

To Your Health

A First-Timer's Guide to Rancho La Puerta

by Cindy Chupack



"You're a first timer?!"

That was the response I got daily from the remarkably friendly and loyal guests of [Rancho La Puerta](#), a wellness resort and spa just over the San Diego border in Baja California, Mexico.

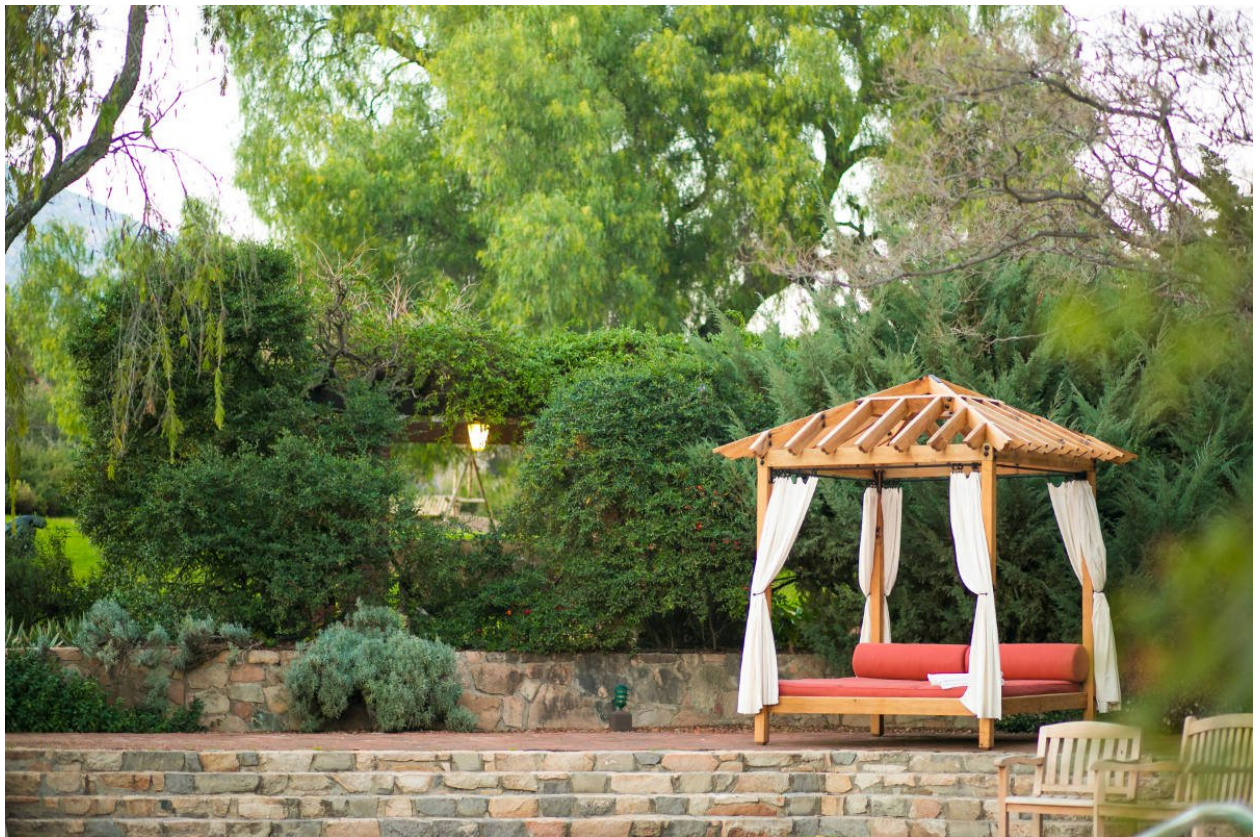
Other than Disneyland or maybe a Past Lives conference, I can't think of many places where people would start a conversation with "How many times have you been here?" but Rancho La Puerta is one of those places. I met guests who had been to this gem 27 or 30 times over the past 27 or 30 years. The folks who had "only" been there 8 or 9 times described themselves as relative newbies. Many guests had an annual tradition of going to the Ranch (as insiders call it) with their spouse, best friend, sister, mother, or friends they met on prior visits.

For me, Rancho La Puerta was a place I'd been *meaning* to visit for almost a decade after hearing about it from a writer friend. This year, with my 12-year-old daughter away at sleepaway camp, I finally had the chance.

I never went to sleepaway camp as a kid, but in many ways, Rancho La Puerta is the ultimate upscale adult version of it, with unlimited options for fitness, fun, meditating, pampering, cooking, crafting, learning, reflecting, and just plain lounging in a roomy, air-conditioned casita.

The problem (which, admittedly, is the definition of a luxury problem) is that almost every hour Rancho offers at least three — and sometimes eight — different [fitness classes and activities](#), and I wanted to try everything.

I had been warned not to make the rookie mistake of overloading my days and not leaving downtime to enjoy a nap in a hammock or a fresh-pressed juice by the pool. But I couldn't help myself. When would this working mom have another opportunity to do a morning hike followed by a pickleball lesson, aerial yoga, cardio hip hop dancing, a hot stone facial, something called yarn painting, sound healing, and a cooking class with a visiting chef?





Sure, I could do some of that on Friday or Saturday before I left, but yarn painting was only offered on Thursday. And aerial yoga fills up quickly. And I already missed cardio drum dancing (which everyone seemed to love) because it was only offered earlier in the week. And then there were the *water classes*! “It’s Water Week with Craig!” I was told the day I arrived by two sisters who come to the Ranch every year (23 so far) specifically for Water Week. AND it was hot when I visited (summer in Mexico is no joke), so any class in a pool beckoned in a way that core conditioning and jewelry making did not. As it turned out, Wave (a shallow water workout) and Water Jogging (a deep-water workout) were so refreshingly fun, they forced me to break my spa rule not to take the same class twice.

Wave was attended by almost 50 people, most of whom had come to the Ranch because of Craig Stuart, the instructor who developed the equipment we were using. Craig has been coming as a guest instructor a few weeks per year for three decades. Using webbed gloves, pool noodles, and Styrofoam dumbbells, I joined men and women of all shapes, sizes, and ages through a challenging aqua-aerobic workout to the tune of hard-not-to-sing-along favorites like “New York, New York” and “Margaritaville.”

Water Week is just one of many annual [special events](#) at the Ranch. A quick rundown of others themed weeks: Folk Festival, Culinary, Cleanse, Chamber Music Festival, and Family (which welcomes children aged 7 to 17 and offers even more classes I would love, like synchronized swimming for tweens).

Although I usually apply the same rule to vacations (never go to the same place twice), I was starting to understand why so many guests return to the Ranch year after year (after year after year). You could do your own thing during the day, then meet up with whomever you came with for meals, hikes, spa treatments, tennis, or a local wine or beer at the beautiful bar/boutique, Bazar Del Sol.

On the other hand, maybe it was even nicer to be here as a solo traveler. I could choose among many options without having to coordinate, consult, or compromise with anybody. I could even change my mind. I’m not sure who else would have been as excited as I was about yarn painting, but after seeing the gorgeous works by Timothy Hinchliff lining the walls of the dining room, I couldn’t wait to spend an hour with him learning how to “paint” by pressing yarn into beeswax. To be honest, I could have done only yarn painting for four days and been very happy. It was surprisingly relaxing, meditative, and (as my daughter would say) satisfying.



Although Rancho La Puerta is a really large property, there are only 86 guest casitas and one dining room, so you get a sense of community and camaraderie even if you're there alone. To further cement this feeling, all of the week's guest names and cities are printed on the back of the property map you get upon arrival, so after dinner with that nice couple from Idaho, you can refer to the list to remember their names.

Meals at the Ranch were the easiest (and most delicious) way to meet people. During breakfast and lunch buffets, it was effortless to join any table and have smart, interesting conversation that invariably began with a comparison of favorite classes and ended somewhere I could never have predicted. I only had one insecurity-inducing moment when I was turned away from a table: It was a reunion of friends who came every year and hadn't yet had a meal together. Even then, one of the friends saw me about to sit alone and took it upon herself to introduce me to another table. That was the type of kindness I felt daily, not just from the staff, but from all the guests at Rancho la Puerta (except for the woman at Wave who I thought was leaning in to tell me how well I was doing for a first-timer, but in fact was nodding toward my cleavage to ominously warn me, "You're getting very close to a bathing suit emergency." I guess that was her version of a kindness, but I was enjoying that "nobody cares what you look like" feeling, and spent the rest of Wave worrying more about my swimsuit than my lunges).

Dinner was table service: A host seats people at an open table if they want to dine with other guests (thus insuring no one feels rejected), so I was able to share my delicious and healthy multi-course meals. The only choice I had to make was between two entrées. Even then, I learned I could ask for half and half or choose one with a taste of the other. Unlike cardio drum dancing, I never had to miss out on anything.

Between the four pools, five spa centers, five meditation areas, seven gyms, and basketball, tennis, pickleball, and sand volleyball courts, I got lost daily, which I highly recommend. Although the winding paths are well marked, I often found myself accidentally walking the labyrinth, reading the quote board, appreciating the many sculptures that dot the property, or standing quietly in the company of grazing deer.







The spa treatments are truly heavenly, even if you have to miss Pilates or TRX Flexibility to enjoy one. I've had hot stone massages before, but hot stone facials were new to me — together with the lotions, toners, masks, and head and neck massage, it was one of the most relaxing facials I've ever had.

The only treatment I didn't love was something I agreed to try during Watsu. Watsu (floating in a warm swimming pool while a therapist stretches, cradles, and massages you) is a tranquil, otherworldly treatment I've loved every time I've had the opportunity to experience it. Water Dancing – an additional option offered by my Watsu therapist — involved a nose plug and a signal of three taps on the arm to take a big breath before being gently pushed underwater and dragged in circles. I ended up dizzy for days. To be fair, this might be because I'm in my 50s and not regularly doing underwater flips as was my habit when I was a kid. I had been excited to try it after hearing a young yoga instructor gush about her Water Dance experience. Apparently she had been afraid of the water her whole life — a great disappointment to her Coast Guard father — a fear she clearly overcame during Watsu because by the time she got to Water Dancing, she said she was swimming underwater like a mermaid.

This is a good reminder to take all recommendations with a grain of salt. One person's Water Dancing might be another person's Yarn Painting. The beauty of the Ranch is that you get to march to the beat of your own cardio drum.

Rancho La Puerta, founded by Edmond and Deborah Szekely in 1940, is North America's original destination fitness resort and spa. It has always been in the same location, and it has always been family-owned and -operated. A list of the accolades and awards they have amassed over the years would be, in a word, long. When I was there in July 2023, Deborah Szekley, at 102 years old, was still coming once a week to the Oak Tree Pavilion to speak about her husband's ahead-of-his-time ideas about the necessity of tending to the mind, body, and soul, and about the Ranch's commitment to follow his motto, *siempre mejor* ("always better"). The current president and CEO, their daughter, Sarah Livia Brightwood Szekely, has spent the past 40 years designing the landscape, gardens, and wildlands around Rancho La Puerta. A true eco resort, this 4,000-acre property sits in a valley at the base of Mt. Kuchumaa, a sacred mountain credited for much of the healing magic of the Ranch. Among the ancient oak groves are 40 miles of hiking trails, 32 acres of gardens, an impressive organic farm, and La Cocina Que Canta cooking school.

The cooking class I took at La Cocina Que Canta (translation: “the kitchen that sings”) with visiting chef Tanya Holland was the highlight of my stay. We were taken by van to a beautiful, hacienda-style restaurant, kitchen, courtyard, and café, and assigned different dishes (I got deviled eggs) which we made using locally sourced ingredients, several of which (endive, romaine, edible flowers, and figs) we harvested ourselves from the adjacent organic garden. The class offered an opportunity to talk and laugh with Tanya and the other guests as Tanya helped us execute her recipes. In the end, we sat down together for an unforgettable meal.





I learned a lesson during that cooking class that had nothing to do with cooking. As a working divorced mother, I'm used to doing things myself. I took this trip to treat myself. I like the feeling of accomplishing things by myself. So when Tanya's guest, Monique, offered to help me peel the hard-boiled eggs, part of me wanted to peel all 24 myself, pipe in the mixture myself, and garnish them myself. Instead, I let Monique help. And as we peeled, filled, and garnished, we realized we had so much in common (living in Los Angeles, the entertainment industry, the same self-deprecating sense of humor). That night, as people (including Tanya) complimented our deviled eggs, it was nice to have a new friend by my side with whom I could share credit and pride.

Like almost everyone who visits, I plan to return (probably in a cooler season) either solo, with friends, with my sister and mother, or with my daughter during Family week. But I will always be grateful that Rancho La Puerta made it easy for a first-timer to make friends, accept help, and realize that solo doesn't have to mean alone.