

A letter from hell

RANCHO LA PUERTA, Mexico — And I thought Baghdad was bad. After a few days here, I'm ready to seek asylum in Iraq.

Here happens to be the well-known Rancho la Puerta spa. It was created back in the '50s as a sort of mishmash of ancient Hebrew wisdom, Indian culture, input from Aldous Huxley and good old concentration camp food. I call it the grape-fruit gulag.

I'm not even exactly sure of where we are. The camp is nestled in some lost mountain valley in darkest Mexico. There's not a beer or burrito for miles. I'm here in this hell-hole because while in Baghdad I promised my body, which was showing very high mileage, a nice, quiet little jaunt to recharge my batteries and enjoy inner tranquility.

Wrong. The first morning, reveille was at 0530. After a delightful glass of water, I reported to yoga. "Awake, ye souls, and greet the dawn" ran the cheery program. After Hindu aerobics, it was time for mountain climbing. Up, up we raced over the rocky sides of the arid sierra. Huff, puff, gasp, pant. My heart went into overdrive. What, I wondered, was Spanish for "Help, I'm having a coronary." My body was designed for cocktail lounges, not Pancho Villa country.

An eternity later, we returned to the gulag for a hearty breakfast of dry bread, fruit and hot cereal without milk, butter or sugar. Next: Weightlifting; then volleyball, a sport I had never before played and for which it was noted, I displayed a certain talent. At least until I was smacked in the face by a mach-3 ball that demolished my chic, \$280 Italian sunglasses.

Something called "fitness" followed. This meant push-ups, sit-ups and similar miseries. Lunch was more veggies and water. And more exercise all afternoon. Finally, the joy of dinner. A potage made from wilted grass, more veggies and, of course, water. Off to bed at 9:30 p.m. I was a wreck but I had survived.

The next morning, the terror of Raymond began. Raymond introduced himself to us as our personal

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training kommandant for the handful of men in this Garden of Eden. There would be no herbal wraps or pedicures for the males. It was the Eastern Front all over. Raymond is short, built like a tree stump and has the personality of a grenade that was about to detonate. He speaks in staccato bursts, rather like machinegun fire. His Belgian-Flemish-Teutonic accent supplied the finishing touch to the Stalag 17 atmosphere.

Raymond had come to the camp from the Belgian para-commandoes, one of the toughest and nastiest bunch of professional cutthroats in Europe. As he barked out orders, his icy cold eyes surveyed us with all the warmth of laser beams.

Mountain climbing quickly became a relief. It was the only way to escape the terror of Raymond. The rest of the day, he made us put ourselves into hideous contortions fit only for an Indian fakir. I lifted weights until my muscles almost smoked and burned. We were forced by Raymond to do types of push-ups that had been banned as inhumane by the Waffen SS. Neck lifts, a novel form of torture, made grown men shriek with agony. Groin stretches left everyone limping.

Last night I had a tantrum in the dining room, which looks like a set from Zorro. I was served a baked potato, something looking remarkably like yak droppings — it was called tempe — and my all-time favorite, beets. I hate beets. We got red beets — and yellow beets as an extra treat. Something snapped inside of my shattered body.

"I don't want beets," I cried out, "I want vodka and margueritas. I want cigarettes and cheeseburgers." Some kindly ladies tried to comfort me. I attempted to explain my body had been trained over years to convert vodka directly into protein.

I can't imagine that a few hills away, there may be happy Mexicans drinking mescal, eating tacos and dancing with dusky señoritas. Here, we talk about our weight, drink more water, and go home alone. I can't imagine inviting someone into my room for a glass of water. Tomorrow, I have to make the life-or-death decision whether to go on a five-hour mountain hike that leaves at 0600 or face another day with Raymond. To think, I'm paying for this. A happy camper, I am not.

Lack of food, booze and cigarettes is making me hallucinate. I think I hear the "whomp, whomp, whomp" of helicopter blades in the late afternoon air. From behind a hill, there suddenly appears an olive-drab, Huey chopper. It skims over the hill, circles for a moment, and then lands right in front of me in the heart of the compound. I hear voices calling my name. I look up. In the chopper are my pals Gary and Dr. J surrounded by crates of ice-cold Pacifico beer. "Jump in, E, they yell, we're off to Acapulco for babes, beer and burritos."

Then reality slaps me the face. I hear Raymond's burp gun voice, sinisterly informing us, "Next we'll do some really deep muscle work — muscles you didn't even know existed."