

# romper

## Family Week At Rancho La Puerta Is The Ultimate Summer Camp For Everyone



First thing I did when I got to Rancho La Puerta was to ask the teenagers about the Wifi. “How do you go without Wifi for a week?” I asked because I wanted them to like me, but also because I was scared of going dark for that long. Nobody seemed to care but me, but I am 50, and this is my first time at summer camp. I am on a bus from the San Diego airport with about 100 other people. We will cross the border into Tecate, Mexico on foot together. Our bags and our passports will meet us on the other side where, I’ve been told, the Ranch is waiting.

The Ranch. This is what everyone calls Rancho La Puerta, where I am headed for Family Week without my own family. (Everyone else brought their family.) In the first hour or so I find out that most people are back for their third or fourth or tenth time at the Ranch. I am new here. I make my first friend on the bus, a golden teenage boy named Zac who is soft-spoken and sweet and wants me to meet his mom. He can clearly sense I'm going to try to make him my only friend and he is backing away but nicely. Zac tells me about his friends here, the friends he only sees for this week every year. A special week at a famous spa, the only time children are allowed to join their parents and we all of us get to go through our own versions of puberty together.

## Where is Rancho La Puerta?

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Rancho La Puerta sits on 4,000 acres in Baja California, Mexico. It is a village unto itself. There are 32 acres of gardens, hiking trails, four pools, a spa, a salon, a dining hall, gift shops, and the most incredible fitness and spa facilities I've ever seen. Families who come during Family Week stay in individual casitas that are set up like little neighborhoods along windy cobblestone paths.

The Ranch, first started back in the '40s by Deborah Skekely and her professor husband Edmond, was one of the first of its kind: A place where people came to eat mostly vegetarian food and do yoga and hike up Mount Kuchumaa to breathe in all of that spiritual air. People thought it was a cult at first and I'm still not sure where I land on that one. It's not a cult exactly, but it's also not regular.



The casitas have terra cotta floors and patios and big beds and excellent air conditioning. There are 86 in total, all with wood beamed ceilings and hand painted tiles. They're roomy, around 1,000 square feet on average.

Again I'll remind you, there is no wifi. Which meant no escaping the socializing by zoning out in front of Netflix. No laptop for working. No emails to check. No scrolling through my friends' lives.

Instead I scrolled through my life.

## Going through second puberty is actually pretty great.

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There I am, sitting alone on the first day of lunch in the big cafeteria, where the food is served buffet style in deference to families and picky eaters. We were all dressed pretty much the same in our adult version of shorts and t-shirts, which is leggings and a tank top. Like summer camp. The lunch bell rang, also like summer camp, and I found my way over from my yoga class to eat. Alone. With no phone to distract me. I wondered what the other girls thought. I swam at sunset with someone's kid while the adults talked in the corner. Me and him swimming our slow laps, wondering if we were going to make any friends.

The next day, I find I have friends. After my early morning hike up Mount Kuchumaa, I find Zac's mom and her friend and they are my age and they say to me, "Oh don't eat alone. We'll meet at this table for dinner too," and I don't think I've ever loved anyone more.

I unpeel myself like a sweet clementine all week. I drink little shots of green juice in the morning with my breakfast. I drink coffee with cinnamon and some kind of orange spice. I swim laps in the pool with another new friend, an adult, my skin sun-tight, my stride lengthening. I take a Pilates class beside a teenage boy who is there because his mom is the teacher and he thinks she's pretty great.





I am a try-hard teenager with the kids who are not trying too hard. They are running around the Ranch with absolute freedom, playing pickle ball and swimming and going to yoga classes and mermaid aquafit like me. Zac told me on a walk around the Ranch, “I learned how to be independent here. This is my secret path.”

The kids all know each other, they all know the instructors who love them and treat them like beloved nieces and nephews. “Did you see Ariana?” you’ll hear after a meditation class and the instructor will say, “Yes, she’s with Adam/Nick/Ella, they were going to do a hike and then go to practice for the musical.”

I stop being nervous of walking by groups of teenagers because these teenagers are Ranch teenagers. Walking by a group hanging out in the hot tub, my first thought is “Oh dear God, they’re going to mock me,” and all they said was, “Careful walking home, Jen! Night!”

# How much is Family Week at Rancho La Puerta?

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Family Week runs at Rancho La Puerta from July 27 - Aug 3, and spots fill up quickly. The price for the week for adults is \$4,750 plus tax, while kids age 14-17 cost \$2,200 and kids 7-13 cost \$1,700 for the week. This includes all meals and activities throughout the week, and the activities are geared to all ages.



## The amenities are like nothing else.

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The beauty of Family Week at the Ranch is that parents can either go their own way, do a few classes with their kids, or a smattering of both. There are classes for all ages, classes for younger kids, teens, and adults only. I can't recommend enough doing classes with the kids, especially the classes that allow for salsa dancing, hula hooping, or anything in the pool.

It's a choose-your-own-adventure kind of place, and I soon figured out that I said yes at the Ranch more than I said no. Yes to a hot stone massage at the spa and then yes to the best facial I've ever had. Yes to mermaid aqua fit with dads and kids who did not belong to each other, we all just sort of happened to be there. We all fall a bit in love with our mermaid teacher Kirsten. We all strike a pose when she says strike a pose. No to the super intense barre class where I remembered I was 50 and learned that my neck can actually sweat.



Yes to breakfast at the Ranch's organic farm, Tres Estelles, after a morning hike at the base of the mountain, for the good yogurt, the good fruit, the good everything. Yes to learning to cook at La Cocina que Canta at the farm where I made spicy Thai coconut shrimp soup and these amazing curry quinoa cakes and a nectarine blackberry cobbler that I am still thinking about.

No to giving up wine for the week. There is one place to drink wine at the Ranch, the Mercato overlooking the valley with comfy seats and fairy lights and an incredible view. I made my parent friends at the Mercato, drinking our wine like we were kids sneaking a flask into our dorms.



Yes to a musical at the Ranch during Family Week, a musical where kids practice in a building that looks like a glass dome with trees all around, and all week when you walk by you can hear the piano, the singing, the laughing. It's not just kids either. Grown up cool men, brothers visiting together, did a Vaudevillian act while a young girl belted out her best Taylor Swift. And we all watched, tucked in barefoot on little cushions in the auditorium like a zen version of *Dirty Dancing* where no one would ever think of putting Baby in the corner.

Yes to the little private rooftop spa where women and girls hang out to nap and soak in the hot tub and cheer each other on in the cold plunge pool. Where we talk like we've known each other forever.

Yes to hiking with Manuel in the morning. Yes to his stories about the magic of the Ranch. People, women especially, came here because they were lost. Because they didn't know how to find the versions of themselves they liked best. They found them here. And they never forgot.

Yes to the very last night. When we all put on that one dressy outfit we brought, kids included. I walk loose-hipped after all that yoga and hiking and good food. I say hi to this family and that family, all mixed up with each other. Yes to the wine served with dinner that we drink like we haven't been drinking it all week.

Yes to dancing under the lights outside the dining hall. Yes to twirling the little boy who swam with me at the beginning of the week. Who was lost like me. Who dances with the adults and the kids and the instructors.

Yes to Family Week at the Ranch.