RANCHO LA PUERTA
PARADISE FOUND IN MEXICO

By R. Couri Hay

MY POINT OF VIEW

I’ve been going to Rancho La Puerta since the 1980s and although it is now a state-of-the-art facility, yet with limited Wi-Fi cell reception, the basics of the Ranch remain the same: the authentic vibe of the cozy casitas with fireplaces, fresh food and juices from its organic gardens, classes for all ages, attentive staff, wondrous hiking trails for all levels of walkers, and Mount Kuchumaa — the sacred mountain that gives off a palpable spiritual energy. Let’s not forget the pollution-free air; but for me, one of the most impressive features is the world-class gardens: 32 gorgeous acres — some wild, others manicured. The sprawling beds of red and white hollyhocks that soar to 14 feet are the most magnificent I’ve ever seen. Sarah Lavin Stewley Brightwood, president of Rancho La Puerta and daughter of the co-founder Deborah Stewley, is a gifted landscape architect. Her use of color blocking by planting large spaces of one specimen creates a breathtaking panorama that reminds me of master works by the great Impressionists. Everywhere you look there’s something heavenly to see: fields of black-eyed daisies, red and white geraniums, cacti, all sizes, white blooms that can bring tears to your eyes, and trellises covered in lavender wisteria. Brightwood has been working on these gardens for over thirty years, and the love and energy she has invested has paid off. My advice to visit Rancho La Puerta at different times of the year to see the enormous variety of plantings that bloom in different seasons. And Deborah Stewley is still here, every week imparting the wisdom she has gathered over her remarkable 103 years on our planet. Rancho La Puerta is the matriarch of spas.

THE RANCH

Rancho La Puerta has consistently been hailed as one of the top wellness resorts in the world by travel writers, celebrities, and seekers of a healthier lifestyle since it was founded by Edmond and Deborah Stewley in 1940. Located 45 miles from San Diego in bucolic Tecate, Mexico, it is the oldest spa in North America, and was proclaimed the “World’s Best Destination Spa” by Travel & Leisure for multiple years. What began as a tiny camp built in the shadow of historic Mount Kuchumaa is now an all-encompassing resort nestled amid lush flora and vineyards. The 4,000 scenic acres include vast woodlands and meandering mountain trails. The resort’s winding brick paths, vineyards, and koi ponds are bordered with orange and yellow lilies, flowering shrubs, and red roses. Nicknamed “The Ranch,” the procession of returning guests, it limits itself to a maximum of 150 guests per week.

MOTHER OF THE MODERN SPA MOVEMENT

Deborah just celebrated her 101st birthday in May 2023 and is now an indefinable and spirited example of healthy living. Deborah is widely referred to as “the mother of the modern spa movement” and is one of the country’s leading wellness crusaders. Deborah told me, “Delight in the little things in nature and in life — I think it’s hard to be truly healthy without that. Thinking out of the box, being aware, and enjoying the little things, this is what is so important.” Of her indelible work, she said, “All the different nonprofits I created have to do with connecting people because then you get stronger. It’s very nice to be powerful individually, but if you can bring people together, it’s lasting.”

KATE WINSLET, MADONNA, CLAUDIA SCHIFFER & OPRAH WINFREY

Stewley’s pioneering fitness and health spa in Mexico was discovered in the 1940s by Hollywood luminaries such as Burt Lancaster, Kim Novak, Bill Holden, and the writer Alistair Horsey. Over the years Rancho La Puerta has attracted Kate Winslet, Madonna, Governor Jerry Brown, Arianna Huffington, Claudia Schiffer, Bill Moyers, Alicia Silverstone, Zita Jeong, and Oprah Winfrey. Ricki Lake once took advantage of the resort’s classes to train for her appearance on Dancing with the Stars. There are also weeklong schedules of Pilates, yoga, art lessons, meditation, and cooking classes by renowned visiting chefs. New classes this year include Breathing Basics, Cardio Dream Dance, and Cha-cha. Some of the interesting workshops include Journaling for Joy and How to Create a Life with Purpose. Do not miss the inspiring Sound Healing classes by Anne Van de Water: she has a magic touch.
ESCAPING THE DEPRESSION

Born in Brooklyn, Deborah’s fascination with beautiful landscapes was developed at an early age when her family moved to Tahiti during the early 1930s to escape The Great Depression. “We were the only Americans on the island other than the governor, who had two boys,” she remembers. Her mother, Rebecca Shaikevitz, was the vice president of the New York Vegetarian Society in 1926 and set the family’s course for healthful eating. “In those days they called it ‘frutitarian’ because we ate everything raw.”

Social Life

At The Ranch, Deborah is hoping to encourage the next generation of “health nuts”—a favorite descriptor for people like herself who she says, “read labels, go to farmer’s markets, participate in a community garden or have a garden, and are active in taking responsibility for their own health.”

WORLD WAR II

The original no-frills camp had its origins in World War II, when Deborah and her husband, a native of Hungary, were living in Southern California, and because of his refusal to return to Europe to serve in the military, an order was issued for his arrest as a deserter. “We didn’t collapse,” Deborah recalls. “Thankfully, we got a letter two weeks later from U.S. Immigration and Naturalization, what they now call Homeland Security, and it said that if he was found in our country on June 1st, 1940, he would be arrested and shipped back to his country. So, we went to Mexico.”

TECATE, MEXICO

Edmond Szebel, a renowned scholar, had planned to teach a summer school session in Oslo. “We knew we would have to hold the summer school because we were counting on the money from the students, and they had already signed up. So, we just wrote them and said the summer school instead of being in Oslo is going to be in Tecate. And we had to make it cheap because they had to bring their own tents.” That’s why they chose the location, near the U.S. border, about an hour from San Diego. The resort is still in that same location today.

HERBAL WRAPS & SKIN CARE

The Ranch began as a rustic summer camp; however, in the early days, they did create an herbal wrap, out of necessity, Deborah explains. “Without it many of the guests, because they never exercised at home, were so stiff they literally crawled out of their beds after their first day of hiking and exercising at The Ranch. Herbal wraps were the answer. The heat relaxed the muscles.” Later, the Szebel’s hired experts to train training programs in massage and skin care at Rancho La Puerta, and they were an immediate hit. “Guests had worked hard all day, and they looked forward to having the soothing attention of facials and massages.” Want a deep tissue massage or shiatsu? Ask for Carlos or Armando; they can bring your body back to life after a long day.

THE SACRED MOUNTAIN: MT. KUCHUUMA

Together, the couple opened Rancho La Puerta, which today runs $5,150 a person per week; however, their first summer health camp in Tecate was decidedly more humble — $175 a week and bring your own tent. For that economical price, guests liked, enjoyed rustic vegetarian meals, group exercises, and attended daily lectures by the founders.

“It was years before we could buy property and it was little by little, by little that we assembled the land,” she says of Rancho’s property that now spans 4,000 acres — half of which can never be developed and includes the famed Mt. Kuchuuma, where Deborah’s late husband and their son, Alex, are now buried. “When we got here, we heard some weird stories that it’s a sacred mountain and my husband said, ‘Oh, it’s just folklore,’ but after we’d been here a few years, they had a major pow-wow on the mountain and tribes came from all over the United States. I know that we’re here because we were meant to be here; I really believe that, and the reason Rancho La Puerta is so successful is because we’re on the path that we’re supposed to be on. It was nothing that we planned, created, plotted — none of that.”

LIVING SKILLS

The lessons taught at the spa on how to lead a healthful, mindful life Deborah has been trying to teach beyond the San Diego region over the last several decades. In 1964, she wrote the Congressional Management Manual, which is still used by all new members of Congress as a manual on how to transition into their new offices. She ran for Congress herself in her 60s and lobbied for issues popular with the “health nuts,” such as taxing sodas and soft drinks and lowering subsidies on unhealthy foods. And she created Living Skills, an elementary school curriculum to teach students about obesity prevention.
THE RESIDENCES

The Residences is a private, wellness-focused 118-acre village with sweeping views of the grounds and will eventually boast 113 private homes priced from $1.21 million to $2.54 million. The homes will feature spacious living and dining room areas with fireplaces, large private patios with hammocks, meditation spaces, and fountains, as well as eco-friendly and sustainable technology. “For many years at Rancho La Puerta we have nurtured the dream of creating a residential community—a village rooted in our traditions of living in harmony with the natural world,” says Brightwood. “This village is dedicated to wellness. It’s a place where you can draw strength and become your most resilient self.”

A TYPICAL DAY’S ACTIVITIES

What you do on any day at The Ranch is entirely up to you and depends upon what interests you, but many guests enjoy a morning hike, go to breakfast, and then perhaps take a mediation class or visit the gym. For guests who want to participate in a fitness session led by a trained instructor, there are over 40 classes every day, including pilates, tai chi, Hatha, kickboxing, and salsa. The Ranch also offers mind-body classes, such as aikido, meditation, Feldenkrais, and Watsu, a form of guided water dancing.

FOOD: PART OF THE EXPERIENCE

Up to 80% of what is served at each meal is grown on the premises at the resort’s 56-acre organic farm, Tesorillos. The farm is located about two miles up the valley from the rest of the facilities; guests can visit with early morning hikes, tours of the garden, and even an introductory organic farming class led by the charismatic head gardener, Salvador Tinajero. The rest of the food is sourced from local farmers who follow sustainable practices, and seafood is purchased daily from local fishermen in the nearby port of Ensenada. A fresh catch-of-the-day is featured on the menu four times a week for dinner, and several times a week for lunch. My favorite dishes include fresh juices and made-to-order omelets or oatmeal for breakfast and rainbow lasagna with lentils and poblano sauce or eggplant parmigiana with curried tomato sauce for dinner.

The cuisine at the resort is described as “lacto-ovo-vegetarian,” which includes dairy, eggs, and seafood, but no meats or poultry. Meals consist of fruits, vegetables, grains, legumes, nuts, seeds, dairy, eggs, and seafood. Since 1940, the team at Rancho La Puerta has developed, tested, and proven hundreds of recipes, culminating in a superb all-natural diet for their guests.

Mealtimes at The Ranch are about creating camaraderie and community. Breakfast and lunch are informal while dinner is a sit-down affair.

Reyna Venegas, the executive chef at The Ranch, says that she believes eating is a sacred act. “What we consume becomes a part of ourselves. I want guests to enjoy each bite, relax, and have the best dining experience possible.” When she cooks, she draws from her culinary training, her strong Northern Mexican roots, and her experience preparing light and healthy cuisine. She explains that her goal at the ranch is “for guests to feel re-energized, inspired, and nourished with every meal.” The Ranch has also hosted internationally renowned guest chefs such as Deborah Madison, the founding chef of Greens in San Francisco; John Ash, the author of From the Earth to the Table, and James Beard Foundation Hall-of-Famer Anne Willan, who wrote The Country Cooking of France. On my visit, the guest chef was the James Beard Award-winning cookbook author Virginia Willis, known for her scrumptious Southern cuisine.

FINAL THOUGHT

After dinner I asked Deborah if she had a final thought now that she’s entered her eleventh decade. “Just do everything right,” she said, and she certainly has. I’m already looking forward to my return.

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