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RETREAT AT THE *Ranch*

Rancho la Puerta, a luxury wellness resort in the Baja region of Mexico, revives and reboots the mind, body and spirit, making for an unforgettable getaway with memories that will last a lifetime.

by Nicholas Nguyen

AFTER MONTHS OF BACK-TO-BACK DEADLINES, YOU COULD SAY THAT I NEEDED A VACATION. Badly. So when I got an invitation to visit Rancho La Puerta, a resort nestled in the hills and valleys in Tecate, Mexico, it was just the ticket I was hoping for.

Little did I know just how different Rancho La Puerta was from the average Mexican getaway. Instead of the usual crowded pools and long buffet lines, the intimate resort is dedicated to wellness, to helping guests relax and recharge through a variety of classes and workshops (that of course, includes plenty of spa time and delicious cuisine). Lovingly dubbed by guests as "the Ranch," Rancho La Puerta attracts visitors from all across the country, and from Houston, it's a short flight to San Diego and a quick bus ride across the border.

I would never have known that the city existed around the Ranch unless I hadn't passed through on the drive in. The lush, green grounds house hacienda-style villas, which are newly renovated and complete with gorgeous views of the hills or one of the resort's four pools. Immediately, I was truly able to unplug from the rest of the world, especially since the resort only offers Wi-Fi and television in a few select lounges and the lobby.

On that first day, I received a folder that detailed the week's activities and events; I had chosen to visit during a special Pilates Week. Every single day, there were activities from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m.; there were so many options that often I wished I had a time machine so I could try them all. Since science hasn't made my *Back to the Future* dreams a reality yet, I took a deep breath and reminded myself that I was also supposed to take this time to slow down. Here's how I reinvigorated my mind, body and spirit in just one week.

MIND

It's always hard for me to shut my mind off, but at the Ranch I only had myself to focus on—and no smartphone in sight—so it felt a little easier to let go. Being an artist by nature, I loved the creative outlets at the ranch, which complemented all of the physical activity.

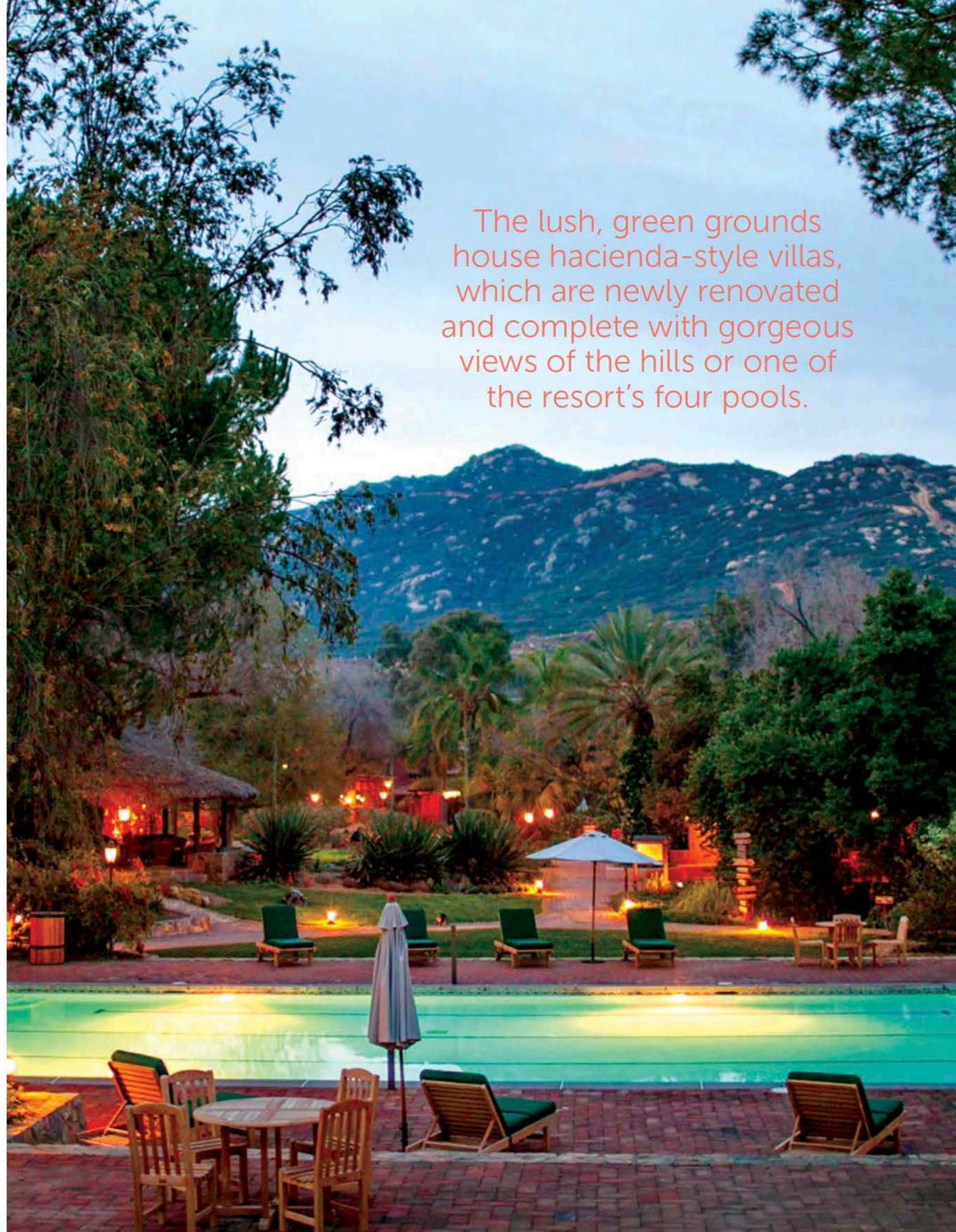
MEDITATION AND HEALING At Rancho La Puerta, there's no shortage of activities for decompressing and clearing your head. Guided meditation and yoga are obvious choices, but for a unique and tranquil experience, try Sound Healing. A guide plays sounds from large, resonant crystal bowls to help you completely relax and lull you into a stress-free state. At least half of the class participants dozed off midway through the session (which is fine as long as you have a friend who will poke you if you start snoring), but everyone came out of it feeling rejuvenated.

ARTISTIC ENDEAVORS The ranch invites artists and writers to help guests flex their creative muscles. Take a watercolor, sketch, jewelry-making or sculpture class to create your own custom souvenir, which is a nice break from physical activities midday or a good way to unwind after dinner. While I visited, memoirist Larry Grobel (known for his books *Conversations with Capote*, *Al Pacino* and *The Art of the Interview*), led writing workshops that helped attendees dig deep and jot down short, but poignant pieces about their lives.

LIFESTYLE LECTURES During my stay, a few other special guests gave talks on a variety of health-related subjects. Dr. Rubin Naiman, a clinical assistant professor of medicine at the University

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OPPOSITE PAGE: THE CENTRAL POOL NEAR THE MAIN LOUNGE AT SUNSET ENVELOPED BY THE HILLS.





LEFT TO RIGHT: SPEND THE EARLY MORNING RELAXING IN YOUR ROOM BEFORE TAKING OFF FOR SOME EXERCISE; THE RANCH'S LABYRINTH CAN BE MOVING MEDITATION; DINNER TIME IS A JOYOUS OCCASION EVERY NIGHT; ON THE TRAIL FOR THE BREAKFAST HIKE, WHICH LEADS TO THE RANCH'S ORGANIC FARM AND BREAKFAST TO BOOT

of Arizona, lectured on how to overcome sleep problems and opened our minds on the science and psychology of dreams. Professor Emerita Beverly Whipple spoke about sexual health and intimacy in a really relatable way.

BODY

In 2016, I started a fitness journey that included learning Pilates to stay healthy and prevent any issues that may come up as I age. Choosing to visit during Rancho La Puerta's Pilates Week—offered several times throughout the year—was a no-brainer. In addition to the numerous Pilates classes offered, there were so many other workout options—some of which I'd never even heard before! To fuel my active schedule, I ate delicious food, and didn't skip breakfast once (like I'm guilty of doing at home).

SWEAT SESSIONS There are too many cardio-centered classes to name, but if you want to get your heart rate pumping, Zumba, Cycling or Cardio Drum Dance—where you work your entire body while banging on giant barrels to energizing music—are some great options. After all of that action, cool off in the pools for a few laps, or take it further with a challenging water aerobics class. Even though I had trouble staying afloat and splashed around quite a bit, it was fun because I had taken it with a new friend, Ann Eshabarr, a dance teacher from San Francisco. She summed the exercise program up at the Ranch quite nicely: "The Ranch is like a well-oiled machine. They have made it very easy to navigate the classes even though the property is huge. I learned to take off in the morning with clothing for hiking,



swimming, dance and Pilates so I was prepared for everything. I would be walking around and see a class I liked and drop right in!"

MIND/BODY BLISS Jennifer Lee Ho, a teacher trained in many different movement modalities from the Bay Area, led Pilates Week. I took two mat classes from her every morning—she, like many of the instructors at the Ranch, exuded a motivating, warm energy—and learned a lot about pelvic stability. (The Pilates studio at the Ranch also offers classes on the Pilates Reformer and other equipment.) A lot of my fellow Ranch-goers attended classes dedicated to stretching and tried Feldenkrais, which, similar to Pilates reinforces the mind-body connection.

ON THE MENU The Ranch's all-inclusive program provides breakfast, lunch and dinner, all made with fresh, local ingredients; they even offer cooking classes. Like me, Jennifer has a love for food: "Though fitness is a priority in my life, eating properly (most of the time) is my other joy," she told me. "It was fantastic to sit down for three organic and tasty meals a day with other interesting guests from all over the world." Breakfast and lunch are buffet style, while dinner has service. At dinner, Ranch veterans let us in on a secret—you can sample both of the entrée options instead of choosing just one. I'm still dreaming about the fresh fish tacos we had for lunch one day and an amazing eggplant parmesan that was served for dinner.

SPA SERVICES There are separate spas for both women and men, along with two other treatment centers, so there's no excuse not to treat yourself after a couple days of working out. The spa offers



a wide range of massages and facials; I tried the classic Ranch massage with some aromatherapy one late afternoon, a perfect prelude to dinner. The women's and men's centers also have lockers for reservation so you can stash your belongings instead of lugging things around or having to return to your room.

SPIRIT

I think the reason the Ranch has been thriving for so long is because of its lingering effect on you, even long after you've left. I met so many people who make it a tradition to visit every few years, and even make it a spot for special occasions like weddings, anniversaries and reunions. Mothers who visited the Ranch decades ago return with their daughters to relive the magic all over again. Here's why.

THE SENSE OF COMMUNITY I think all the classes, from creative to fitness, help people open up. There isn't a feeling like you're being judged or a reason to feel self-conscious, like the way you might feel at a large gym, for example. Everyone is there to learn and share. Ann agrees: "I loved the sense of community with my fellow Ranchers. This took place mostly at mealtime, and I found it very interesting and humorous how most guests would tell you how many years they've been coming. It was a source of pride. Just for the record, five was a low number. Since I was a rookie, everybody was happy to help me acclimate."

BONDS THAT LAST I traveled alone, but it was easy to make fast friends like I did with Ann and Jennifer. Many visitors travel with a friend or spouse, but I also met some larger groups, like 13



women who came together to celebrate a friend's 50th. What was most surprising to me at first was meeting people who first met at the Ranch and now make it their tradition to come back together. Now that I've experienced what Rancho la Puerta offers, I understand it better—it's an experience unlike any other that can tie you to strangers, and together, you forge something new. I will never forget all the laughter with Ann and trying so many new classes with her, nor will I forget the wisdom Jennifer generously imparted. See you soon at the Ranch, Ann and Jennifer! **H**

Plan Your Stay

GETTING THERE There are several ways to get to the Ranch, but you can fly into the San Diego International Airport (don't forget your passport!) and catch a Rancho La Puerta bus to cross the border, which takes about an hour.

ACCOMODATIONS The lush, green space features hacienda-style *casitas*, complete with gorgeous views of the hills or one of the four pools that dot the Ranch. I relaxed most afternoons on the patio outside my Ranchera Solo room, soaking up the sun and the hills. Inside the recently renovated room, there's a spacious seating area, wet bar and desk; you can lounge in a robe and take a break from activities on a daybed. Rooms and villas for larger groups are also available.

HOW IT WORKS The Ranch offers weeklong programs, from Saturday to the following Saturday, though you can opt for a half-week stay. Booking includes meals at the Ranch and nearly all of the activities on the schedule. Private Pilates classes or cooking classes, for example, incur an extra charge. For rates and more information on how to plan your stay, visit rancholapuerta.com.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF RANCHO LA PUERTA