

Italy on 6 Almonds

A notoriously stringent wellness retreat comes to the home of *la dolce vita*—and the results speak for themselves.

By Esme Benjamin

On a balmy summer evening, I sat outside a gelateria, eating a cup of velvety tiramisu ice cream. If this were a regular Italian vacation, it would barely be worth mentioning. But this wasn't a regular Italian vacation. I was in the mountain town of Fuggi, an hour outside of Rome, to visit the new Italian outpost of the luxury wellness boot camp known as The Ranch.

The Ranch originated in Malibu, California, and rose to fame in the 2010s as the go-to program for celebrities looking to drop pounds before red-carpet events. As at the Malibu original, The Ranch's Fuggi-based boot camps are strict multiday retreats designed to make both an immediate and lasting impact on your health and physique. Though no stranger to wellness retreats, I'm more inclined toward the kind where balance is emphasized and nobody raises an eyebrow to an evening glass of red. The Ranch, however, requires an altogether different mentality. Over the next four days, I would forego sightseeing and heaps of pasta for intense exercise fueled by a light, vegan diet, and so here I was, savoring every spoonful of ice cream.



The Italian take on The Ranch's boot-camp experience is based at the luxurious Palazzo Fuggi.



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Meals at The Ranch are colorful and flavorful—albeit in limited proportions.

Ranch, including one couple from Texas who were there just a few months prior and had already booked a third visit in the fall. This isn't unusual; The Ranch claims to have an impressive 50-percent return rate, which says a lot about its effectiveness.

As we tucked into a welcome meal of lentil “meatballs” with zucchini “spaghetti,” the retreat staff talked us through the fundamentals of the program. Days begin at 6 am with guided stretching and breakfast, followed by a four-hour hike in the mountains. Then it's back to the hotel for rest and lunch, so we can gather our energy for a strength session and yoga class. The rest of the afternoon is dedicated to recovery, with a one-hour massage and an opportunity to use the spa facilities before dinner is served at 7.

Food is organic, plant-based and nutritionally dense, with no gluten, dairy, meat or other ingredients that might impede “detoxification.” That includes alcohol and, horror of horrors, even caffeine. Each day, The Ranch's guests consume just 1,400 calories in the form of three square meals and two snacks (including the program's infamous six-almond trail snack, served with black sea salt, aka “Ranch caviar”). Needless to say, one of the most common outcomes of the program



is weight loss, though our host was keen to emphasize that the goal is simply to improve overall well-being.

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For me, a big-city dweller, hiking was the highlight. Fuggi is surrounded by the Apennine Mountains, which offer varied terrain, shaded trails and gorgeous vistas overlooking medieval towns and monasteries. In the program, you hike for time not distance, setting your own pace and turning around after two hours.

Some days I stuck with a couple of my fellow hikers, trading life stories and snapping selfies at the top of a mountain or the bottom of a waterfall. Other times I drifted from the group, enjoying my own zone of shady forests or meadows full of strawberries, mint and hundreds of butterflies.

When we returned to the hotel, sweaty and aching, it was hard to rally myself for a strength-training session. But the clever thing about The Ranch is that by removing decision-making, it allows guests to apply their willpower where it counts. Simply follow the program laid out for you hour by hour, and you'll reap the benefits.

On the final day, we closed out the program with a group gratitude practice and left with lifestyle guidelines for reentering the real world. The Ranch

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Daily four-hour hikes explore the natural beauty and villages of the Apennine Mountains.

was designed as a fast track to transformation—a complete break from the everyday foods and habits that make us sluggish and squishy, and the opportunity to create noticeable change in a week or less. It certainly delivered, although the most profound takeaway wasn't a more taught body—it was a stronger mind. I even started pushing my limits further of my own volition, setting a new personal best for time submerged in the cold plunge.

Did I inhale another gelato that evening before heading to the airport? Absolutely. But I departed Italy with the knowledge that I was capable of more than I gave myself credit for—and had the strength to see it through. ☺



The other “ranchers” and I congregated for a briefing in a private lounge at the Palazzo Fuggi. The Ranch's first permanent location outside the United States. A former palace turned wellness hotel, it offers program participants access to an impressive 64,000-square-foot Roman-thermae spa and a golf course. On the more clinical side, our program also included a blood panel, urine test and ECG, and a consultation with an on-staff doctor to assess the results. All of this, combined with a weighing and measuring session at the start and end of our stay, provided an in-depth picture of our overall health and progress.

Our group of 15 Americans and Europeans paid between \$4,950 and \$10,650 per person, depending on room occupancy and whether they were doing The Ranch Italy's four- or seven-night program. Several members of the group were alumni of The