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One of the Original Health Retreats, Rancho La Puerta Finds Harmony in Nature, Wellness and Community



For most traveling to Rancho La Puerta, the journey begins at the border. Though unfamiliar with Tecate, about an hour east of San Diego, I made plans to leave my car at the recommended duty-free shop just steps from the Mexico-United States pedestrian gate. I'll admit I was a bit trepidatious at first—even with all the reassurances from the resort.

But then I reminded myself of my mantra for the long weekend ahead: “Just let go.” So I did and walked into Mexico effortlessly with my driver and escort.

If I could sketch out what I was looking for in this quick getaway, Rancho La Puerta still would have exceeded any expectations. After a roller-coaster year—gripping the handlebars for dear life—I needed to release my hold. Maybe even get lost a bit. One day at the ranch, and I knew I found my place. This was a no-pressure zone. No fuss. No stress. Just beauty. Pure joy.



From its inception, Rancho La Puerta evoked surrender—to nature, to simplicity, to life. In 1940 Edmond and Deborah Szekely arrived at a valley in the shadow of Mount Kuchumaa, shaded with oaks and sycamores. They set up an impromptu health camp and welcomed their first guests with a promise of exercise, fresh pesticide-free food and plenty of Mother Nature. Some came. Then many more.

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Eighty-four years later, the Szekelys’ daughter, Sarah Livia Brightwood, carries on the family operation. She welcomes dozens of weekly guests, with regular visits by centenarian Deborah as well.

Much has changed since those early, rustic days on the ranch. The grounds have expanded, with enclaves of casitas and villas connected by meandering paths and surrounded by gorgeous flora. In the ranch’s hub you’ll find a spacious dining hall with both indoor and outdoor seating, multiple fitness rooms, male and female spas, a pool, library and marketplace.



So what does a typical day at the ranch look like? That's pretty much up to you. Each guest receives a robust schedule of activity options, including a variety of fitness classes (yoga, Pilates, pool movement, HIIT, etc.), meditations, talks, art, sound baths and more.

Most begin their day with a hike. There are a few to choose from daily, each of varying lengths, and most start right before the sun rises. One of my favorite hikes, the Organic Garden Breakfast Hike, is a 4-mile jaunt off property to the nearby ranch gardens for a delicious breakfast in the farm-to-table kitchen. Nothing like working for your meal.



Speaking of food, all the cuisine is lovingly prepared by a team of chefs using fresh, local ingredients and healthy preparation techniques. Mealtime also offers an opportunity to mingle with other guests at a shared table. Most of my tablemates were return visitors and multigenerational, some making a yearly pilgrimage for decades. They fondly call it adult camp.

There are three spa facilities at Rancho La Puerta: one co-ed, one exclusively for men and one for women. While both of my treatments—a delightful head-to-toe massage and a facial—were performed at the co-ed Villa Spa, I would sneak away each day to the men’s spa for some private R & R. There I could enjoy time in the secluded outdoor hot tub and infrared sauna.



While fitness classes and spa treatments tend to dominate the mornings and afternoons, presenters take the stage most evenings. The list changes weekly, but my roster of special guests included a functional dietitian nutritionist, a violin and cello duo, a leadership coach and a portrait artist to immortalize founder Deborah.

I also had the fortune of taking a group cooking class with Kristine Kidd, former food editor of *Bon Appétit* magazine. Now I proudly make tortillas from scratch.



Another favorite spot, the Bazar del Sol, hosts the perfect after-dinner glass of wine or early-morning caffeine hit. Surrounded by so much healthy living, it felt naughty to indulge in either. But I soon found all the cool kids were doing it too. Adult camp, indeed.

Most guests stay for a full week at Rancho La Puerta. My trip could only be four nights, but I savored each one—especially those late-night walks to my villa, quiet and moonlit. Though sad to depart, I accomplished exactly what I hoped to: I disconnected for a few days, surrendered my usual control and let the weekend unravel as it wanted. Organically.

Even with an itinerary of encounters, I still allowed myself to get lost a bit. And in doing so, I found a peaceful part of my soul I had neglected.