



Bonnie Ann Stewart/Rancho La Puerta

WELLNESS & SPAS

## This Centenarian Founded a Wellness Hub in America's Only Blue Zone

*Here's what she learned.*

BY JESSICA CHAPEL

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Brooklyn-born and Tahiti-raised **Deborah Szekely** is often referred to as the “Godmother of the **Spa**”—and at 102, she is a living legend in wellness travel. It all started back in the 1940s, when she headed to **Tecate, Mexico** with her husband, and discovered a small, temporary hut nestled in the mountains of **Baja California**. The two transformed the site into what is now **Rancho La Puerta**, a renowned **fitness and wellness resort** on the southern border of **San Diego, California**.

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Thanks to the influence of her mother, the Vice President of New York’s Vegetarian Society, and childhood in Tahiti, Szekely turned the site into a buzzy sanctuary with a focus on exercise classes, freshly-grown food, and nature. In 1958, she established the lavish, Japanese-inspired Golden Door Spa, which was a huge hit for female Hollywood stars who were seeking rejuvenation in the 1960s and ‘70s. From General Manager to Head Chef, she has held every imaginable role at the resort—eventually spearheading a Blue Zone-inspired hub: a 4,000 acre utopia of wellbeing, leading to a life of longevity, vitality, and happiness.

While the Ranch is now run by her daughter, Sarah Livia, Szekely returns often when she isn’t celebrating more than a century on the planet, traveling from her home in San Diego, the only Blue Zone (a region where the population lives longer than average) in the US, to attend the theater, opera, and hikes with her friends from Los Angeles to New York.

We spoke with Szekely about her career in wellness, how it’s shaped her idea of living well, and her secret sauce to longevity.

### **What’s your idea of wellness travel, and how have you seen it change in your lifetime?**

Wellness travel is movement, it’s community, and it’s fresh food from the ground. It started with the awareness of the importance of food, then it was all great chefs, and increasingly exotic experiences for healthy living. Today, there’s all of these buzzwords like, regeneration, biodiversity, and eco-friendly.

Everyone’s calling “wellness travel,” “luxury travel” now. I call it survival. When it comes to wellness, there needs to be another word, there needs to be a call to a larger audience. It really depends on what you’re looking for. I think with social interactions, family, you can reap the benefits of a healthier life. When I was promoting The Golden Door in the ‘60s, which was more “upscale,” I avoided the word luxury, too.

### **Besides the Ranch, have you traveled to any other wellness retreats yourself?**

I haven’t been to any in a long time. When I first began the Golden Door, I did look at other retreats, but couldn’t find anything that caught my eye. I went to Elizabeth Arden’s Maine Chance early on, and they focused on beauty treatments. I was drawn to more of a focus on exercise and fitness. We didn’t (and don’t) have a pool, but we have a mountain to climb— and a sacred one at that. So we became the first fitness destination that hosted international guests, and offered 30 different classes a day.

## **How has your relationship with what it means to live well changed throughout your life?**

It hasn't changed much at all.

Now, because I am over 100, I don't get up easily off the floor for workouts anymore, but I religiously walk a mile a day instead. I have a lovely park nearby my home in San Diego, and I have the Ranch at other times. Now I'm not so tied down anymore because my daughter runs the Ranch, I'm often off with my friends. I like to offer this as advice: always have friends that are younger than you. It's those friends who go to the plays I want to see, the hikes I want to do. I live well through these activities. If I had friends my age, there wouldn't be many. How many 102 year olds do you know around the world? I don't know any.

## **How much has travel played a part in the way you live?**

Because of the abundance of food and nature, moving to Tahiti as a child was life-changing. In Brooklyn, where I was born, I remember, the only fruit available was bananas from Cuba—nothing else. My family was basically “fruitarian,” and my mother, who was constantly reading and learning about the world, came home for dinner one day, stood up and said “we're leaving.” [In Tahiti], I basically had a French upbringing—and still, I think in French. I returned twice after that with my husband, and have been all over the world since. We had to move to Mexico because of his papers—he didn't have US citizenship. Settling on the border, we were transformed into another world that brought people and cultures from all over to this hub that we created.

I will always love to travel because I will always love new things. I love theater. During this trip to New York, we haven't gone to see any shows, just to the Met. But the last time I was here was for five nights and we went to five plays. After this, I'm going to D.C. Then I'll head up to Los Angeles to see the opera. My friends and I will drive up for a little snack and go to the matinee. We enjoy a real dinner, which we reserve in advance, after the show and then we drive home. But I don't drive anymore, so I sleep in the back.

## **With all that in mind, does culture play into your approach to the Ranch?**

Sarah Livia just introduced a Kumeyaay walk at the Ranch to their newly built homestead. It's 1.5 miles and happens around twice a month. All of the guests are led by the Indigenous leader, more often than not a woman named Norma, and learn about what the homestead was, and what it is now. The land that we built on was originally the land of the Punia Indians, so we've always paid tribute to them in any way we can. When we broke ground on the new wellness residences we are building, we invited them to help break up the ground with us. It's their ground, too.

**What has a century on this planet taught you about how to live?**

I don't allow my mind to drag me down. I only accept positive thinking and activity. We own our minds. We're the one who dictates through it. The world has terrible things. I don't dwell on them. There's nothing I can do about them. I am one person: I can create an aura, an area, and that's the Ranch. I am very proud that I can help this many people. So do what you can do, what pleases you, and makes you happy. You cannot take care of everything, but you can make flowers.