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STAYCATIONS & GETAWAYS



Rancho Valencia Resort & Spa

Reset at the Ranch

Baja's Rancho La Puerta offers a peaceful place to unplug, reboot, and de-stress BY ANDREA NAVERSEN



The 4,000-acre Rancho La Puerta sits in the shadow of Mt. Kuchumaa, considered a sacred place by the Kumeyaay tribe

THIS YEAR, I WAS DETERMINED TO reset my often frenetic life, resolved to recommit to health, wellness, exercise, and diet (and maybe lose a few pounds along the way). What I also needed was a “getaway with the girls,” longtime friends who share my goals and with whom I always have fun. We decided to book a three-day trip to Rancho La Puerta, the storied destination, fitness resort, and spa just across the border in Tecate, Mexico, founded by Edmond and Deborah Szekely in 1940. Although Edmond died in 1979, Deborah, called the “grandmother of the modern spa and fitness resort movement,” celebrates her 102nd birthday this month. Sara Livia Brightwood Szekely, their daughter, is now president and CEO, continuing her parents’ vision.

I have visited the resort several times in the past, but only for day trips. What I wanted was to immerse myself in all it has to offer: nature walks, exercise classes, and lectures on nutrition as well as healthy meals, cooking classes, and perhaps a spa treatment or two.

My friends and I met at Lindbergh Field, where buses provided by Rancho La Puerta transported our group to the Tecate border about an hour away. With passports and immigration forms in hand, we passed through customs, walked across the border, and boarded vans for a short ride to the sprawling, 4,000-acre resort set in a valley at the base of Mt. Kuchumaa.

The expansive grounds include 40 acres of hiking trails, dozens of landscaped gardens, four pools, gymnasiums, exercise studios, and

MAIN: PHOTO COURTESY OF RANCHO LA PUERTA



TOP LEFT Guests plucked — and tasted — produce from Rancho La Puerta’s bountiful garden prior to the interactive cooking class with Guest Chef Janina Garay (third from right) and Executive Chef Reyna Venegas (far right)

TOP RIGHT Walking paths wind through acres of lush gardens and groves

BOTTOM LEFT A popular class is aerial yoga, in which guests, wrapped in silky “cocoon” suspended from the ceiling, are guided through gentle yoga poses

BOTTOM CENTER Suzy Westphal and Sandra Maas at The Spiral reflexology pathway designed to release tension and improve balance

BOTTOM RIGHT The boxing class was not only a challenging exercise but a great way to deal with stress



ALL OTHER PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREA NAVERSEN

sports courts. Rustic casitas, most with fireplaces, are furnished with Mexican furniture and comfortable beds, and are accented with colorful folk art. Rancho La Puerta offers 86 casitas ranging from studios for one to three guests to expansive, two-bedroom indoor-outdoor villas with private patios, dipping pools, outdoor showers, and day beds.

“Our junior villa was rustic and cozy, with the sounds of chirping birds and gorgeous views of the natural landscape from every window,” recalls my friend Sandra Maas. “The perfect way to get your Zen on.” There are no televisions or Wi-Fi in the rooms. The Ranch encourages guests to “unplug” during their stay, even providing small cloth bags to tuck away cell phones.

Once settled, we attended orientation sessions to get our bearings and plan our stay, choosing from dozens of classes, lectures, and experiences including art and nature walks. At the beginning of

the stay, the Ranch suggests reflecting on one’s life, and affirming intentions and goals for the week.

The next few days were packed with activities. We chose some classes together; at other times, we “divided and conquered.” Our favorites were the morning hikes, which ranged from 1.2 miles to longer, more challenging routes. “I especially enjoyed the 5.5-mile Coyote hike starting at dawn and watching the sunrise as we traversed the trails up Mt. Kuchumaa,” notes Maas. Adds our friend Suzy Westphal: “The mountain hikes are definitely worth the very early wake-up call just to experience the local mountains, flora, views, and sunrise.” Lisa Fisher agrees, adding, “The ‘oneness with nature’ and a good exercise ‘bump’ lifts my day and starts me off with a feeling of accomplishment.”

Other classes which got high marks: yoga with Aman Keays, a veteran guest instructor who spent time emphasizing proper >>



Friends relaxed by the fireplace in the lovely dining hall. From left to right: Sandra Maas, Andrea Nowersen, Suzy Westphal, and Lisa Fisher.

« form and technique; boot camp; and Tai Chi, an introduction into this ancient Chinese martial art described as "moving meditation that improves balance and body awareness." In just 45 minutes with instructor Manuel Velasquez, Fisher learned about Tai Chi's history and such poses as "parting the wild horse's mane."

Also noteworthy: Katie Harris' meditation class. "It made me remarkably relaxed," Maas reflects. "Looking out at the mature trees from inside the wood studio made mostly of glass, I felt like I was in the middle of the forest." I especially enjoyed "sound healing," said to suppress pain, heighten the immune system, and produce deep relaxation. Stretched out on the carpeted floor, wrapped in Mexican blankets and cushioned by pillows, we listened to ethereal sounds from crystal bowls. It was so peaceful that some of the guests actually fell asleep. Another highlight for me was aerial yoga, "floating" in the air in a silky hammock suspended from the ceiling while flowing through yoga poses. I felt like a moth emerging from a cocoon after the gentle, soothing workout.

There were surprises too, such as a knitting/crochet class. "The instructor, a young man, was incredible," says Fisher. "He told us how it changed his life, slowed him down, and he wanted our 'first time with the needle' to be a beautiful experience. As corny as it sounds, it was beautiful! He gave everyone individual attention and was such a cheerleader." Fisher also signed up for a burlesque class which wasn't a "bump-and-grind experience," she says, but rather, a bonding exercise. "You'd think everyone would be giggling and embarrassed, but it turned into a somewhat close sisterhood experience."

All agree that the food, much of it plucked from Rancho La Puerta's own six-acre farm, was plentiful and delicious. The vegetarian/pescatarian menus include organic ingredients and local dishes. "My favorites were the soups and freshly made tortillas for tacos and

quesadillas," says Westphal. Breakfast and lunch are buffet-style in a large communal dining hall, or on a lovely terrace when the weather is nice. In the evening, an attentive staff serves dinner. Healthy snacks and smoothies are provided at various times during the day.

While breaking bread together, we met many friendly, fascinating people from all over the United States: a solo photographer from New York who returns each year to recommit to healthy living, a retired couple from San Francisco, two longtime friends from Kansas City, mother-and-daughter duos, and extended families. After dinner, Rancho La Puerta offers guest lectures and movies. Szekely herself lectures once a week on health and wellness topics.

Everyone's favorite experience was the hands-on cooking class at La Cocina Que Canta ("The Kitchen That Sings"), led by Executive Chef Reyna Venegas. Set in the heart of the ranch's six-acre farm, we all picked fresh herbs and vegetables for the multi-course evening meal. Guest chef was Janina (Nina) Garay, culinary director at Be Saha Restaurant Group San Diego and Baja which includes the Guild Hotel and Wormwood in San Diego. Garay put all of us to work in the expansive kitchen, offering advice as we prepared a menu that included farm spinach dip, yogurt flatbread, shrimp quesadillas, pico de gallo, and a "detox everything salad."

"It was like our date night out, the personal tour of the amazing organic gardens and then the well-planned cooking class," says Westphal. "I loved pairing off and learning how to prepare different parts of the menu. Chef Nina was so willing to offer many tips as she demonstrated and oversaw our joint cooking efforts come together for an amazing meal." Westphal says Chef Nina also had a good sense of humor. "When I put a few too many of the cooked chilis in the shrimp sauce, she just said, 'We will just change the name of this course to Shrimp Diablo' — oops!" Maas especially remembers dessert: "We made these incredible peanut butter cookies that I can't stop thinking about!"

Takeaways from our stay at Rancho La Puerta? "Breathe, slow down, meditate, create balance, and try to have some digital noise-free time daily," says Westphal. "It takes very little time to decompress from the stresses of our lives," adds Maas. "And even small changes like drinking more water, deep breathing, and enjoying our surroundings can make a world of difference." "Stress is like an onion," Health Coach Adita Lang told our class. "Peel back the layers so you can move on. Learn to let it go." She also asked us: "When was the last time you laughed so hard that you cried? We need that endorphin rush." My friends and I laughed long and often on our visit to Rancho La Puerta.

In the end, the trip was all about friendship, sisterhood, and shared experiences. "The real highlight of the trip," says Westphal, "was being together with good friends on a new adventure." rancholapuerta.com 