

INSIDER'S GUIDE TO
SPAS

Rancho La Puerta: Creating Community Since 1940

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PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF RANCHO LA PUERTA

If there was just one destination where a traveler knew in advance that every tiny detail would be impeccable without being fussy and where all the golden promises of tranquility and enlightenment could be found in gentle abundance—would this be the one place to return to again and again? Yes, and I do. Rancho La Puerta is that elusive combination of retreat, pilgrimage, rest cure, and nature immersion.

Just 30 miles from the San Diego airport and across the border from Baja, California, Mexico, a four-thousand-acre nature preserve is home to a series of gardens, fitness centers, pools, and adobe casitas and villas where at every step sage, wild rose, jasmine, and lavender scent the high desert air. In our post-pandemic world, the quiet and solitude of each casita's private garden provides as much solace as the spa's blissful treatments. Camaraderie and friendship feel as if it has been baked into the sense of place. Perhaps this is because when Rancho La Puerta first opened in 1940, it was a gathering spot for seekers, mystics, writers, and an international community that may have comprised the first global nomads.



A typical retreat week at Rancho La Puerta in the early days might find Oscar-nominated Burt Lancaster baking bread and playing croquet, while students of co-founder Edmond Szekely gathered in the evenings to hear his health lectures. Szekely, affectionately known as the Professor, was a Hungarian philosopher and natural living enthusiast who authored over 80 books, including *The Essene Gospel of Peace*. He and his wife **DEBORAH** set up camp, and in those years of World War II, prices were \$17.50 a week and guests stayed in tents and helped milk the goats.

Deborah today, at 101 years of age, is known as the godmother of the wellness movement and is busy planting trees in Tecate to protect the village from global warming. Planting is a family tradition. RANCHO LA PUERTA founded the first international organic garden before the Rodale family planted the garden in Emmaus, Pennsylvania. Daughter Sarah Livia Szekely Brightwood, who studied landscape architecture, now leads Rancho La Puerta as its president. In 1984, she regenerated the organic garden Tres Estrellas—which is why today every spa and hotel with culinary and social ambitions tries to do the same thing. Now you know who started it!

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Rancho La Puerta President Sarah Livia Szekely Brightwood; photo by Doug Ellis

A humble and generous presence who rarely steps into the limelight, Szekely Brightwood includes each guest in nurturing the same epiphany. All meals are included in guests' stays, so are all classes and workshops—more than 50 to choose from a day. Each plate and each glass of herbal-infused water and

tea shimmers with the energy of hand-tended ingredients. Guests are even invited to work on the farm, just as they did in earliest days. Most recently, a cooking school has been built by Szekely Brightwood on the grounds of the farm, and visitors to the ranch harvest and then learn to cook a plant-based diet during their stay. Retreats here are Saturday through Saturday, meals are communal, and the continuity and intimacy of shared experience includes an early morning hike each day under the watchful gaze of Mt. Kuchumaa—a mountain listed on the National Register of Historic Places for its sacred significance.

The friendliness and lack of pretension quiets the stress and anxiety, and the all-inclusive price eliminates the a la carte conundrum found in too many retreats that offer solace and then present fine print. A Mediterranean micro-climate brings the gift of sunshine. In the summer, it is cooler than every major American city, and of course, the winters here are golden. If you go, keep an eye out for the DETOX AND CLEANSING RETREAT that Szekely Brightwood herself hosts under the supervision of Dr. Michael Finkelstein. These are not to be missed.