

# Truth in Travel: Is Integrity-Led Travel the Next Big Travel Trend?

by Juliet Kinsman | Nov 13, 2025



*Featured image: Juliet Kinsman and Pat Mitchell discuss integrity in travel during their time at Rancho La Puerta | Photo by Juliet Kinsman*

## Let's make integrity great again!

by Juliet Kinsman

What does it mean to have integrity? At its heart, it's about walking your talk—when your values, words, and actions align so that there's no gap between who you are and how you act in this world. North America's original destination wellness retreat, **Rancho La Puerta's** first Women in Sustainability week, brought it home to me that integrity in travel is what we need.

There's something profound about being somewhere that has followed a regenerative organic way of being for decades, long before all the buzzwords abounded. Here in Tecate, Baja California, Mexico, Project Dandelion, a global, women-led movement for climate justice, organized an intimate gathering of change-makers to raise awareness about climate solutions, convening at this decades-old wellness resort.

This isn't a luxury wellness retreat that has suddenly discovered eco because it's a box to tick. It's long been iconic, as what my stepmother back in the 80s called a Health Farm. With more than 4,000 acres and 86 casitas, the ranch has been quietly pioneering regenerative practices since the 1940s, long before "eco-conscious" became a selling point.

## Integrity is the thread that connects us

Created in 1940 by Professor Edmond Szekely and his wife, Deborah, 85 years later and she can still be seen attending events and activities. At 103, you couldn't find a better ambassador for the Ranch's organic, homegrown plant-led cuisine, its many dedicated facilities for specialist movement and spa therapies, and art classes suited to all sensibilities and fitness levels. Activities pull you in all directions, but even if you just did the early-morning hikes, and grazed on the healthy home cooking, time here works wonders.

Disconnected from my everyday, here on this sprawling cactus-studded campus at the foot of the Flintstone-peppered mountains, I couldn't help but reflect on why this timeless retreat is so special.

Staying somewhere with a deep history of living in harmony with nature, with heart and soul, where your every need is considered, and the staff have all mostly worked here for years, it came to me that this was a hotel exemplifying integrity. And how this should be a hotel category in its own right: A hug of hospitality which is true to its original mission. A property that doesn't catfish you with Pinterest-perfect cut-and-paste could-be-anywhere contemporary interior design. And it's run by a passionate human being who lives and breathes a respect for people, place and nature as a whole — not a private-equity board that makes every decision based on what will yield the greatest short-term profits.

Today, Sarah Livia Brightwood Szekely — daughter of Edmond and Deborah — runs Rancho La Puerta and Fundación La Puerta, sensitively demonstrating how an environmental conscience, community consideration, and personal wellness intertwine. What comes through is how our well-being is inseparable from the well-being of the places and communities we visit. When we choose experiences and destinations with integrity, when we travel with intention rather than just Instagram potential, we create space for genuine reflection, connection and personal growth.



*Views from Rancho La Puerta / Photo provided by Rancho La Puerta*



*Thoughtful details throughout the property / Photo by Rancho La Puerta*

## What does integrity mean to you?

“What does integrity mean to you?” I asked Pat Mitchell of [Project Dandelion](#), co-curator of this week’s talks from environmental health to ethical banking. Without skipping a beat, the first woman CEO of PBS and author of *Becoming a Dangerous Woman: Embracing Risk to Change the World* answers: “Truth. And being trustworthy. Only supporting companies that align with your values.” I threw the same question at co-founder Ronda Carnegie, fellow host of this week of sustainability insights: “Purpose-driven and true to your mission” was her instant response. And these sentiments also present as the perfect navigation to the best travel experiences.

The truth is, the travel industry is vulnerable to what we might call “integrity gaps.” Hotels flaunt halo-worthy brags about caring for people and planet, while it’s business as usual behind the scenes. Tour operators promise “authentic local experiences” while funnelling profits away from communities into offshore accounts. And wellness retreats slap “transformational” onto their marketing while offering little more than pretty backdrops for selfies.



*Mexico's Rancho La Puerta hosted a dedicated Women in Sustainability Week / Photo provided by Rancho La Puerta*

Many hosts have forgotten how to be human. So it's always refreshing to spend time somewhere genuinely family-owned and run, where you're encouraged to do a digital detox and consign your phone to its own sleeping bag for your stay, rather than being coaxed into doing what's essentially their digital marketing. In a style-over-substance landscape of sleek spas and luxury facilities, little wonder this tried-and-tested home-from-home lures its loyal clients back, again and again, which also cultivates a strong sense of community.

It was here that it dawned on me the hotels I've loved most and the travel agents I'm most grateful for have this virtue in common—integrity. They don't shout about their values because they live them quietly, consistently. Hotels and humans that don't need to convince you of their authenticity—you just feel it. Hotels that exemplify this might not be the flashiest, the fanciest or the most famous; they're just quietly being good businesses, without a whiff of corporate policies or chain-hotel formulas.



*The OG of wellness retreats in Tecate, Mexico, just south of San Diego / Photo by Rancho La Puerta*

## A return to human-led brands

And in this world of AI-generated generic content, we will surely increasingly turn to the honest voices and human-led brands we most trust. It will be those with integrity we value. We'll share tips and word-of-mouth recommendations that come from genuine experience rather than algorithmic optimization. The travel advisors who survive and thrive will be those who've built relationships based on honesty rather than commission potential.

As my aunt once said to me, what's great about getting older is joining the dots between all you've learned along the way in life. And with wisdom, there comes a point where we're sure of our values and less willing to compromise on what truly matters to us. And in travel, as in life, integrity creates the foundation for experiences that truly nourish us. In a world increasingly hungry for authenticity, integrity is exactly what we need.



*Juliet was a guest of [Rancho La Puerta](#) for Women in Sustainability Week. One-week programs start each Saturday and end on the following Saturday, ranging from \$5,150 per person, plus tax. The nearest major international airport to Rancho La Puerta is San Diego International Airport (SAN) in the United States, about 45 miles away. Tijuana International Airport (TIJ) in Mexico is less than an hour's drive away.*

### **Ways to test a travel business's integrity:**

1. **Ownership isn't anonymous.** The website has an 'about us' section, which tells the story and history of the passionate humans behind the hospitality.
2. Hosts **spend time on the property**, and personally share honest, open stories of how their hotel ticks — whether it's the work of their foundation or how they're working on solutions to local challenges, such as unemployment or responsible water or food sourcing.
3. Hotels and agents can answer with confidence: "**How does your business positively benefit nature or the local community?**" Integrity-led hotels are brimming with stories of how and why they care for the environment, or they support their team or neighbours in a meaningful way and they're not shy about talking about some of the challenges.

4. **Gauge staff retention:** I always ask hotel team members how long they've worked there. High staff churn often signals poor culture – a major integrity gap. Hotels with integrity keep long-term staff who genuinely want to be there, which translates into an uplifting vibe overall.

5. When they talk about impact or sustainability, you know it comes from the heart, and it's **always been their ethos**; they haven't just learned the right script for marketing purposes.