

# SOCIAL LIFE

AUGUST 2017



*in the hamptons with*

**BETH  
STERN**

FASHION  
HEALTH & BEAUTY  
GALA PHOTOS  
TRAVEL & ART  
REAL ESTATE





## RANCHO LA PUERTA

### MEXICO'S WORLD CLASS SPA

BY JOE ALEXANDER



*Joe Alexander is the travel editor and society columnist for Social Life Magazine. He focuses on culture, theater, movies, and food. Joe was born in New York City. His stories have been featured in numerous national magazines, including Haute Living. Joe lives in Manhattan and Southampton with his Cavalier King Charles spaniels, Cornelia and Webster.*

#### THE FULL SPA EXPERIENCE

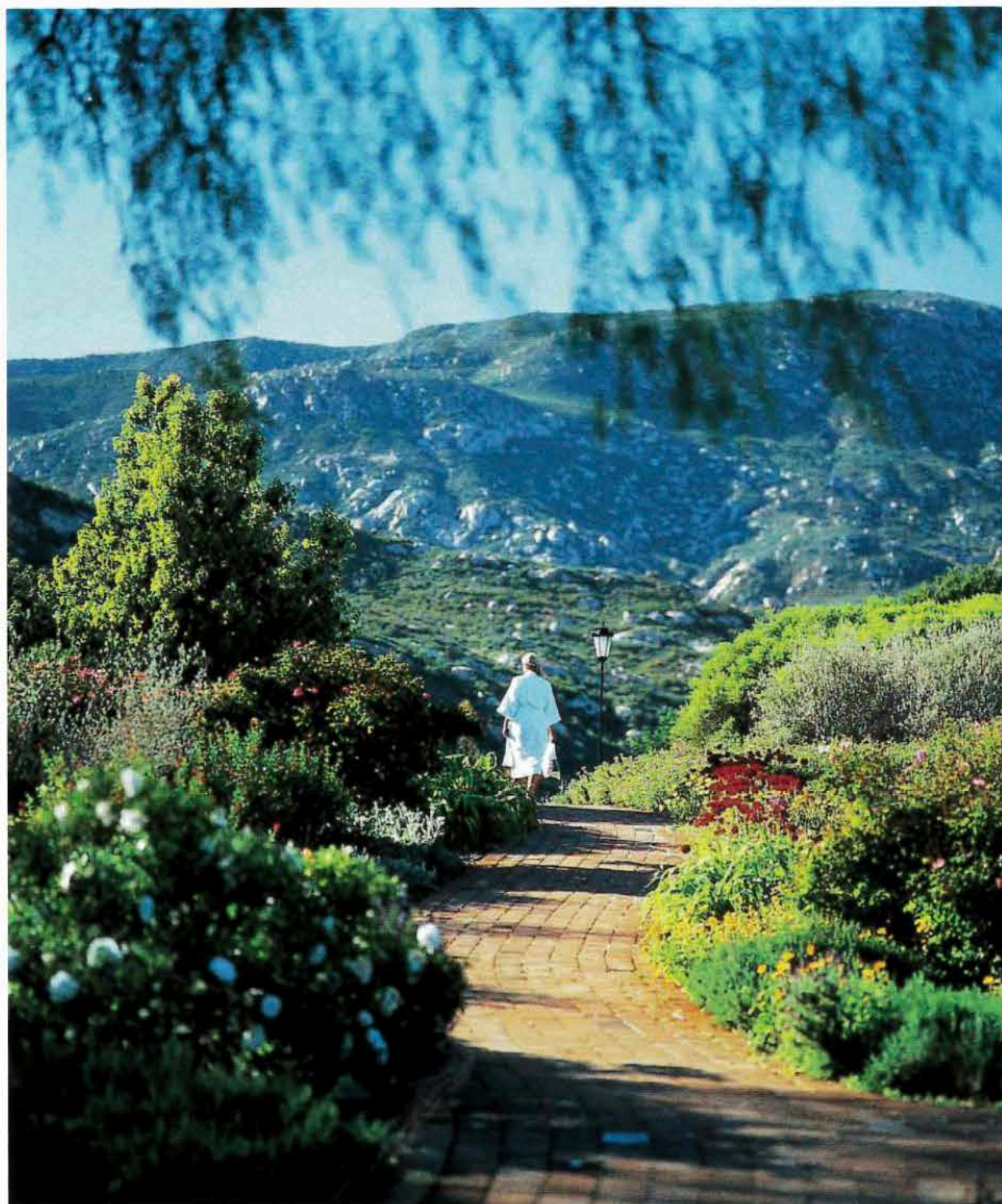
While Rancho la Puerta resort may have been North America's first fitness spa, founded in 1940 by Deborah Szekely and her late husband, Edmond, it continues to adapt to modern tastes, and remains one of the world's top spa destinations after 77 years. Guests have included Kate Winslet, Robert Redford, Oprah Winfrey, Governor Jerry Brown, Erica Jong, Barbra Streisand, Madonna, and Arianna Huffington.

Set amid 3,000 pristine acres in Tecate, Mexico, only an hour from San Diego, Rancho la Puerta's spa facilities are world class, and treatments are constantly being added and reimagined as science evolves.

"The full spa experience — facials, massages, water therapy, manicures and pedicures — was not always a part of Rancho la Puerta's program," says co-founder Deborah Szekely, who is now 95. "For example, we never offered massage at the ranch until I started [California spa] the Golden Door 18 years after the first guests arrived at Rancho la Puerta."

#### HERBAL WRAPS & SKIN CARE

The place 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 exercise at the ranch. Herbal wraps were the answer. The heat relaxed the muscles.”

Later, the Szekelys hired experts to begin 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.”

### HEALTH CENTERS

Today, the spa has health centers for both women and men, and Deborah says they are as important a part of each guest’s stay as the hikes, exercise classes, cooking school, and other programs. “We emphasize balance,” she says. “Long ago, I said it never has been enough that my spas simply make you better looking. I really believe people can be happier and more energetic, and altogether more fulfilled human beings.”

The number of spa treatments offered has quadrupled over the past decade, and there is an experienced staff of 75, most of them long-term employees.

### FOUR-TIER HEALING PROCESS

Cleansing involves ridding the body of toxins, and treatments include a detox massage and the original herbal wrap, the ranch’s signature treatment. They use fresh plants and herbs like eucalyptus, rosemary, or sage that are grown in their organic garden, or that grow wild in the nearby mountains. The 30-minute wrap is sometimes combined with a 20-minute massage, which Tere Ochoa, the spa director, says opens up your pores and allows moisturizers to really seep into your skin. Doesn’t that sound heavenly?

They also employ a method of cupping with suction cups made of plastic instead of glass. Plastic cups don’t leave marks on your skin like the purple blotches on the body of gold medalist Michael Phelps at the Rio Olympics last summer. “They suck up the impurities in your body,” Ochoa says. “If you smoke, you can see the oil they use for the cups turning dark. It really works.”

Restoring might include a rosemary loofah salt glow, which starts with a loofah glove that helps remove dead skin cells, followed by a scrub, then a shower, and ending with a massage. “It opens up all your pores and gets rid of all the dead cells on your body,” says Ochoa. “That really renews your skin, and at the end your whole skin is like a baby’s bottom.”

Relaxing involves treatments like a head-to-toe candle oil massage, a combination of body treatments using warm oils secreted from melted candle wax poured onto your skin.

Energizing entails healing therapies that activate and



Spa Pool with organic scrubs

strengthen, like reflexology on your hands and feet. Energy balance is a fundamental holistic philosophy, and treatments include a somatic experience to relieve stress, plus craniosacral therapy, acupuncture, and reiki, which remove energy blocks and allow healing energy to flow and harmonize the whole body.

### LOOK AND FEEL BETTER

Ochoa says you can actually see the results after a week at the spa. They take photos, so you can see your skin color when you arrive on Saturday. “At the end of the week you can really see the different color of skin, just from the different eating habits they have throughout the stay, a really healthy skin, really glowing,” she says. “That’s amazing, but they change a lot.”

### MEN AND SPA TREATMENTS

One recent phenomenon that Ochoa has noticed during her 17 years directing the spa is in the change in clientele. Today 16% of weekly spa visitors are male. “Men don’t think of spas as fat-farms anymore,” Ochoa says. Most weeks there are up to 30 men among the guests, and many more during couples’ weeks.

She says many male clients are into exercise, and the most popular treatment among them is the sports recovery massage. They usually try some other spa treatments and get hooked. “Sometimes their wives need to convince them to try different treatments, not just the full body massage,” Ochoa says. “Then we can’t get rid of them,” she jokes.

The mountain sage hot stone massage and the men’s refresher facial are both favorites. “Usually men are not into facials, but once they try it, they like it.”





Spa Pool with organic scrubs

### SPA CONCIERGES

Rancho la Puerta's spa offers 55 treatments in all, and choosing among so many options may seem overwhelming, but stay calm. Concierges and other expert employees help you figure out what will work for you. "We have a spa concierge," says Ochoa. "We have what we call the fitness concierge at the dining room on Saturday, your arrival day. We have a docent on the premises who can also help you, and we have all of our fitness staff. You can always do consultations and ask them questions." And don't forget, pampering treatments include things like moisturizing scalp treatments for the hair, and manicures and pedicures, which are popular with men, too.

Guests may want to exercise, or simply relax and be pampered.

### A TYPICAL DAY'S REGIMEN

What you do each day at the ranch is entirely up to you, and depends on your interests, but many guests enjoy a morning hike just before breakfast, then perhaps take a meditation class or visit the gym.

And you can decide when to incorporate spa treatments

into your day. For instance, Ochoa says people oftentimes take a few classes in the morning, go for a spa treatment, and relax for the rest of the afternoon.

### NEW TREATMENTS

New treatments include runner's reflexology; Xocolatl, a gentle body mask made from cacao and sugar, followed by an exfoliation scrub of yogurt, chocolate, and honey; and a jet-lag treatment, employing reflexology to relieve hazards of travel like swollen feet and clogged pores from the stale airplane air.

### MATERNITY MESSAGES

The ranch offers maternity massages, but Ochoa says pregnant women can also enjoy regular treatments using special pillows as they lie on one side. A couple of treatments are not recommended during pregnancy, and the ranch advises pregnant guests to consult with their physicians prior to coming.

### IF YOU CAN'T DISCONNECT

Brand new are three *villas cielo*, or heavenly villas, secluded private residences with a den that can be converted into a private gym or an office, in which you can receive private spa treatments as well. These new villas bow to the modern world.

"They were designed because not everyone can take a week off or disconnect completely from their daily life," says Ochoa. A corporate CEO cannot always just take time off. This way, you get the ranch experience, but still have your own space to work as many hours as you want. A special reiki massage is offered only to guests in those villas.



Fresh, organic juice bar

**Rancho La Puerta**  
[rancholapuerta.com](http://rancholapuerta.com)





## RANCHO LA PUERTA'S ORGANIC GARDENS

La Cocina que Canta (Bottom) Octopus dish

### RANCH DINING

"I don't really know what spa cuisine is," says Rancho la Puerta's executive chef, Denise Roa. "I know the philosophy of the ranch: we incorporate food into the whole experience. Food is just one of the foundations of being able to tie everything together to have balance," she says.

The Mexico City-born, Miami-bred chef has taught cooking and has owned her own restaurant, but she still has learned from Deborah Szekely, who embraced organic gardening and natural foods from the very beginning in 1940.

### SEASONAL & ORGANIC

"What I've learned about the ranch is that it's about eating something that is at its best, because it tastes better, and you don't have to mask it with flavors," she says, meaning they eschew butter, salt, and cream. "So if you're eating seasonal, you always have the best quality and the right nutrients that you need for that time of year, but also, when you eat well and you exercise and you breathe, and then you get back and you read, listen to music, and do things that you love, it'll help you have an emotional balance."

The food she and her staff prepare for guests is semi-vegetarian, a fusion of seasonal and Mexican flavors. Anywhere from 65 percent to 85 percent of what is served at each meal is grown on the premises at the resort's six-acre organic farm, Rancho Tres Estrellas. "Since we're in the summer right now, today I got 50 pounds of fresh strawberries," Roa says.

The rest is sourced from local farmers who follow sustainable practices, and seafood is purchased fresh daily from local fishermen at the nearby port of Ensenada.

### BEST JOB IN THE WORLD

Even with all her experience in the culinary world, Roa says that ranch founder Deborah Szekely has given her the best opportunity of her life. "There's something that she saw in me; it was just a trust. I would never want to let her down." The two women meet weekly, and talk about food and its role in wellness. "I have the best job in the world," says Roa.

### THE KITCHEN THAT SINGS

Cooking classes are offered at La Cocina que Canta — the kitchen that sings — which is set in the organic garden. Chef Roa teaches classes, as do world-renowned visiting chefs who regularly come to offer lessons. The "singing kitchen" is a reference to the sensory experience, the aromas, colors, and sounds, and the energy of a lively group of people cooking together. It all comes together in an explosion of taste when you dine on the meal you have just created.

**The Singing Kitchen**  
[thesingingkitchen.com](http://thesingingkitchen.com)





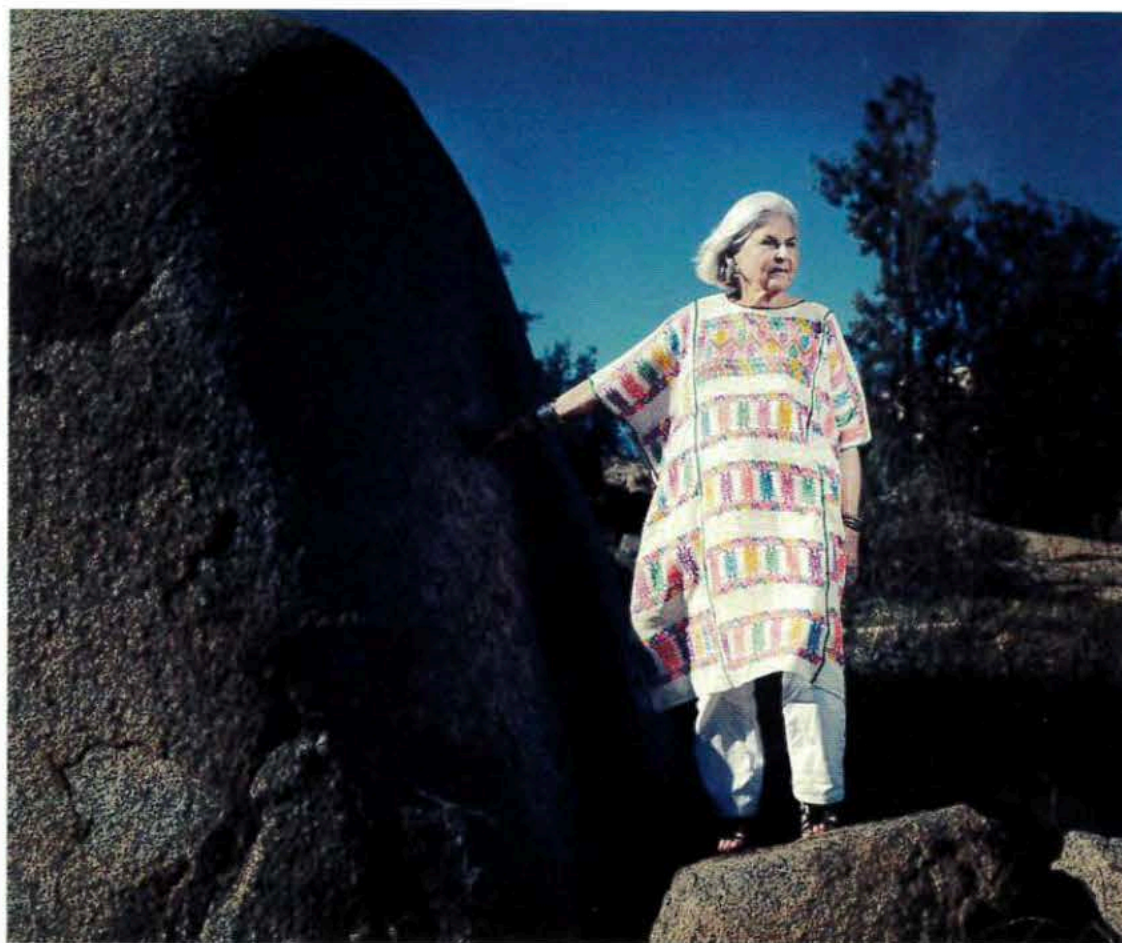
# DEBORAH SZEKELY

## MOTHER OF THE MODERN SPA MOVEMENT

By JOE ALEXANDER

Deborah Szekely, the founder of famed fitness spa Rancho la Puerta, calls herself a health nut. “To me that’s a favorable term,” says the 95-year-old. The most important key to leading a healthy life, Szekely believes, is state of mind. “Thinking out of the box, seeing, being aware, enjoying little things. It’s a presence, being centered,” she explains.

It’s more than just positivity, says Szekely, who is considered the mother of the modern spa movement. People should enjoy what they do. “Whatever they work at should be a joy or pleasure, not work,” she says, adding that the quality of the food and the quality of the movement are also important. “Delight in the little things in nature and in life. I think it’s hard to be truly healthy without that. I mean, cows can be truly healthy; they just eat grass. So I think the psychological aspects are very important. And that’s why the ranch is so successful, because there’s a spirit there and the spirit is so important.”



Rancho La Puerta founder Deborah Szekely

### FROM RUSTIC SUMMER CAMP TO LUXURY SPA RESORT

These are the basic tenets with which she started Rancho la Puerta in 1940, and they remain so at the ranch today, although the resort has evolved from a rustic, bring-your-own-tent, \$17.50-per-week summer camp to a full-fledged luxury spa resort with every conceivable, state-of-the-art amenity.

### STARTED AS A RESULT OF WORLD WAR II

That no-frills camp had its origins in World War II, when Szekely and her husband, a native of Hungary, were living in Southern California, and as a result 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,” Szekely recalls. “He was married to an American, and we were living and working in Hollywood. But then we got a letter two weeks later from U.S. Immigration and Naturalization, and it said that if he was found in our country on June 1, 1940, he would be arrested and shipped back to his country. So we went to Mexico.”

Her husband, 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.

### HOLLYWOOD CAME CALLING

What they started as a summer health camp was so successful that several participants wanted to come back and spend the winter, because the weather was so gorgeous. The Szekelys had no money at the time, but they could afford to rent the land at \$50 per month. “And it was years before we could buy property, and it was little by little by little that we assembled the land.

Not long after its launch, Rancho la Puerta became popular with Hollywood stars. “Burt Lancaster practically lived here between pictures,” Szekely says. “We built exercise bars for him because he came so often. He designed them and we built them.” The movie star worked out on those bars every morning. Bill Holden and Kim Novak were also regular guests.





Living Room of Heavenly Villas

### MEANT TO BE HERE

"I had no dreams for the ranch," Szekely says. "I was thinking that as soon as the war was over, we were going to England. We had no intention of staying. So — and I say this all the time — we were meant to be here. It was nothing that we planned, created, plotted — none of that."

When they first arrived, they heard some weird stories about Kuchumaa being a sacred mountain. "My husband said, 'Oh, it's just folklore.' We just paid no attention to it. What's a sacred mountain to an educated, erudite European?" Szekely laughs. But after they'd been there for three or four years, there was a "very major" pow-wow on the mountain, and tribes came from all over the United States.

Today, Szekely's husband is buried on the mountain, as is her late son, Alexander. "That's their home," she says flatly. "We have a family cemetery, because this is our home. I'll be buried there too eventually. No rush."

### MORE PROJECTS & DAUGHTER RUNS THE RANCH

Szekely's daughter, Sarah Livia Brightwood, now runs the resort full time. But her mother has not slowed down at all.

She's an author, advises Congress, and works in Washington on policies promoting fitness, health, and making more nutritious, natural foods available to Americans.

Szekely is still at the ranch at least once a week, and always partakes of services, including massages, peels, manicures, and hairstyling. She thinks her daughter is doing a terrific job. "She is gifted, and I think in some ways it reflects her personality," says Szekely. "She is very spiritual. She's very musical. She's an artist, and I think most of the classes reflect more of her."

But there are forces at work other than just human endeavor, she insists. "Anyone who thinks that they're directing the whole thing could forget about it; it builds from itself," Szekely says. "But I know that we're here because we were meant to be here. I really believe that. And the reason it's so successful is because we're on the path that we're supposed to be on."

**The Wellness Warrior**  
[wellnesswarrior.org](http://wellnesswarrior.org)