

The Original Wellness And Fitness Resort: One Week To A Healthier You

Larry Olmsted Senior Contributor ⓘ



When it comes to “wellness travel,” today’s market is a clear case of caveat emptor—buyer beware.

Wellness vacations are not all equal—or even good. Make no mistake about it, if you are looking for a trip that will change your life for the better, you have to tread carefully. Wellness is red hot in the travel industry right now, and

just like any marketing buzzword that sells, many places use it wrongly, and frankly a lot of “wellness” travel is bogus. I get press releases and pitches almost daily from long existing hotels and resorts across the globe that have rebranded themselves as wellness destinations—but without actually doing anything new or different.

Just about every decent resort has some sort of spa, some sort of hotel gym and maybe a pickleball or tennis court, but suddenly these amenities are being touted and repackaged into wellness escapes. The resort that has always offered one free yoga class a week is suddenly a wellness retreat. Hotels adding a mocktail menu are suddenly wellness retreats. Many offerings of these self-proclaimed wellness retreats are things that are probably already available within five minutes of wherever you live. It’s gotten so crazy that when a place tells me they are a wellness destination, I first assume it’s a scam.

But [Rancho La Puerta](#) is the real deal, and in many ways invented the category of the destination immersion wellness/fitness vacation.



This is the place that started it all back in the 1940s—and is still going strong as a standout leader in the industry. There are now several other immersion fitness resorts with weeklong programs, but just about every one of them is derived from the model at Rancho La Puerta. After more than 80 years of sending guests home happier, healthier, better informed and often a little bit lighter than when they arrived, Rancho La Puerta is still owned by its original founders, and widely considered the “original destination wellness spa” in the Western Hemisphere.

I had heard many good things about it from past guests over the years, and recently got the chance to see what it’s all about. What it is all about is great—and it just keeps getting better.

Instead of being stuck in their rich past, they are continually upgrading, and were one of the first to popularize yoga in this part of the world, and much more recently were way ahead of the curve on the explosive popularity of pickleball. When they opened, they refused to serve coffee, and now have multiple espresso/cappuccino bars. For years they were alcohol

free, and now have programs promoting the up-and-coming wines produced nearby and local craft beers. Customers wanted a juice and smoothie bar, so they added one. When interest in home cooking increased, they built a state-of-the-art demo kitchen and cooking school, and are constantly on the lookout for the next big thing their customers want.

One very good sign of a high-quality experience in the luxury travel space is a high-repeat rate, as most people will not continue to spend good money on something they didn't like. While many of my favorite travel companies have very diverse specialties, including active travel operators such as [Butterfield & Robinson](#) and [Backroads](#), golf travel operators such as [Perry Golf](#) and [Haversham & Baker](#) or the gold standard in all things safaris, [Micato Safaris](#), the one thing they all have in common is a very high repeat customer rate, and that kind of loyalty does not come easily. But I've never seen quite the kind of repeat business Rancho La Puerta commands, with many customers who come once or several times a year. When your dinner companion is on their 20th, 50th or 70th visit, it's hard not to be impressed.

At the first timer's orientation upon arrival, I was joined by less than 20 other guests—out of the 190 Rancho La Puerta can accommodate, and it was full. The overwhelming majority were returnees who had chosen to come back, some so often they had lost count.



The positive experience began long before I even boarded the plane to San Diego, because Rancho La Puerta has one of the best and most detailed websites of any resort I have ever visited, and the logistics are outstanding. After seven-plus decades of running weeklong retreats South of the border in Mexico, they have got the system dialed in and down to a science. The website is so detailed, down to sample menus and daily activity schedules, that it would be hard to be surprised if you paid attention in advance.

What you just can't get from a website is the attention to detail and the friendly, dedicated and extremely helpful staff. Employees and service are so good you have to experience it in person. Many repeat guests remember the names of helpful staff members, and vice versa, and there's an amazing family/community feel about the whole place. There are roughly 400 employees, including a large gardening and maintenance crew, and walking around the spacious property you pass more employees than guests. They are uniformly—as in every single one—ultra-friendly and bend over backwards to be helpful. I've not been to any resort outside of Southeast Asia with this kind of staff and service. A good sign of any employer is retention, and not only have many staffers been here for decades and their entire careers, there are many multi-generational family staffers.



Rancho la Puerta is just 3-miles into Mexico, and bypasses Tijuana for a low-key border crossing much further east. Their programs run Saturday to Saturday, and every Saturday they have a fleet of scheduled buses to and from the San Diego airport, setting up a welcome table inside the terminal. You get off the plane anytime in the morning or early afternoon, go to the table, check in, and get on a bus. They even fill out the paperwork for you, and there's nothing to do but get there—you don't even have to show your passport or talk to anyone at the border. Or if you've learned to mistrust the airlines, you can do what I did and arrive a day or two early, enjoy San Diego and then just head back to the airport, which is about 10 minutes from downtown. The entire trip from San Diego to the Ranch, including changing vehicles at the border, is less than 90-minutes.

Once you arrive, there's the orientation, and activities begin right away. The aerobic heart and soul of Rancho La Puerta is daily hikes, typically 3-4 options each morning of varying length and difficulty, with an additional afternoon option some days. The ranch is in a beautiful mountain wilderness preserve of 4000-acres, plus enjoys privileges with abutting landowners. There are 40-miles of trails, and hikes run as long as 7.7 miles. In addition to the hiking, there is an extremely extensive hourly calendar of exercise and educational classes, including all the usual suspects: yoga (several options), pilates (mat and reformer), several kinds of strength training, aqua fitness classes, indoor cycling, TRX, bootcamps, as well as a broad slate of lessons and free play for tennis and pickleball. Most classes like yoga are offered for all levels from first timer to advanced as well

as classes for those with limitations, and there are also specialty movement classes like Feldenkrais, dance and more. There's a roster of mindfulness practices including meditation, along with a silent meditation hike daily. The hardest thing you'll do at the Ranch is not necessarily working out, but rather picking what to do from tempting competing choices. Longer hikes are early in the morning, and then starting at 9AM there are roughly 5-10 classes or experiences offered every hour until 4PM.



Most first timers (like me) tend to overschedule, while many returning guests just do a class here and there and enjoy the pools, weather, spa and ultra-relaxed atmosphere. There's no dressing up, and when in doubt, you can snag one of the many hammocks strung across the property, laze by the pool, sunbathe on your private veranda, or get a massage.

Personal training and private hikes are also available (extra fee), and the full spa (extra fee) is much larger than it looks, with tons of treatment rooms. The therapists are fantastic and represent the best of the long-term employees. They are especially skilled at working on people who are working out. I have had massages at top ranked spas all over the world, and this was one of the all-time best. If you have no budgetary constraints, you might want a massage every day. In addition to the main spa, with full locker facilities, there are separate men's and women's "health" buildings, each with sauna, steam hot tub and showers, all complimentary. Many spas and resorts only allow you to use these facilities when paying for treatments, but here I popped in between fitness classes every day for a sauna and steam.



There's also a broad slate of guest expert lecturers each week, including music, education and cooking classes with a guest chef. The Ranch operates a large organic chef's garden that is more accurately a farm, which supplies much of its produce, and there are tours offered, morning walks to breakfast in the garden, even gardening lessons. Several years ago, they built a dedicated cooking school facility, which is where the three-and-a-half hour hands on cooking demos/dinners are held a couple of times weekly. Other presenters cover topics ranging from personal relationships to nutrition to de-cluttering your home, and there is a full art studio with a range of art and craft classes.

The hardest thing to wrap your head around and one of the things that really makes the place special is the property itself. The Ranch is very big and entirely low rise, with almost no buildings higher than one story. It is heavily landscaped and interlaced with a vast network of walking paths, none of which seem to go straight, but instead wind through the ecosystem. It was purposefully designed to increase walking, and hike or no hike you are going to get your steps. You are also going to get your pool time, as there are pools and hot tubs all throughout the property. If you want one to yourself, you can probably find that. Just as they don't need to have extra men's and women's spa buildings, they don't need this many pools, and most resorts with this many rooms would have just one. But that is a big part of the charm. Everyone is on their own schedule, and some people go mainly for hiking, some to do classes and some to just recharge, pick and choose and relax.

It's set up sort of like a college campus in a giant garden, with at least ten different gyms and studios, and to give you an idea, there is one just for mat pilates and another studio for reformer. There's a fully equipped strength gym with a wide range of weight and aerobic machines plus separate cycling and TRX studios. It's all green and lush and escapist, with lodging in freestanding casitas scattered into clusters across the property. There's a central dining room that serves all three meals, but also several ancillary outdoor breakfast spots, special different dinners, and a separate wine bar serving exclusively Mexican wines, craft beers and cheese plates, plus a smoothie bar and two different spots to get specialty coffee drinks.



The weekly fee covers all hikes, classes, lodging, meals (including two gala dinners with wine or sangria), entertainment and transfers, while spa, cooking classes, private training and the wine/beer bar are extra. High-Season (February 24-June 14 and September 21-November 15) rates start at \$5,100 per person, double occupancy, with discounts for groups of 3 and 4 in larger casitas. Regular season (December 30- February 23 and June 15-September 20 and November 5- December 27) is \$4,900. However, because summer is hot and off-season, weekly packages are discounted further and extras such as spa treatments are thrown in. With the exception of special Family Weeks, [Rancho la Puerta](#) is for ages 14 and up.

I experienced a “normal” week, but in addition Rancho La Puerta offers a host of specialty weeks, including a popular annual Folk Music Festival, a Chamber Music week, a culinary celebration week of Baja foods, and the very popular Family week, where extra camp counsellors are brought in and a wide variety of special activities and classes for all ages are offered. There are summer short stays and 3–4-day retreats at various times of the year in addition to the regular 7-night program. Weekly Pickle Ball Retreats with specialty instructors have become popular and are offered several times each year.

I've been to a few different immersion fitness resorts, and these typically run the gamut from low calorie, weight-loss focused to athletic performance bootcamps to more educational, expert driven places to learn ways to live better going forward. Rancho La Puerta is firmly in the middle of this spectrum. If you want to lose a few pounds quickly, you can, but if you want to eat large meals and drink a bottle of wine every night, you can do that too. It's not aimed at competitive athletes, and this is not the place if you're looking to improve your triathlon times, but then again, there are swimming stroke clinics and trail running programs. If you are a highly experienced yoga practitioner and that's your main thing, you might be better off seeking out a more yoga-centric specialized retreat, but for most of us, there's plenty of yoga. You can attend as many extra lectures as you want, and for most guests, it's a mix of several hours a day of exercise with healthy eating, thoughtfulness and relaxation, and just about everyone goes home cleaner, healthier and most of all recharged, which is why so many people come back, because we all need to recharge.

For me personally, the highlight was to try new things and fine tune my existing fitness program. Because I have a fairly large home gym and don't go to a facility to work out, I really wanted to try TRX, as it something easy to add to your home that I hadn't done, so I took advantage and tried several different TRX classes, basic, core, advanced and so on to see if it was something I wanted to move forward on. I already do Pilates and yoga, so I took some higher-level classes to fine tune technique. But

some higher-level classes to fine tune technique. But because I do a lot of cycling and have a Peloton bike, I largely skipped the indoor cycling classes because there wasn't anything new or different for me there. With all the strength training options it was easy to find things that could be added to my home routine or ways to modify my existing program. The hiking was fantastic, and I did a long hike every day.

Everyone self-selects at Rancho la Puerta, but talking to my fellow guests, the biggest commonality seemed to be the desire to try new things and see if anything stuck in terms of life changes going forward, and that's one of the reasons I loved the week so much. There's no doubt that it was a healthier seven days, but it's equally important to have a takeaway that lasts, and here you get both. I highly recommend it, I understand why there are so many loyal fans, and I would absolutely go back.

For more takes on fitness and wellness vacations, I [recently wrote here at *Forbes* about a unique approach](#) that is more educational/nutritional/scientific and less boot camp through a 4-day program at the Four Seasons Westlake in Southern California.