

VOGUE

GLOBAL SPA GUIDE

Rancho La Puerta

San Diego, California

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Welcome to Vogue's first-ever spa guide—a compendium of the 100 best spas worldwide, pulling from the expertise of our global editors. There is a lot out there in the world of wellness, and we are here to sort the cryo from the cold plunge, the infrared light treatment from the IV infusion. Or if your path is a more holistic one—there's something for you here, as well.

Why go here?

Located just four miles south of the US-Mexico border and an hour's drive from San Diego, this 80-year-old resort is largely considered North America's "original wellness destination spa"—but it feels more like a magical utopian eco-village than that designation allows. Set across 4,000 acres of nature preserve, there are miles of private mountain hiking trails, dozens of fitness and art studios, several tennis and pickleball courts, three spa centers, several swimming pools, a large library, an artisan market, an organic farm, and so much more. With over 70 activities to choose from—including reformer pilates, Feldenkrais, Watsu, aerial yoga, breathwork, nutrition classes, and an ever-changing roster of personal development workshops and lectures led by visiting experts—it's no wonder so many guests return time and again.



What's the vibe?

Despite its modern approach to programming, Rancho La Puerta is really all about reconnecting with the tried-and-true wellness basics: nature, nutrition, physical activity, and rest. To that end, the atmosphere is wholesome, timeless, and unpretentious. It's also disarmingly social: meals—which are delicious, primarily vegetarian, and Mexican or Mediterranean-inspired—are eaten communally in a lodge-like dining hall. Thus, the spirit is convivial and friendships form fast. It actually feels almost like an adult summer camp—but instead of sleeping in a rickety screened-in cabin, the accommodations are private stone casitas decorated with luxe embroidered Mexican linens, plush king-size beds, and extra-large fireplaces that are always impossibly stocked with fresh wood.



The history?

The Ranch—as it’s lovingly referred to—has an improbable origin story that’s a favorite topic among guests; its 100-year-old cofounder, Deborah Szekely, still visits each week to confirm the facts. She tells of coming to Tecate in the late 1930s with her professor husband, a Romanian philosopher interested in health, human potential, and New Age concepts before they were mainstream. Though they originally came for what they hoped would be a short stint in order to wait out World War II, the couple quickly fell for the natural beauty of nearby Mount Kuchumaa, known as the “womb of creation” and the “exalted high place” in the local Kumeyaay tradition. The Szekelys lived off the land and eventually started hosting like-minded guests. The lodging was basic—bring your own tent!—but word soon got out; the San Diego newspapers even wrote a three-part series that described this new “cult.” It only drove more attention, visitors, and press. Though the Ranch is no longer rustic by any stretch, cheeky nods to its so-called days as a “cult” still abound, and it’s definitely still family-run.



What should you try?

With so many activities on offer each hour, it's possible to pass the week busily and still feel like you missed out. But the daily sunrise hikes should definitely be on your list—there are several to choose from no matter your skill, and each is well worth the pre-dawn wake-up call. There are meandering strolls along pristine streams and ancient oak groves; or vigorous treks over boulder-strewn hills to mist-veiled mountaintops. The midweek “Organic Garden Breakfast Hike” is most popular of all; it winds through farm fields and wildflower meadows to the ranch's own farm, where—as the name suggests—a freshly prepared organic breakfast is served. Upon your return, a visit to the charmingly old-school European-style spas—complete with wood cabinet lockers and terra-cotta floors—is another good call. The staff recommends “scheduling cleansing treatments at the beginning of the week, restorative treatments midweek, and energizing ones before you leave to go home”; I followed their advice and was very glad. With all the extra physical activity, each rosemary scrub and hot stone massage was more soothing than the last—and felt like a well-earned reward.



How environmentally friendly is it?

Sustainability has been a way of life at the Ranch since its inception, and that ethos is fused into nearly everything you see and touch. The biodiverse landscape hosts 200 different species of plants, and all are protected and tended to with extreme care: Landscaping is done mostly with hand tools, plants are grown in the nursery on-site, and professional on-staff botanists ensure the proper mix of seed-germinating and pest-reducing plants. All the buildings and pathways are built in the local tradition using natural materials, and there's nary a piece of plastic in sight.

What else do we need to know?

Though the Ranch is just four miles from the US border and right outside the city of Tecate, it feels deceptively remote. Partly, that's because of its stunning natural setting—and also because Wi-Fi isn't available in the main spaces or most of the guest rooms. In fact, cell phone use is discouraged in the gardens, dining hall, and most other public areas. If you really need to check in, there is a small business center, but you'll likely relish the enforced digital detox. It's also worth noting that the Ranch makes entering and leaving Mexico effortless and quick: A member of the staff will either pick you up at the San Diego airport or meet you at the Tecate border; in both cases you'll need a passport, be escorted on foot, and your luggage will be carefully ported.

Who can go?

Though a weeklong stay is definitely the norm, it is possible to come for just a few days or even an afternoon—but only on Saturdays, when the past week's guests change over. Then, the Ranch offers day visitors access to the full-schedule of classes, spas, fitness centers, and pools, as well as an organic farm tour, breakfast, lunch, and a special cooking demo.

Address: Carretera Mexicali-Tijuana K.M, 136.5, Rancho la Puerta, 21520 Tecate, B.C., Mexico

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