

BOLD

TRAVEL INSPIRATION

Best Wellness Retreat in Mexico: A Week at Rancho La Puerta

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On a week-long retreat in Mexico, Margaret Swaine embraces healthy living, for the mind and the body

RANCHO LA PUERTA has been on my mind for decades. Over the years my friends have gone there and come back raving about the healing powers of its programs. One day I'll get there, I promised myself. That day finally came last year when the timing worked out for my husband and me.

We flew to San Diego and were picked up at the airport with others for the approximately 90 minute bus drive across the border to the resort. Upon arrival we were led along pathways lined with flowering bushes, cactus and trees. On and on we walked, taking twists and turns on this 4,000-acre spa and fitness resort in northern Baja California. By the time we got to our spacious casita with a view of Mount Kuchumaa (known as Tecate Peak on the US side), I wondered how we'd ever find our way back to the main buildings.



There are 32 acres of landscaped gardens and about 40 miles of hiking trails – plus 11 gyms, four pools, a running track and tennis, pickleball, basketball and volleyball courts. This place is so spread out that I needed to consult a map for the first couple of days in order to find my way. My husband, who has limited vision, never did get his bearings and we had to ask for a staff escort anytime he went somewhere without me. A small price to pay for this sanctuary set in a fertile valley shaded by oaks and sycamores.



The founders, Edmond and Deborah Szekely, chose this part of northwestern Mexico in 1940 partly because it was believed to be an energy vortex. (The Kumeyaay people of this area saw it as a special place for acquisition of knowledge and power by shamans.) The Szekelys started with planting a garden, giving lectures and instructing guests to “bring their own tent.” Today, the couple’s daughter Sarah Livia Brightwood presides over the family business as president. Deborah, 102, continues to meet guests during her popular Wednesday night question-and-answer sessions.



In 1940, Edmond and Deborah Szekely, co-founded Rancho La Puerta, a revolutionary health camp in Tecate, Mexico.



Now 102 years old, Deborah has been a pioneer in the industry for over eight decades.

It's a special place where guests can reconnect with their body and mind in any number of ways, through the daily activities on the hour, fitness classes, lectures, concerts, spa visits, hikes and more. All are included in the room costs except for spa treatments and cooking lessons. Many of its patrons return year after year. I'm a night owl, so the 6:15 am hikes were an easy no. Pilates reformer classes around noon? Sign me up! Ditto for the stretch and relax, and sound healing sessions. My exercise-averse husband went for beginner Spanish lessons. We both signed up for the hands-on cooking class at La Cocina Que Canta with visiting vegan chef AJ. Set in the Rancho's six-acre organic farm, it was a fun three hours of creating a meal and then eating it.



Fresh turnips, bell peppers, cherry tomatoes from the farm.



Tres Estrellas farm.

I took a private Feldenkrais session, said to improve posture and balance, had several excellent massages, a blissful pedicure, Japanese restorative facial and a herbal wrap. Before treatments, I hung out for a while in the steam room or sauna and whirlpool. We went together to lectures given by Leni Felton, a clinical nutritionist, about sleep, cognitive health, energy and mental clarity. She gave us so many excellent healthy living tips that my husband signed up for private sessions. In those, after learning about him through detailed questions, she recommended a number of vitamin and homeopathic supplements, lifestyle changes and other actions to remedy his inability to sleep through the night.



The last activity of the day, generally at 8 pm, was a concert, movie or special lecture. I loved the opera singers and musicians, but not the sitting on floor mats, with my arthritic hips. Instead, after dinner my husband and I made the trek to the Bazaar Del Sol patio for a glass or two of good Mexican wine. There are a number of top notch Mexican wineries in the Valle de Guadalupe region fairly close to the Rancho. As one who writes about and loves wine, I had to sample some of them. Other guests shared my enthusiasm, and we often ended up in lively wine-fueled conversations as the sun set. Most guests were from the US, with a good many Californians. A smaller number were from Canada, Mexico and, this week, South Africa.

We were given a list, first names only, of our fellow guests and their domiciles at the start of our week. We had such a good connection with one couple that we've kept in touch and hope to meet up again at the Rancho. Wine was not served nor available in the dining room except at the welcome reception and the farewell dinner. Food was mostly lacto-ovo cuisine, low in fat, salt, sugar and refined flour. There was no meat or poultry but fish was offered four times a week. We could ask for double portions, two mains or even bread and butter. But that would go against the grain of the program and I was already cheating with the wine. We never did feel hungry or deprived. Although a week was not quite long enough to have any lasting health improvement, it was a start – and I did feel filled with positive energy. In the famous words of a former California governor, "I'll be back."