

PARK



Rancho La Puerta World's Best Destination Spa

By R. Couri Hay
My Point of View

I've been going to Rancho la Puerta since the 80's and although it is now a state of the art facility, think limited



Wi-Fi and iPhone, the basics of The Ranch, the authentic vibe of the cozy casitas with fireplaces, fresh food and juices from its organic gardens, classes for all ages, attentive staff, wonderous hiking trails for all levels of walkers and Mt Kuchumaa, the sacred mountain that gives off a palpable spiritual energy, remain the same. Let's not forget the pollution free air; but for me, one of the most impressive features are the world class gardens; 32 gorgeous acres of them, some wild, others manicured. The sprawling beds of red and white Hollyhocks that soar to 14 feet tall are the most magnificent I've ever seen. Sarah Livia Brightwood Szekely, president of Rancho La Puerta and daughter of co-founder Deborah Szekely, is a gifted landscape architect. Her use of color blocking by

planting large spaces of one specimen create a breathtaking panorama that reminds me of master works by the

great impressionists. Rather its fields of black-eyed daisies, red and white geraniums, calla lilies, cacti of all sizes, white irises that could bring tears to your eyes, or trellises covered in lavender wisteria, everywhere you look there's something heavenly to see. Brightwood has been working on these gardens for over thirty years, and the love and energy she has invested has paid off. My advice: try to visit Rancho La Puerta at different times of the year in order to see the enormous variety of plantings that bloom in different seasons. And Deborah Szekely, The Ranch's inspiring co-founder, is still here imparting the wisdom she has gathered over her remarkable 101 years on our planet every week. Rancho La Puerta is the *ne plus ultra* of spas.

The Ranch

Rancho La Puerta has consistently been hailed as one of the top wellness resorts in the world by travel writers, celebrities, and seekers of a healthier lifestyle since it was founded by Edmond & Deborah Szekely in 1940. Located 45 miles from San Diego in bucolic Tecate, Mexico, it is the oldest spa in North America, and was proclaimed the "World's Best Destination Spa" by Travel + Leisure for multiple years. What began as a tiny camp built in the shadow of historic Mt. Kuchumaa is now an all-encompassing resort nestled amidst lush flora and vineyards. The 4,000 scenic acres include vast woodlands and meandering mountain trails. The resort's winding brick paths, vineyards and koi ponds are bordered with orange and yellow lilies, flowering shrubs, and red roses. Nicknamed "The Ranch" by the procession of returning guests, it limits itself to a maximum of 150 guests per week. rancholapuerta.com

Mother of The Modern Spa Movement

Deborah just celebrated her 101st birthday in May 2023 and is now an indefatigable and spritely example of healthy living. Deborah is widely referred to as "The Mother of the Modern Spa Movement" and is one of the country's leading wellness crusaders. Deborah told me, "Delight in the little things in nature and in life—I think it's hard to be truly healthy without that. Thinking out of the box, seeing, being aware and enjoying the little things, this is what is so important." Of her charitable work, she said, "All the different nonprofits I created have to do with connecting people because then you get strength. It's very nice to be powerful individually, but if you can bring people together it's lasting."

Kate Winslet, Madonna, Claudia Schiffer & Oprah Winfrey

Szekely's pioneering fitness and health spa in Mexico was discovered in the 1940s by Hollywood luminaries such as Burt Lancaster, Kim Novak, Bill Holden, and the writer Aldous Huxley. Over the years Rancho La



Puerta has attracted Kate Winslet, Madonna, Governor Jerry Brown, Arianna Huffington, Claudia Schiffer, Bill Moyers, Alicia Silverstone, Erica Jong, Oprah Winfrey, and Ricki Lake, who once utilized the resort's classes to train for her appearance on Dancing with the Stars. There are also weeklong schedules of Pilates, yoga, art lessons, meditation, and cooking classes by renowned visiting chefs. New classes

this year include Breathing Basics, Cardio Drum Dance and Chakra. Some of the interesting workshops include Journaling for Joy and How to Create a Life with Purpose. Do not miss the inspiring Sound Healing classes by Anne Van De Water; she has a magic touch.

At The Ranch, Deborah is hoping to encourage the next generation of "health nuts"—a favorite descriptor for people like herself who "read labels, go to farmer's markets, participate in a community garden or has a garden, and are active in taking responsibility for their own health."

Escaping the Depression

Born in Brooklyn, Deborah's fascination with beautiful landscapes was developed at an early age when her family moved to Tahiti during the early 1930s to escape the Depression. "We were the only Americans on the island other than the governor who had two boys," she remembers. Her mother, Rebecca Shainman, was the Vice President of the New York Vegetarian Society in 1926 and set the family's course for healthful eating. "In those days they called it 'fruitarian' because we ate everything raw."

Szekely met her husband, Edmond, just after finishing high school and the couple married when she was 17. "He had never bought a train ticket, he never learned to type, he never learned to drive because he said that it

interfered with the life of the mind. He was totally impractical but marvelous and charismatic,” she says of their first meeting in Tahiti, when Edmond, the head of the British International Health and Education Center in Surrey, England, was on leave to write two books on Mexico. “Everybody thought he was wonderful, so I thought he was too. The minute he walked into a room, some way or another the energy of the room changed.”

World War II

The original no-frills camp had its origins in World War II, when Deborah and her husband, a native of Hungary, were living in southern California, and because of his refusal to return to Europe to serve in the military, an order was issued for his arrest as a deserter. “We didn’t collapse,” Deborah recalls. “Thankfully we got a letter two weeks later from U.S. Immigration and Naturalization, what they now call Homeland Security, and it said that if he was found in our country on June 1st, 1940, he would be arrested and shipped back to his country. So we went to Mexico.”

Tecate, Mexico



Her husband Edmond Szekely, a renowned scholar, had planned to teach a summer school session in Oslo. “We knew we would have to hold the summer school because we were counting on the money from the students, and they had already signed up. So we just wrote them and said the summer school instead of being in Oslo is going to be in Tecate. And we had to make it cheap because they had to bring their own tents.” That’s why they chose the location, near the U.S. border, about an hour from San Diego. The resort is still in that same location today.

Herbal Wraps & Skin Care

The Ranch began as a rustic summer camp, however, in the early days, they did create an herbal wrap, out of necessity, Deborah explains. “Without it many of the guests, because they never exercised at home, were so stiff they literally crawled out of their beds after their first day of hiking and exercise at the Ranch. Herbal wraps were the answer. The heat relaxed the muscles.” Later, the Szekelys hired experts to begin training programs in massage and skin care at Rancho La Puerta, and they were an immediate hit. “Guests had worked hard all day, and they looked forward to having the soothing attention of facials and massages.” Want a deep tissue massage or shiatsu? Ask for Carlos or Arturo; they can bring your body back to life after a long day.

The Sacred Mountain: Mt. Kuchumaa

Together, the couple opened Rancho La Puerta which today runs \$5,150 a person per week; however, their first summer health camp in Tecate was decidedly more humble—\$17.50 per week and bring your own tent. For that economical price, guests hiked, enjoyed rustic vegetarian meals, group exercises and attended daily lectures by the founders.

“It was years before we could buy property and it was little by little by little that we assembled the land,” she says of Rancho’s property that now spans 4,000 acres— half of which can never be developed and includes the famed Mt. Kuchumaa, where Deborah’s late husband and son, Alex, are now buried. “When we got here, we heard some weird stories that it’s a sacred mountain and my husband said, ‘Oh, it’s just folklore,’ but after we’d been here a few years, they had a major pow-wow on the mountain and tribes came from all over the United States. I know that we’re here because we were meant to be here. I really believe that, and the reason Rancho La Puerta is so successful is because we’re on the path that we’re supposed to be on. It was nothing that we planned, created, plotted – none of that.”

Living Skills

The lessons taught at the spa on how to lead a healthful, mindful life, Deborah has been trying to teach beyond the San Diego region over the last several decades. In 1984, she wrote the Congressional Management Manual, which is still used by all new members of Congress as a manual on how to transition into their new offices.

She ran for Congress herself in her 60s and lobbied for issues popular with the “health nuts,” such as taxing sodas and soft drinks and lowering subsidies on unhealthy foods. And she created Living Skills, an elementary school curriculum to teach students about obesity prevention.

Sarah Livia Brightwood Szekely

Although her daughter now runs the resort full time, Deborah has not slowed down. She’s an author and advises Congress on policies promoting fitness, health, and making more nutritious, natural foods available to



Americans. Deborah is still lecturing at The Ranch at least once a week. She thinks her daughter is doing a wonderful job. “She is gifted, and I think in some ways it reflects her personality,” says Deborah. “She is very spiritual. She’s very musical. She’s an artist, and I think most of the classes reflect more of her.”

Now in her tenth decade, Deborah has ensured her mindful message will live on. Rancho La Puerta is now under the direction of her daughter, Sarah Livia Brightwood Szekely – who continues to strive for excellence with new endeavors. Their newest additions include a state-of-the-art water treatment plant, as well as a brand-new community, dubbed The Residences.

The Residences

The Residences is a private, wellness focused 118-acre village with sweeping views of the grounds and will eventually boast 113 private homes priced from \$1.21 million to \$2.51 million. The homes will feature spacious living and dining room areas with fireplaces, large private patios with hammocks, meditation spaces, and fountains, as well as eco-friendly and sustainable technology. “For many years at Rancho La Puerta we have nurtured the dream of creating a residential community – a village rooted in our traditions of living in harmony with the natural world,” says Brightwood. “This village is dedicated to wellness. It’s a place where you can draw strength and become your most resilient self.”

A Typical Day's Regimen

What you do on any day at The Ranch is entirely up to you, and depends upon what interests you, but many guests enjoy a morning hike, go to breakfast, and then perhaps take a meditation class or a visit the gym. For guests who want to participate in a fitness session led by a trained instructor, there are over 40 classes every day, including pickleball, Tai Chi, HIIT, Barre, kickboxing, and salsa. The Ranch also offers mind-body classes, such as aerial yoga, meditation, Feldenkrais, and WATSU, a form of guided water dancing.

Food: Part of the Experience



Up to 80% of what is served at each meal is grown on the premises at the resort's six-acre organic farm, Tres Estrellas. The farm is located about two miles up the valley from the rest of the facilities; guests can visit with early morning hikes, tours of the garden, and even an introductory organic farming class led by the charismatic head gardener, Salvador Tinajero. The rest of the food is sourced from local farmers who follow sustainable practices, and seafood is purchased fresh daily from local fishermen at the nearby port of Ensenada. A fresh "catch of the day" is featured on the menu four times a week for dinner, and several times a week for lunch. My favorite dishes include the breakfast, with made-to-order omelets and fresh juices and oatmeal, as well as the Rainbow Lasagna with Lentils and Pomodoro Sauce and Eggplant Parmigiana and Curried Tomato Sauce for dinner.

The cuisine at the resort is described as "lacto-ovo pescatarian," which includes dairy, eggs, and seafood, but no meats or poultry. Meals consist of fruits, vegetables, grains, legumes, nuts, seeds, dairy, egg, and seafood. Since 1940, the team at Rancho La Puerta has developed, tested, and proven hundreds of recipes, culminating in a superb all-natural diet to fuel their guests. Mealtimes at The Ranch are about creating camaraderie and community. Breakfast and lunch are informal while dinner is a sit-down affair.

Chef Reyna Venegas, the executive chef at The Ranch, says that she believes eating is a sacred act. “What we consume becomes a part of ourselves. I want guests to enjoy each bite, relax, and have the best dining experience possible.” When she cooks, she draws from her culinary training, her strong Northern Mexican roots, and her experience preparing light and healthy cuisine. She explains that her goal at the ranch is “for guests to feel energized, inspired, and nourished with every meal.” The Ranch has also hosted internationally renowned guest chefs such as Deborah Madison, the founding chef of Greens in San Francisco, John Ash, the author of *From the Earth to the Table*, and James Beard Foundation Hall-of-Famer Anne Willan, who wrote *The Country Cooking of France*. On my visit, the guest chef was James Beard award-winning cookbook author Virginia Willis, known for her scrumptious Southern cuisine.

Final Thought

After dinner I asked Deborah if she had a final thought now that she’d entered her tenth decade. “Just do everything right,” she said, and she certainly has.

I’m already looking forward to my return! For reservations call Rancho La Puerta at (800) 443-7565.