



Canyon Ranch Woodside: First In

by REBECCA MISNER

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While many spas want you to dramatically change your life, the Canyon Ranch Woodside just wants you to get yours back.



It's easy enough to drive past **Canyon Ranch**'s new Northern California wellness retreat, located in Woodside between the Pacific Ocean and the San Francisco Bay. With your windows down to better glimpse the colossal redwoods and gulp in the fir-saturated air, blaring something from Neil Young's *Harvest*, maybe

Heart of Gold or *Old Man* (Young's Broken Arrow Ranch is down the road), you really are likely to miss that hard right of an exit and just keep on coasting along the serpentine Skyline Boulevard that curves through the forested Santa Cruz Mountains. You'll realize your mistake at some point, but it's hard to get stressed out driving through one of the most magical, mystical stretches of the state en route to a wellness retreat.

If the **majority of spas** these days want to dramatically change your life, after spending a weekend at Woodside, I came to the conclusion that this one just wants you to get yours back. It's a simple yet profound, distinctly fitting mission for a **wellness retreat** located mid-point between tech-centric **San Francisco** and Silicon Valley, where brutal work weeks and borderline-umbilical attachment to devices are the norm. Surrounded by towering evergreens and twisted Coast Live Oaks, the Woodside property feels more like a Renaissance Fair location than a place for overworked tech execs to recharge. But the latter (along with anyone with limited days off and a need to reboot) is who Canyon Ranch, the brand that pioneered the concept of the modern health resort in America when it opened in Tucson, Arizona, in 1979, seems to be targeting. Instead of sticking with the resort model of its Tucson and Lenox, Massachusetts, properties (each sleeps over 200 and guests often stay for a week), Canyon Ranch positioned Woodside as a retreat. What this means is shorter stays—a weekend or three days—and a smaller, more intimate property.

There are certainly **big-name California retreats** that take more niche and hardcore approaches to wellness—Big Sur's Esalen for things like re-wilding and couples' tantric dance or **The Ranch Malibu** for a no-option philosophy, eight hours of exercise, and body-fat monitoring. And if Canyon Ranch's other properties feel result-oriented (lose weight, deal with a medical concern, tweak eating habits), Woodside seems more about letting go of rigid goals and perhaps, at least for a few days, cutting yourself a little slack. For starters, nothing is obligatory, although there are no shades on the windows, which makes a sunrise wakeup pretty much mandatory. You can do as much or as little of the programming as you like, and, not to sound too pat, but you'll get out of it what you put in.



One of the 38 guest rooms at Canyon Ranch Woodside.

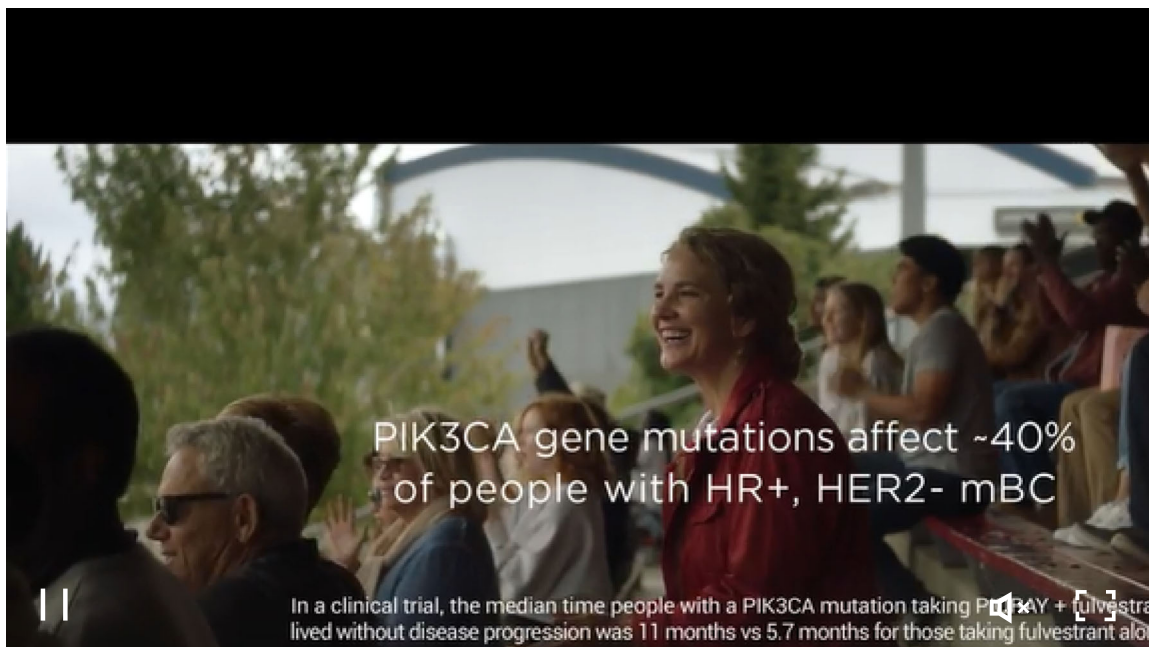
Randy Galligan

The 38 guest rooms are comfortable and modern, done up in white and taupe and with a huge mural, a blown-up cross-section of a log or a skyscape, on one of the walls. I stayed in one of the more private treehouse rooms—lofted 50 feet into the forest’s canopy with a balcony that looked out over the property’s 16 forested acres and the perfect perch for stargazing before bed. But, truth be told, I wasn’t in my room much. I was either in the main lodge (a sprawling three-level glass and wood complex, which is really the heart of the property) or, more often, outdoors. The lodge is where the saline pool and spa treatment rooms are located, as well as the dining room with its multiple outdoor terraces with firepits and cozy throw blankets for chilly nights. Meals are served family-style and mostly at group tables—the vibe is a convivial one that encourages connecting. And while the food is healthy (organic and sourced from within 25 miles) and the type of nutrient-dense dishes best consumed in small portions—

coconut milk chia pudding and lentil and wheat berry salad—dessert is still served, salt and sugar are available upon request, and alcohol, a first for the brand, is offered in the evenings.

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The main lodge is also where the gym and the more traditional fitness classes take place. I did barre and a strength training circuit class, as well as yoga and stretching classes. All of the instructors were knowledgeable, extremely motivating and supportive, but it's worth noting that classes fall on the open-to-everyone end of the spectrum rather than the elite training side. There were also less expected classes that I wish I had time to try, like one that involves a lot of perching on a BOSU balance ball and another that incorporates a Hyperice vibration tool that looks like Han Solo's blaster and is supposed to increase

circulation. But it's Woodside's open air fitness classes and the numerous opportunities to be in next-level nature that set it apart. Like the Zen Boot Camp, a quasi-military obstacle course through sun-dappled redwoods that taps into mind-body awareness—sort of *G.I. Jane* meets *The Karate Kid*—where the instruction matches your dosha (apparently I'm an airy Vata and I need to strike the ground more firmly when I run). Or the more restorative options like forest bathing, nighttime guided meditation through the onsite labyrinth, a hike through coastal grasslands to see land art, or a visit to the nearby Ciara West stables for an Equus Coaching session, a type of equine therapy. Or even just a solo walk along the property's trails, stopping at an alleged vortex (where it actually does feel like the energy shifts) and listening to birdsong or the trickle of the creek.



The main lodge

Randy Galligan

Another real highlight was the lineup of informal talks that happen throughout the day in The Loft, an airy multi-functional gathering space on the top floor of the lodge with huge windows for catching sunrise and a floor-to-ceiling fireplace surrounded by deep couches. When I was there, the talks were led by Canyon Ranch's resort-wide director of spiritual wellness, Stephanie Ludwig. Don't be put off by the talks' somewhat soft titles, like 'Achievable Happiness' and 'Work Life Balance.' Things get deep, fast, and are well-worth the time.

It wasn't until I was driving back to **San Francisco**, going uncharacteristically under the speed limit and making an unplanned detour to try and find Methuselah, the area's oldest redwood at nearly 2000 years, that I realized my perspective had subtly shifted. And while I hadn't received the latest cryogenic spa treatment and I was pretty sure I hadn't dropped a pound during my stay, I did feel lighter, calmer, and more at ease. And maybe, in this hyped up, more-faster-now world, a little gentleness can change your life after all.

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