



WELLNESS

# Life at the Ranch

After 85 years, one of the world's first wellness retreats remains true to its roots

BY AMELIA RODRIGUEZ



## HE STORY STARTS

when she is 17. World War II is raging, and Deborah Szekely is newly married to a Jewish health guru known as the Professor.

"My husband was a prominent writer, a Hungarian with a Romanian passport," she recalls. "When his visa expired in the United States in 1940, we tried to get it renewed, but we were unsuccessful."

So, they go to Tecate, Mexico, where they rent a hay shack at the foot of the sacred Mt. Kuchumaa for \$50 a year. It's the furthest thing from fancy, but that doesn't stop the people from coming—health-conscious devotees drawn by the Professor's work. For \$17.50 a week and some chores, they can hear him speak and follow his diet and exercise recommendations, sleeping in tents they bring themselves. They don't know it yet, but they're the first guests of one of the first wellness retreats in the world. Eventually encompassing 4,000 acres just south of the US-Mexico border, it would come to be known as Rancho La Puerta.

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Rancho La Puerta's rustic architecture is nestled in a fragrant, 80-acre garden designed by the Szekelys' daughter, current RLP president Sarah Livia Brightwood Szekely. **INSET** RLP founder Deborah Szekely turns 103 on May 3.



## MORE NEARBY PLACES TO BE WELL

These other Baja Norte sanctuaries offer their own mixes of movement, pampering, and serenity.

**MONTEVALLE SPA & WELLNESS RESORT**

At this Valle de Guadalupe retreat equipped with a putting green, racquet sport courts, and a reflexology path, guests can book wellness packages that include massages, nutrient IVs, and hyperbaric oxygen treatments.

**SANTA MARIA HOLISTIC HEALTH & LONGEVITY CENTER**

Health seekers can schedule a 10- to 14-day stay at this self-professed "live-in biohacking retreat" by the water in Rosarito. After an initial eval, explore dozens of futuristic-sounding therapies and programs designed for specific wellness goals.

**BREATHE INN VALLE DE GUADALUPE**

An intimate Valle hotel and wellness center with only four villas, Breathe Inn draws upon Indigenous practices to offer ceremonial rituals in addition to bodywork, yoga classes, birth chart readings, sound therapy, and more.

Now, in RLP's 85<sup>th</sup> year, guests have traded tents for Mexican-tiled casitas equipped with wood-burning fireplaces. But an adult summer camp sensibility endures.

A typical day at the Ranch, as guests and staff affectionately call it, starts around 6 a.m. "I would say 90 percent of our guests do some kind of hike or walk before breakfast," says Director of Guest Experience Barry Shingle. After you eat, it's off to your pick of RLP's 40-or-so daily 45-minute classes—meditation, water workouts, Pilates, yoga, breathwork, art, sound healing, stretching, pickleball clinics, dance, tai chi—from 9 a.m. to about 4 p.m., with a midday break for a buffet lunch and, if one is so inclined, a spa treatment or a few hours by the pool. Dinner is four pescatarian courses, usually shared with strangers. After that, it's time for a movie or lecture before an early bedtime, so you can do it all again the next day.

Some travelers (the must-sightsee-everything or don't-talk-to-me-until-I've-had-my-breakfast-margarita types) will find this

## THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO VALLE

concept akin to paying \$5,150 or more to spend a week in a Daedalean labyrinth of small talk and abdominal soreness. For a certain kind of person, it's heaven.

More than 60 percent of guests return after their first visit, with plenty booking dozens of eight-day stays over the years. (A handful have made their way there more than 100 times.) And while many publications have sung RLP's praises ("I first read about this place in *Teen* magazine when I was 13 and I thought, 'I have to go there,'" now-retired, first-time guest Gloria Rathbun tells me), most people find themselves here on the recommendation of friends. The Ranch tends to create evangelists.

Many credit Szekely's warm influence. Turning 103 this month, she is vibrant, still sharp, a living advertisement for the RLP brand of wellness. "I think some people make wellness too complicated and can get obsessive," she says. "For me, regular exercise, eating well, and communing in nature helps me feel well."

Indeed, you won't encounter blood tests or calorie counts or supplements or body scans at the Ranch. Instead, you move. You eat produce grown on the property's five-acre organic garden. And, with a maximum of 150 guests a week and all those group classes and structured mealtimes, you spend most of your waking hours immersed in one of wellness's most underrated tenets: community.

While the Ranch, now run by the Szekelys' daughter, always has something new in the works—they are currently building onsite residences, and a treatment plant that will process wastewater from 5,000 local families—its guiding lights remain the same.

"After we'd been in business for about 10 years, a reporter from the *San Diego Union Tribune* came to the Ranch to give us a review and called us 'a cult to end all cults,'" Szekely remembers. "But today, many of the things the Professor taught and we've practiced at the Ranch since the beginning ... are all considered common sense. Wellness is like buoyancy; you float in happiness, and you can do things that you wouldn't be able to do if you were tired."

