

This All-inclusive Wellness Resort in Mexico Feels Just Like Summer Camp — With 40 Miles of Hiking Trails and Cooking Classes

Holistic spa treatments, an on-site culinary school, and desert hikes await.

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PHOTO: COURTESY OF RANCHO LA PUERTA

Named one of the best destination spas in the world by *Travel + Leisure* readers for 10 consecutive years, I knew that Rancho La Puerta was a special place. However, it's impossible to truly understand its magic until you experience it for yourself.

Shortly after landing at the airport in San Diego, I piled onto a shuttle bus with 25 other strangers to embark on our hour-long journey to the all-inclusive wellness resort in Tecate, Mexico — just four miles over the U.S.-Mexico border.

My seatmate asked me if it was my first time visiting the ranch. “It’s my sixth visit,” she says. The person in front of me? Their ninth. The person behind me? Their third. I quickly realized I was in the minority as a first-timer, but their raves had me more than ready to experience the magic.

Rancho La Puerta has been family-owned and operated since 1940 and is widely recognized as the pioneer of the 20th-century wellness movement in the U.S. In the wake of World War II, Edmond Szekely, a Jewish Romanian scholar known as “the Professor,” and his wife, Deborah, were forced to move south across the border to Mexico after his immigration status expired. The couple found a scrap of land at the base of sacred Mount Kuchumaa with a bare-bones storage shed to live in, and not long after, Rancho La Puerta was born.

In the opening year, guests brought their own tents to the summer health camp, and week-long stays ran just \$35 — you got 50 percent off if you were willing to work in the garden and help with chores. The ranch has continued to evolve and grow in popularity by staying true to its motto, touted by “the Professor” himself: *siempre mejor*, meaning “always better.” Deborah, now 101, is known as the “godmother of wellness” and still lives an active and healthy lifestyle, which includes weekly visits to the ranch to host lectures.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF RANCHO LA PUERTA

WHAT WE LIKE

- The expansive grounds span 4,000 acres, with 40 miles of hiking trails and 32 acres of landscaped gardens.
- A daily sunrise hike concludes with breakfast at the ranch's culinary school, set on an organic farm.
- There's a huge, diverse selection of fitness activities and spa treatments to choose from.
- The villa accommodations have private patios and wood-burning indoor fireplaces.

The week-long program runs from Saturday at 3 p.m. through the following Saturday at 11 a.m., and guests build their schedule each morning, choosing from more than 50 activities each day.

Waking up before sunrise each morning was a goal I set for myself at the beginning of my stay, which was easy to achieve thanks to the slew of daily sunrise hike options spanning all levels, from five-mile challenging mountain treks to more relaxed two-mile nature walks. From then on, much like a traditional sleepaway summer camp, activities run on the hour all day, with two-hour blocks for meals scattered throughout the day. Take as many classes as possible to get your money's worth, but if keeping a strict schedule every day isn't your thing, that's OK. Take some time to yourself in the meditation room, lap pool, or weight room, available when classes aren't in session.

After only a few days into my wellness journey, I began to understand why so many people choose to return time and time again. The natural splendor, camaraderie among guests, holistic therapy approach, and emphasis on exercising and healthy eating all come together to create the ultimate wellness retreat. After a revitalizing one-week stay, it was easy to see why T+L readers sing Rancho La Puerta's praises year after year.

“There’s no place like this on the planet, between the mountain, the sacredness of the land, the type of people it attracts — there’s something magical that goes on here. The ranch heals your soul, no matter what,” said one visitor, who’s been to the ranch a whopping 40 times. “Even if you’re just here for a couple of days, you will be healed. It’s the only place I know on the planet that does this.”



PHOTO: COURTESY OF RANCHO LA PUERTA

The Rooms

All 86 accommodations on-site, from casitas to haciendas, are built in a traditional Mexican style, featuring wood-beamed ceilings, indoor fireplaces, and private patios. However, each still maintains its distinctive flair through individualized color schemes and original artwork. My home base, Villa Luna 8, was among the largest studios on the property, and for those who don't have the luxury of completely unplugging, it's also one of the few spots with high-speed Wi-Fi internet.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF RANCHO LA PUERTA

The accommodations are only a tiny fraction of what makes the wellness oasis so unique. Action-packed days leave you time in your room to sleep, bathe, and, honestly, not much else. The no-frills design choices sometimes deterred me from spending the

little downtime I had cooped up in my villa. For instance, the sofa opposite the fireplace, a high-back wooden bench with stiff cushions, wasn't exactly fit for extended periods of lounging. So, rather than staying put to read my book one evening, I ventured out to find a cozier spot. It wasn't long until I stumbled upon a quiet oak grove with hanging hammocks beneath twinkling lights in the trees.

Food & Drink

Of all the experiences at Rancho La Puerta, meal times feel incredibly reminiscent of summer camp. Guests spill into the kitchen off the dining room at a set time, grab a tray, and form an assembly line to work around various food stations. The ranch's sense of community also comes alive during this time, as you'll quickly learn that dining with strangers is the norm here — it's encouraged. Whether you're debriefing on your favorite activities from the day or identifying common interests, it's the perfect opportunity to forge connections and, in some cases, long-lasting friendships with fellow ranchgoers.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF RANCHO LA PUERTA

The meals emphasized healthy and fresh ingredients rich in fiber and complex carbohydrates. Eggs, fruit, yogurt, and freshly squeezed juice were my morning go-to, and for lunch, a plate full of veggies, cottage cheese, and a bowl of bean soup. While these meals are buffet style, dinner is more formal, with waiter service. A short list of entree choices is updated daily on the chalkboard in the kitchen, from protein-dense selections like fresh halibut, Tecate-style, to vegetarian-friendly options like tofu and spinach lasagna.

After a much-needed week-long detox from refined sugars and processed fats, I felt better than I had in years. However, fulfilling a quick caffeine fix or having a nightcap after an active day isn't going to derail your wellness journey completely — it's all about

moderation, after all. That's where Bazar del Sol, a daytime espresso bar turned nighttime wine bar, comes in. Another coveted Wi-Fi hotspot, this hidden gem serves local wine from the Guadalupe Valley and has a boutique full of handmade artwork from Mexico for sale. And, some nights, Bazar del Sol treats guests to live music with complimentary sangria, chips, and guacamole.

The ranch's culinary school, which sits on an organic farm, hosts three weekly cooking classes led by renowned chefs worldwide. Spots are limited and fill up quickly, so the daily sunrise hike to the farm is another solid option. The two-mile trek to La Cocina Que Canta is rewarded with a breakfast prepared by the ranch's culinary students, followed by a farm and vegetable garden tour.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF RANCHO LA PUERTA

Activities & Amenities



PHOTO: RANCHO LA PUERTA

Set your intentions for the day during a meditation walk, get your heart rate up at one of the 50 fitness classes, expand your mind with a lecture on health and nutrition, or center yourself with a sound healing meditation session. Whatever you seek in a wellness retreat, Rancho La Puerta delivers on all fronts.

With such a robust program, it would be impossible to experience every single activity during the week-long retreat, which is important to remember as you build your schedule each morning. Prioritize the options that'll push you toward your personal wellness goals, whether physical, mental, spiritual, or all of the

above. I tried to strike a balance between activities I'm already familiar with, like hiking and pilates, while setting aside time to step out of my comfort zone and try something new. I returned to the beginner kickboxing classes and meditation lessons day after day — two practices I've integrated into my daily life since returning home.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF RANCHO LA PUERTA

The Spa

Rancho La Puerta's reputation as a wellness paradise speaks for itself, as T+L readers rank it among their favorite destination spas year after year. Both holistic therapies and traditional treatments can be booked at one of the three on-site spa facilities: Villas Health Center, Men's Health Spa (which is, naturally, one of the few

buildings with a TV), and Women's Health Spa. The ranch also offers private healing sessions to help you fully connect with your mind, body, and spirit, whether that's a Feldenkrais workshop to improve your balance and posture or Watsu water flow therapy to relax your nervous system.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF RANCHO LA PUERTA

Family-Friendly Offerings

If you're looking for jungle gyms and kids clubs to keep the little ones busy while you indulge in your health and wellness journey, Rancho La Puerta might not be the place for you. All of that,

though, changes for one week each summer during “Family Week,” when programming is adjusted to cater to children: nature activities, team sports, art and music workshops, cooking classes, Spanish lessons, and, of course, quiet time. This summer, Family Week is scheduled from July 27–Aug. 3 for families with kids ages seven and up.

Sustainability

Touting itself as the “resplendence of nature,” sustainability is central to Rancho La Puerta’s identity. Along with more straightforward efforts like refillable water bottles, composting toilets, and fluorescent lighting, the ranch employs water conservation practices to keep the landscaped gardens and organic farm produce flourishing year-round. An on-site waste treatment facility collects gray water from the drip irrigation system, then is treated by a biological marsh, and the resulting clean water is eventually recycled back into a creek that flows through the property. Also, Mexico recently developed a federal environmental safety program named Empresa Limpia, which means “Clean Company,” that performs audits to improve efficiency and compliance with sustainable practices. Rancho La Puerta is one of the few resorts in the country that voluntarily participate in the program.

Location

Rancho La Puerta is located just 45 miles southeast of San Diego, about four miles past the U.S.-Mexico border in Tecate. There's a shuttle service that transports guests directly to the ranch from the airport in San Diego, and thanks to their strong relationship with the town and border authorities, the process of entering Mexico is always quick and seamless. Southern Californians may drive to the ranch instead, but to avoid border wait times on busy Saturdays, it's most convenient to park on the U.S. side, walk across, and ride over to the resort with a ranch staff member. Nestled at the base of sacred Mt. Kuchumaa, the 4,000-acre grounds encompass serene oak groves, pristine gardens, and 40 miles of nature trails, while gorgeous casitas and impressive spa and fitness facilities are well hidden among the natural splendor.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF RANCHO LA PUERTA

Finding the Best Value

The Ranch Referral Program rewards returners with a \$250 credit for every first-time guest they refer for a seven-night stay. Additionally, the referee is given a \$250 discount on their accommodations. Ranch visitors can also take advantage of the “Summer Loving” package from mid-July through early September, which includes a 10 percent savings on lodging, a complimentary spa package, and other perks. Visit [Rancho La Puerta's specials page](#) to find out how to get the most value out of your wellness journey.