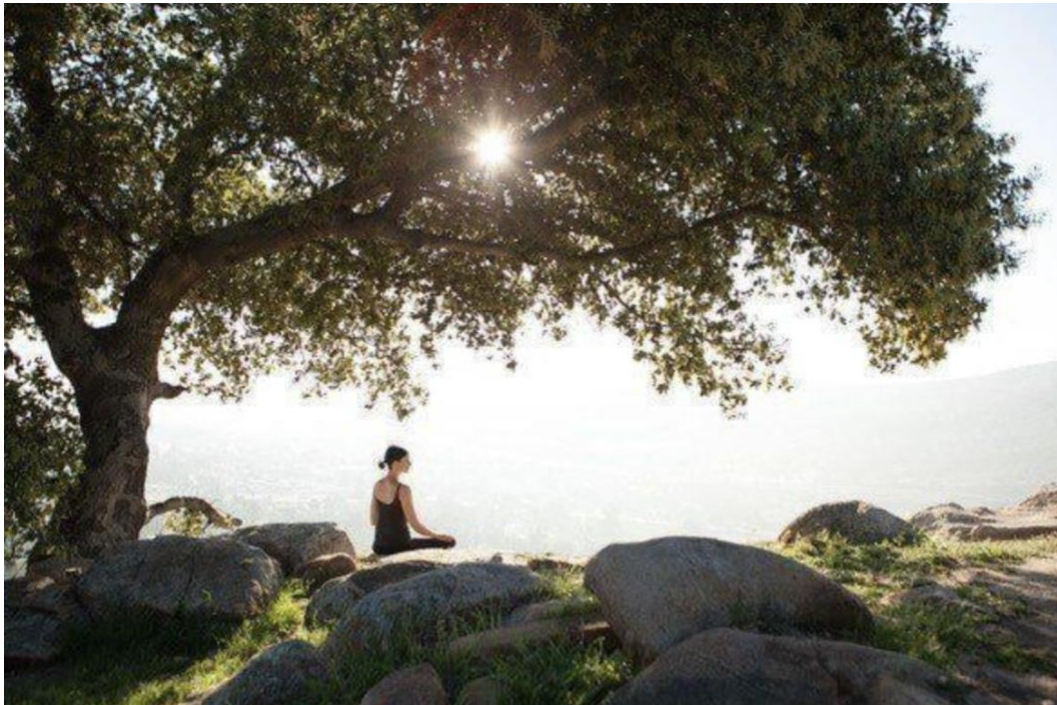


## HEALTH

## Opinion | I ditched booze after a visit to the world's top spa

Rancho La Puerta, North America's original holistic wellness resort, draws women looking for a reset.

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By **Anne Bokma** Contributor

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The first clue that my experience at Rancho La Puerta will make me confront my addictions is the small cotton drawstring bag — just big enough for my cellphone — that's on the hallway table in my luxurious casita.

There are instructions to put my phone “to sleep” throughout my stay. No bedtime news scrolling, no morning Instagram gratification.

The second clue is the lack of alcohol.

There's only one tiny bar set in a far remove on this 4,000-acre nature preserve, a utopian eco-village home to North America's original wellness resort, situated on the northernmost tip of Baja California, just a few kilometres south of the U.S.-Mexico border, an hour's drive from San Diego. Founded in 1940 by a Hungarian philosopher and his young American wife, it has a long history of attracting Hollywood luminaries eager to slim down for movie roles and a mostly female clientele determined to kick-start the kind of healthy habits we typically resolve to adopt when a new year rolls around. You know the drill: eat better, exercise more, drink less.

Reducing my drinking has long been a struggle. I white-knuckle it through "Dry January" and am desperate to pop the cork on a bottle of red come Feb. 1.

It's all about clean living here. While booze isn't banned, it is discouraged. Even though 150 guests are here this week, there are only two or three women at the bar when I head there a couple of times before I decide to stop going.

I'm here to take in all the health benefits The Ranch has to offer. Drinking certainly isn't one of them.

Wine isn't served at dinner in the spacious dining hall where you are seated with strangers who quickly become friends, the way women do when they are on a retreat. Many are here to heal from something: a death, a divorce, children leaving home. Some are celebrating — a birthday, an anniversary of some sort. Midlife women travel here with their aging mothers, or their millennial daughters or long-standing gal pals. They love it here so much they come back again and again — the guest return rate is 60 per cent.

Voted the top destination spa in the world by Travel and Leisure magazine in 2024, The Ranch is set in a picturesque valley in the shadow of the sacred historic Mount Kuchumaa, known as "exalted high place" in the local Kumeyaay Indigenous tradition. It has dozens of acres of stunning gardens, a landscape decorated with a variety of palm trees and cacti, lavender-scented wisteria dripping from every trellis, a massive organic garden that supplies 80 per cent of the food served on site and 40 acres of hiking trails.

The sprawling expanse of luxury facilities includes a variety of gyms, spas, pavilions and pools and 86 casitas with high beamed ceilings, wood burning fireplaces, private patios and dipping pools.

The Ranch promises a healthier and happier life — and a longer one. Guests are inspired by 102-year-old founder, Deborah Szelsky, who developed the property with her late husband Edward Szelsky, a natural living enthusiast who promoted wellness trends such as cold plunges and sound baths long before they became mainstream and a vegetarian diet years before anyone had heard of kombucha. When they first came here 85 years ago, they rented a \$5 a month dirt-floor adobe. Like-minded guests, including author Aldous Huxley, were invited to stay for \$17.50 a week and brought their own tents. (Today, a week's stay is about US\$5,000.)

In the 1950s, Hollywood luminaires such as Kim Novack and Burt Lancaster began to be attracted to the place in part because of its potential for weight loss. (There's a rusty relic of a large barrel shaped body contouring device on the property, popular in the 1970s as a supposed shortcut to slimness.)

Deborah Szelsky, known as the mother of the modern spa movement and a beacon of good living, still shows up for work three days a week, walks a mile a day using her walker (“life is movement, death is not movement — very simple,” she says) and runs



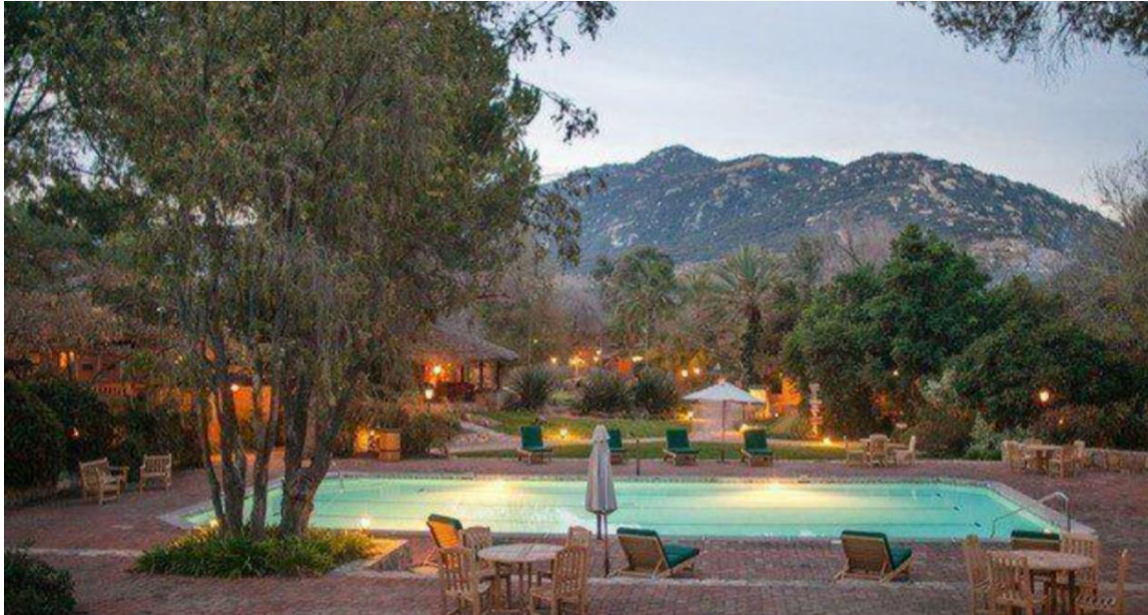
The Ranch is run by Sarah Livia Brightwood and her 102-year-old mother, Deborah Szekely, who founded the spa with her husband in the 1940s.

Rancho La Puerta

the place with her daughter Sarah. She gives twice-weekly fireside chats at The Ranch on the secrets of longevity: organic food, daily exercise, social connection and, especially, unrelenting optimism, her most notable trait, admirable considering the emotional upheavals in her life, including the death of a son and a divorce from Szelsky, who went on to marry his young assistant.

“Optimism against all odds is how things get done in this topsy-turvy world,” she says.

I throw myself full throttle into the week's offerings: tango dance classes, sunrise hikes, breathwork, a soundbath session, aerial yoga, a labyrinth walk. There's also reformer Pilates, cooking classes, something called Watsu (a form of water therapy in which you are cradled and massaged in chest deep water). In addition to the more than 70 weekly activities to choose from, there's a long list of spa treatments.



During a hot stone massage, I consider how terribly I have treated my body over the years, smoking for decades, drinking since I was a teenager, sporadic bursts of fitness that I lose the will to maintain.

I'm in my 60s now — it's not too late to set things right, is it?

I attend a lecture by one of the many personal development gurus who serve as visiting experts. Life coach Emily Boorstein shares the story of her marriage unexpectedly blowing up after her husband left her for another woman. There are nods of recognition among the women who sit at her feet. One blurts out, "I was the cheater in my marriage." Boorstein responds by observing there is bravery in vulnerability, that by honestly addressing our mistakes we can move forward.

"Ultimately, transformation is not about erasing the past or pretending that pain did not exist," she says. "It is about alchemizing that pain into wisdom, compassion, and strength.

"Every time we share our secrets, we reduce our shame," she adds.

I feel shame about my bad habits, particularly the drinking — my weekly consumption was about double the Canadian guidelines of 10 standard drinks per week for women. (Last year the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction revised those guidelines to state that no amount of alcohol is safe and, if you are going to imbibe, you should keep it to two drinks a week.)

I knew I was heading for disaster, upping my odds of getting cancer, dementia, liver disease or permanent damage from a fall. Yet it was hard to stop. Such is the nature of addiction.

It would take another six months of stops and starts before I am able to give up booze completely, but it was The Ranch that planted the seeds for sobriety.

Do I have regrets about how I have been so cavalier about my health in the past? Certainly. I hope reversing course might change things. There's no chance I'll make it to 102 like Deborah Szeksky, but perhaps I can add a few years to my life.