



TRAVEL

HOW A HEALING RETREAT IN MEXICO HELPED ME FINALLY PUT MYSELF FIRST DURING THE HOLIDAYS

Image: courtesy of Dominique Fluker.

By Dominique Fluker | December 17, 2025

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After profound loss reshaped the holidays, one writer finds healing, rest, and unexpected community during a wellness retreat in Tecate, Mexico.

I haven't been in the holiday spirit since my father died in 2013, and the lack of enthusiasm increased when my mother died in 2023 from glioblastoma, an aggressive brain cancer. As an only child, my mother and I were extremely close and often spent holidays together, but since her passing, I've felt confused and lost on how to approach the holidays, as it's not a joyful time for me. I've felt the pressure to return home to celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas with my broader family, but the experience hasn't exactly been joyful due to the loss of my parents. If anything, the holidays feel lonely, isolating and a reminder of what will never be – my family unit appearing again.

So, what does an only child who's lost both of her parents do when the holiday season rolls around each year, besides cry? Aim to explore new ways to acknowledge the season with an open mind and heart, which isn't always easy. While I usually like to spend the holidays alone to grieve privately, I decided to try something different this Thanksgiving. This year, I spent a whole week at a fitness and wellness resort in Tecate, Mexico, at [Rancho La Puerta](#).

Anyone who knows me knows I'm often extremely busy with an airtight, jam-packed schedule, so the thought of leaving a to-do list in Los Angeles for an entire week was daunting. Still, I decided to trade in my dresses, heels, and purses for workout clothes, sneakers, and UGGs to immerse myself in wellness to soak up the whole experience. I knew my time at Rancho La Puerta would be an adjustment for me – no glamour, just myself stripped down.



Image: courtesy of Dominique Fluker.

The location: Rancho La Puerta was founded in 1940 by spa pioneers Edmond and Deborah Szekely. Coined the original "fitness resort" and spa, the property, affectionately known as the "ranch," welcomes some 140 guests each week to its 4,000 private acres of lush gardens, serene mountains, and meadows in Baja California, Mexico, near San Diego, California. The ranch prides itself on offering a robust wellness program with exercise classes and activities that include Pilates (Reformer and mat work), yoga, guided hikes on over 40 miles of wild and trails, Qi Gong, T'ai Chi, meditation, aqua exercise classes, dance, strength training, and more, all part of their fitness week. Five classes are offered every hour on the hour from 9 am to 4 pm each day of a seven-night stay.

The property also touts being a digital, noise-free environment, which meant I had to limit cell phone use throughout my stay. While it was a change for me, I happily welcomed it and got used to not being glued to my phone – it was nice to experience a digital detox there. Another aspect of the ranch I had to get used to was the difference in cuisine. The delicious yet healthy cuisine is semi-vegetarian, with fish options and limited snacks and desserts. Many recipe ingredients come fresh-picked, only hours old from Tres Estrellas, their organic garden. Additionally, fresh seafood is purchased directly from the local fish market in Ensenada, Mexico, two hours away.

The journey: After a short flight from Los Angeles to San Diego and an hour bus ride to Tecate, Mexico, I arrived on the ranch. After settling into my spacious, beautifully traditional, decorated casita, I finally felt able to breathe. I took off my shoes, lit the ready-made fireplace, and settled in. There wasn't any noise, hardly any blaring lights (I had to use a flashlight to walk to and from dinner at the food hall, most nights), and hustle and Los-Angeles' career-induced anxiety began to fade away. I could hear myself, I could feel my heartbeat, and I knew what I needed in that exact moment: *rest*.

And rest, is what I found.



Photo Courtesy of Dominique Fluker

Activities and experiences: At the ranch, I started most of my mornings by doing something for myself before doing so for others, which led me to Buddhist meditation at 9:00 am after breakfast. During my meditation sessions, I learned the importance of releasing harmful self-narratives to joy and invite in peace, a reminder I desperately needed, as I am often angry that my parents aren't here with me during the holidays. Our meditation guide reminded us that "Impermanence is the only constant."

Water Aerobics: In addition to meditation, I wanted to make sure I tried new activities at the ranch that would also make my inner child happy. So, while I can't swim well, I decided to test out water aerobics. I had the best time doing jazz hands and dancing in the water to the song, "YMCA," while exercising.

Cooking class: I had the unique opportunity to experience a private cooking class that was literally farm-to-table. I was able to handpick the ingredients from their organic farm for the meal with Chef Alyse Whitney. We prepared a wonderful assortment of dips and seafood.

Reformer Pilates: I'm not new to reformer, especially living in Los Angeles, but I was impressed by their state-of-the-art Pilates studio and the instructor. Our guide focused more on our posture and positioning than on how much or for how long we could stretch ourselves, which served as a metaphor for my trip.



Image: courtesy of Dominique Fluker.

Trampoline cardio class: My trampoline cardio class was so much fun and much more complicated than I thought it would be! We didn't just jump and down; we did squats, stretches, and curls all on the trampoline. The class also did a bit of weight work.

Sound healing: Similar to meditation, I've always wanted a good sound-healing experience, but it never quite worked for me. I found myself fidgeting in class or distracted by the many tasks I had to do after the session. However, the experience on the ranch was vastly different because the healing session regulated my nervous system, making me more open to it. I left the session feeling refreshed, rested, less stressed, and more focused.

What I did on Thanksgiving: To my surprise, it was a pleasant one. Instead of participating in wellness and fitness activities, I opted to lounge at one of the ranch's four pools and enjoy a green juice. Later, I enjoyed a mountain sage massage with hot stones and retreated to my casita to rest in front of the fireplace. I carved out space to reflect on what I was grateful for beyond my parents, and I found that I value the autonomy to live my life the way I want, even if it strays from tradition. However, the ranch did offer a gorgeous sit-down dinner for Thanksgiving, and we feasted on fish, soup, pumpkin gnocchi, grilled corn, and pumpkin pie.

Building community and belonging: Everyone at Rancho La Puerta chose to come to the ranch to celebrate Thanksgiving, some alone, some with their families, and some with partners or best friends. Being surrounded by people who chose differently made me feel less alone and less guilty about not having a traditional Thanksgiving. Instead, I felt more empowered to continue exploring, to pick myself through self-care, and to receive the love and support from people who genuinely wish me well. Because of an open mind, I now have new, aligned lifelong connections.