



A Fitness VACATION

By Michael Martino

As the champagne hangovers fade so begins the process of choosing a New Years Resolution. After stuffing your faces with turkey and sweets it's likely many of you will choose to work off those excess pounds gained over the holiday season. There are many ways to achieve this goal. You might purchase a membership at a local gym, or start that South Beach diet you have been hearing so much about. While these promises that we make to ourselves are always made with the best intentions, it is often the case that once spring rolls around the membership goes unpaid, and we phase back into our old eating habits. Which is why we at The Emerald Magazine thought it would be interesting to take a look at a different way to drop some pounds, a fitness vacation. Sometimes all you need when trying to unleash your inner Brad Pitt or Angelina Jolie is a push in the right direction. Health and wellness retreats have been around for decades. They are fitness vacations that put you through all day boot camp style workouts while also educating you about proper diet and exercise. In the past these are all issues I have struggled with when trying to lose weight. So I searched online for a retreat where I could focus on my fitness education and lose a few pounds at the same time. Eventually I decided on a place called the Biggest Loser

Resort at Fitness Ridge in Malibu, CA or BLR for short. Not to be confused with the actual television show The Biggest Loser, BLR is a separate entity, but they license The Biggest Loser name for marketing purposes. Here I learned all kinds of skills, from proper eating strategies, to knowing how best to utilize my time at the gym. Along the way I met some really great people, and hiked in some of the most picturesque parts of Southern California.

When I called to make a reservation I learned that they are made for one-week intervals, Sunday thru Saturday. So I signed up for one week not exactly sure what I was getting myself into, but excited for the experience. I found a Groupon and was able to book it for \$1795. When I arrived Sunday afternoon I was shown to my room where I was to relax before dinner and orientation. It was furnished with a queen bed, a TV and a private bathroom, similar to what you would find at any hotel. Before the real work began I had to turn in my signed agreements stating that BLR was not responsible for any "injury, including death to any person suffered while at the resort or participating in the program." Which felt strangely ominous as I looked at the weeklong schedule I was given. There was no free time unless you counted the 10 minutes we had to change for

circuit class or jog to our next "mountain" or "core" cardio class.

The schedule at BLR is demanding to say the least, and why the word resort is in the name is lost on me completely. There is a pool, but there is no time for lounging around it, and you are only in it if you are swimming laps or taking a pool class. The days are regimented from 6am to 6pm. Each day starts with breakfast and then afterward is a two and a half hour hike. Followed by lunch, and then three exercise classes, a cardio class, a pool class and then a gym class. In between the exercise classes are two nutritional classes, then finally dinner. The food at BLR was great. Everyone is placed on the same 1500 calorie per day diet. The meals are served in a large cafeteria where everyone eats together, but they are served restaurant style, meaning a waiter brings you your meal. If you don't like what's on the menu there are always substitutions that the kitchen staff can prepare for you instead. Amazingly I never really went hungry at BLR. They prepare mainly low calorie items liked baked chicken, and use low carb breads so that they are able to make the portions to a size that were always filling.

The hikes were probably the most physically challenging part of my stay at BLR, but they were also the most rewarding. The resort is set in a beautiful part of Malibu and there are literally a hundred hiking trails within a half hour car ride. The stunning vistas are the best part of the hikes, at times you will see the jagged Santa Monica Mountain Range and at others the meandering Malibu coastline. I think it's important to mention that BLR exists for people of all fitness levels. I was surprised when I showed up for orientation at the number of fit people who had come presumably just to have their butts kicked for a week. Of course there are people at the other side of the fitness spectrum as well. Some staying for rather long periods of time with stated goals of losing a 100 pounds or more. Which is why the hiking groups are split up based on fitness level. For the first time in my life I found myself in the group that was deemed most fit. Which was a nice compliment at first, but then later came to regret as I learned our group had the most challenging hikes e.g. walking up mountains.

The exercise classes were challenging but the trainers are top notch so they make it all possible. I thought I would have these drill sergeant style trainers where someone was screaming at me constantly. The trainers were not like that though, they would keep the work outs at a high intensity but at the same time be very encouraging and motivational. If you are unfamiliar with a gym classes like

circuit training are great because they introduce you to all of the different machines you will find there. Making the gym at home a less intimidating place to be. Having never taken a pool class before I thought that would be the easiest part of the day. Turns out you can sweat in a pool, a lot. Kicking your legs as hard as you can for 5 minutes after swimming 15 laps will really get that burn on!!!

After a week of sweating and grunting my way through hikes and cardio classes only one thing mattered. Saturday was my weigh in and I was hoping to get some good news from the one thing that I can always count on to give me bad news. I was happy to say the least when I learned that I had lost 5 pounds and four inches on my waist. In just one week!!! All that work really paid off. At the end of the day on Saturday they have a "graduation" ceremony where they play a video of all the guests going about the business of working out. They also hand out a list of emails so guests can stay in contact with each other. Going to BLR is an intense experience so you definitely generate a bond with the people you meet there. Overall I have to say that my experience at BLR was a great one. I learned a lot about nutrition and greatly increased my over all fitness levels. I also made some new friends and saw some amazing vistas along the way. So if you need to lose a few pounds or a few hundred you might want to consider jump starting your path to a healthier you by going on a fitness vacation.

