outside with other people and not talk about work. On another day, my companions might be closing multimillion-dollar deals or shooting with *Vogue* but here we're comrades: dusty, a bit hungry and eager to share cute photos of our pets.

When the time comes for the final weigh-in, I've gained half a kilogram but I've lost 3 centimetres from my waistline. I know how to do a squat (kind of) and have a new-found appreciation for cooking with an ingredient called "nutritional yeast". Still, I don't feel any closer to understanding what makes The Ranch so appealing to A-listers, who must surely be accustomed to fancy hotels, personal trainers and good food.

I put the question to Glasscock.

"I think some of the younger celebrities are seeing that they can really be anonymous and normal when they come here," he says. "Every guest who comes to The Ranch is special so they get treated equally. They're just another guest."

In other words, it doesn't matter how wealthy you are or how many Instagram followers you have. Here, everyone gets six almonds. ●

Flight path

LAX

Qantas flies to Los Angeles from Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne.
qantas.com

Take a hike

Four other American retreats to help you revive.

New Life Hiking Spa, Vermont For outdoor fitness on the eastern coast, head to this wellness-centric stay (newlifehikingspa.com) in the lush green mountains of Vermont. Scenic trails, complimentary exercise classes, wellbeing education and an extensive spa menu make it easy to kickstart healthy habits.

Canyon Ranch, Tucson, Arizona The grande dame of health retreats (canyonranch.com) is a desert oasis that has been going since 1979. The luxurious Canyon Ranch offers a range of health and beauty treatments, from its "7 days to change" mind-and-body overhaul to tailor-made packages that meet your individual needs.

We Care Spa, Desert Hot Springs, California Another celebrity favourite, We Care Spa (wecarespa.com) counts Cameron Diaz, Gwen Stefani, Heidi Klum, Gisele Bündchen and Liv Tyler among its fans. This holistic fasting spa is famed for its juicing and colonics detox – not for the faint-hearted. Reviving facials, body wraps, massages and scrubs are also available.

The Lodge at Woodloch, Hawley, Pennsylvania Sixty hectares of woods surrounding a private lake make an idyllic setting for whatever activity takes your fancy, from golf and kayaking to spin and yoga. Did we mention the 3500-square-metre spa at the lodge (thelodgeatwoodloch.com)?



The Lodge at Woodloch features a stunning indoor pool and luxurious spa