



The Ranch Reminded Me the Basics Are Best for Fitness

Why hiking four hours a day and 5 a.m. wake-ups were just what I needed..

The Ranch is the kind of place you go to eat a little (gluten, soy, and dairy are off limits), walk a lot (15 miles a day), and escape from whatever ails you. Nearly fifteen years ago when it launched in Malibu, the program felt radical, attracting the likes of Michelle Obama, Jessica Alba, and Elle McPherson for its 7- or 9-day retreats. Today? Wellness tourism has boomed, and LA has gone full Erewhon, so while the shine of newness has worn-off, the lore of the Ranch remains. In fact, when I asked a few in-the-know friends about it—telling them I was going to the newly opened outpost in the Hudson Valley, two hours outside of Manhattan—they were dying to know what it would be like. I have mixed feelings about experiences like this—expensive “wellness” retreats aren’t really my thing—but I have always been fascinated by the hospitality space and how existing structures, like hotels, provide an easy opportunity to improve people’s well-being if programmed correctly.

Pulling up the winding driveway to the estate we would be staying in, it became clear why folks were intrigued. If Jay Gatsby started a wellness retreat, it would look something like this. Built in 1904 and previously owned by JP Morgan, the 25-room lakefront mansion is set on 200 acres with views from all angles. There was a solarium that housed an indoor pool with a cold plunge and a jacuzzi, specifically intended to be used after long hikes. The workout area, where the group classes would take place, was a 2,000-square-foot space that once served as the grand ballroom and housed a fireplace taller than me. As I settled in for orientation with the other guests and gave a personable Goldendoodle a few earnest scratches behind the ear, I was no doubt impressed, but I really wanted to know how the actual experience would stack up.



What's the experience like?

The Hudson Valley property offers a fairly straightforward experience that's less intense than Malibu but follows the same principles. You wake up each day at 5:30 a.m., to the sound of Tibetan chimes, followed by 30 minutes of a morning stretch at 6 a.m. From there, a communal, plant-based breakfast is served. Then it's time for a two or four-hour hike through scenic nearby Harriman State Park or Ringwood State Park. Upon return, you have the rest of the itinerary laid out for you: a daily massage, a choice between fitness and yoga classes, a snack, and—if you're lucky—a nap. Everyone eats dinner together at 7 p.m. And throughout the day you have the option to add in things such as energy healing, IV therapy, or a physical therapy-style session for an extra cost. The standard offerings are in two different durations, either four days and three nights or five days and four nights, and the price tag ranges between \$2575 to \$6900.

If it sounds like a lot—it is.

The Ranch framework makes sense

When I looked at the schedule, I felt like it was overkill: The early wake-ups. The long hikes. The additional workouts. The plant-based-only eating. But when you actually do it, and dive into the science behind it all, you can get behind it more easily. **Waking up earlier is linked to a reduced risk of depression**, as long as you make sure you're still getting enough sleep. The suggested schedule made sure we woke up and went to bed around the same time every day and got plenty of **daylight exposure**, creating **circadian rhythm regulation** which is vital for well-being.

A short-term shift to plant-based eating, which they stressed did not have to be a “forever” thing, seems to be backed by science as well. **Research indicates** that it can increase feelings of fullness, and the bioactive compounds in the food can promote well-being. The long hikes are challenging but not impossible, and you get the benefits of “**Zone 2**” **training** while in nature. Spending **increased time in nature** can act as a recovery protocol against burnout.

It also creates connection—when you’re on a four-hour hike together and forced to break bread in communal meals, you connect, you chat, you bond. Seeing people from all backgrounds push **through really inspired me**. While I do wish there was more variety in the workouts—perhaps a strength session to help attendees realize the importance of maintaining muscle mass (especially as the crowd skewed older)—overall the simplicity worked. Instead of getting lost in overly complicated protocols that seem to be the rage these days, The Ranch keeps to the foundations. I respect that.

This isn’t The Ranch at Malibu

During my time at The Ranch, I could see that people who’d been to both the Malibu property and Hudson Valley property were comparing the two. Malibu is much more restrictive, rustic, and a longer stay. The East Coast experience is modernized and better suited for what people need today—learning how to cope with burnout, being present and physically active while still not overdoing it. By the end of the retreat, most folks came around to appreciate what New York had to offer in comparison to the West Coast outpost.



It's a lifestyle, not a moment

One of my core beliefs is that you can talk *alllll* day about how good something is for you, but if you don't actually consistently live it, it doesn't matter. The best part of The Ranch is that it really is just an immersive camp where you force yourself to *actually* live out your values. Since returning from The Ranch, I've been waking up early and doing my **15-30 minute stretch**. I've become a walking apologist, getting at least 60 minutes of steps a day, which research shows can help improve everything from brain function to **back pain**.

The staff were the all-stars of the experience. **Chef Michael Narciso** invigorated my love for cooking again. Lentil burgers, summer salads, Korean inspired “hot-pot” dishes—he could do it all. I was worried about the caloric restriction, but each day I was actually quite satiated, though not stuffed. This is likely why by the end of it, even though it was not my goal, I lost a few pounds.

I’ve been able to recalibrate my food intake and cut out snacking when bored. In the context of the hustle and bustle of life, **sometimes you just need a pause to remind yourself** that the only thing you need for a reset is a simple framework you can apply it yourself to your own life.

Would I do The Ranch again?

Of course. Do I need to do it again? Absolutely not—and that is why it works. Many people have complained that the New York experience is too easy, but I think these people are missing the point. Fitness doesn’t have to be overly hard; the hard part is applying your learnings day-in and day-out once you leave. The hard part is accepting that if you can afford \$5,000 or more for an experience like this, then you can probably admit that some shortcomings when it comes to your health might be the result of your actions. At the end of the day, I understand why The Ranch has such ardent fans. It gives you a little bit of an extra kick to jumpstart the rest of your life for the better, and for people who need that, it’s a solid investment. The Ranch provides you with wellness foundations you can take away and apply to your life. But remember, at the end of the day, the onus is still on you.