



Revisiting Rancho La Puerta, Mexico's go-to resort for Bay Area wellness seekers

By
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I confess: Before I jumped on the plane to San Diego, took the 75-minute shuttle ride to the U.S. border, and walked through customs into Tecate, Mexico for a five-night stay at Rancho La Puerta (RLP), I was worried. My biggest fear was that, like so many hot restaurants or buzzy Netflix series, the iconic fitness resort and spa wouldn't live up to the hype.

Mind you, this particular hype has been decades in the making. Ever since I landed in San Francisco in the mid '90s, I've listened as good friends and random acquaintances alike gushed (and gushed) about their visits to "The Ranch." Now that I've finally experienced this unpretentious paradise, founded in 1940 by American couple Edmond and (a still-involved almost-centenarian) Deborah Szekely, it's my turn to dish.

Here are my key takeaways.



(Courtesy of Rancho La Puerta)

Planning a stay and getting there is easy.

It's not surprising that Bay Area residents flock to Rancho La Puerta when in need of quality Mother Nature time and a reset of mind-body-spirit equilibrium. The trip to slightly inland Mexico—i.e. no beach—is relatively short and easy (just don't forget your passport), but driving through the front gate is like entering another world, one filled with 4,000 acres of stunning gardens, meadows, and mountains. As soon as I stepped out of the shuttle, the vibrant greenery and otherworldly blooms demanded my attention. I was comforted by the warm air and impressed by a stoic [Mt. Kuchumaa](#), lording over, well, everything. My shoulders released for the first time in forever; remember this feeling I whispered to my type-A self.

Really, there was nothing to stress about. Like all 140-ish weekly guests, I had several communications with ranch staff before I arrived, to arrange shuttles to/from the airport,

pre-book my appointments (facial and hot-stone massage), and sign up for cooking class.



(Courtesy of Rancho La Puerta)

The all-inclusive resort is a wonderful invention.

Other than a long-ago visit to Club Med Martinique, all-inclusive stays have not been a regular part of my vacation repertoire. RLP has me wondering why not. I absolutely dug the fact that, once on site, I didn't have to shell out one damn peso—all meals, fitness classes, hikes, seminars, and evening activities are included with the cost of accommodations. I did, however, *choose* to spend about \$100 out of pocket on two crazy-delish green smoothies from a pool juice bar, a couple of glasses of wine (more on that later), and a few items from the store: Advil, darling silver stud earrings made locally, and some yummy Mexican chocolate. Don't worry if you're more a go-with-the-flow type, you can book your acupuncture appointments, Watsu massages, and Bean-to-Bar Chocolate classes upon arrival, or any time during your stay.

Getting around in general is easy. The Ranch feels like a friendly campus with paved pathways and lots of signs, connecting the many adobe and brick buildings. That's not to say I didn't get lost a gajillion times a day—a newbie rite of passage.



(Courtesy of Rancho La Puerta)

Charming accommodations provide everything you need.

ICYMI: You do not *need* a television or WiFi in your room. Not gonna lie, I was a little worried about being disconnected. But with decent internet access in the main lounge (your go-to for tea, coffee, and healthy snacks) and various public buildings, turns out I was A-OK. In fact, after attending Catherine Price's talk on "How to Break Up With Your Phone" ([also a book](#)), I took her 24-hour no-phone challenge. Easy-peasy.

The 87 casitas, which accommodate singles, doubles, triples and quads, are spread throughout the grounds, clustered in mini villages with names like Flores, Arboles, and Pajaros. I stayed in Villas Luna: My airy, clay-tiled space was warm and charming, tastefully decorated with colorful Mexican folk art. A wood-burning fireplace (it gets chilly in winter) and a gorgeous patio with sweeping mountain views rounded out the cozy comforts. Happy as an *almeja* I was.

Bottom line about rooms: You probably won't spend much time there—activities run, literally, from the crack of dawn (6:05am hike, anyone?) until about 10pm (loved me some bingo night). If you're trying to save a few bucks, go for a smaller casita. While each room is unique, they're all similarly appointed. On the flip side, Villas Cielo is the place for luxury seekers. The three serene sanctuaries are the spa's newest accommodations and feature handcrafted furniture and museum-quality art. Plus, they

come with oodles of upgraded amenities: private terraces, saltwater plunge pools, hammocks, outdoor showers, in-room WiFi, and more.



(Courtesy of Rancho La Puerta)

The best way to spend your days—*your* way.

First a few facts: The Ranch is home to 11 gyms, 4 pools, and 20 full-time fitness instructors. Indeed, there are endless classes to take, 25 miles of hiking trails to hike, well-regarded healers to see, interesting speakers to hear, and delicious spa treatments to indulge in. No wonder I was overwhelmed as I studied the weekly schedule of classes and activities included in my welcome packet. There are 50-plus classes offered daily and 10 weekly guest speakers, workshops and visiting expert events. I meticulously planned my first full day while reclining in bed the night I arrived. On my agenda: Pilates mat; intro to circuit training, The Wave (in the Activity Pool); sound healing; a talk on Vincent Van Gogh; and a screening of *A Star Is Born* in the library lounge. Plus meals, of course.

I followed the plan to a tee. The fitness instructors and speakers were excellent, the gyms were clean and filled with all the equipment one could need (circuit training was hard), and all the facilities were perfectly lovely. It definitely felt good to work long-dormant muscles and challenge myself to try new things. But I was exhausted and, yeah, kinda stressed. I hadn't left any room to simply wander and take in my surroundings, meditate in nature, plop down on one or more of the 26 hammocks

scattered around, or talk to people. You know, basically just experience the undeniable beauty and palpable spirituality that permeates the place.

For the rest of my stay—except for scheduled appointments—I just went with the flow and my mood, allowed myself to be free of expectations (my own, of course). Best decision ever. I discovered that I absolutely love [Feldenkrais](#), and I took every class that was offered. I lounged at the pool and read a book without thinking about what was next. I took a jewelry-making class in the art studio and now have a very chic beaded bracelet to remind me to always be creative. In between yoga classes taught by Phyllis, a RLP institution who happens to be a septuagenarian Brit with a "schoolmarm meets stand-up comedian" personality, I took a nature walk that was a master class in the hundreds of plants, flowers, and birds that reside in the valley, And I tried [pickleball](#) for the first time (oh what fun).

My hot stone massage and facial were major highlights. The main spa, with a [vast menu of treatments](#), is clean and modern, and the Mexican masseuses and aestheticians really know their stuff. I floated away, smooth, relaxed and happy after both of my appointments. I also got to try RLP's new and divine organic skincare line, La Puerta Core Essentials. My sensitive skin really took to the [Calendula Moisture Crème](#). (I'm just about done with the sample I took home.)

My only regret is that I didn't go on any of the [early morning hikes](#) for which The Ranch is known—and which, I am told, are akin to religious experiences. Next time.



(Courtesy of Rancho La Puerta)

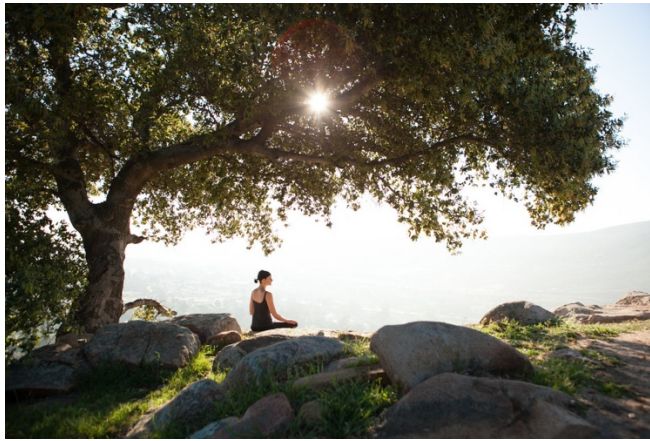
Burgers and fries aren't on the menu but the healthy meals are delish.

Let me say up front that I'm not a foodie (don't hate). I appreciate quality food but my palate is, shall we say, pretty basic bitch. Before I arrived, I knew very little about what to expect in the dining hall. Fifteen meals later, I give the chefs an enthusiastic thumbs up. The Ranch describes its cuisine as "semi-vegetarian with an abundance of organic fruits and vegetables." Those very fruits and vegetables come from its own six-acre organic farm, located two miles from the center of activity. (The most popular early-morning hikes are the ones that end with a yummy breakfast at the farm.) Eggs, dairy, and fresh seafood from the port of Ensenada also appear frequently on the menu. Gluten-free options are plentiful and accommodations can be made for those with special dietary needs.

Breakfast and lunch are served buffet-style (go ahead, eat as much as you want—I did). Dinner, still informal, is seated and offers a choice of two main entrées with different side dishes, followed by dessert and the tea du jour. Overall, the food was healthy, tasty and satisfying; obviously I liked some dishes better than others. Hands down, though, breakfast was the best MOD (meal of the day). I especially enjoyed the scrambled egg-black beans-tortilla combo, and I'm still dreaming about my daily cuppa Mexican hot chocolate.

All that being said, my absolute favorite single meal was one I cooked myself. OK, not really, but I did help make a fantastic salad with dressing to die for. RLP is known for its cooking school [La Cocina Que Canta](#) (The Kitchen That Sings), located adjacent to the organic farm. Even though I don't cook much at home, I thought why not, I can follow a recipe. Led by visiting [Chef AJ](#) (Abbie Jaye), about 16 of us whipped up an organic, vegan feast. I definitely had favorites: the balsamic dijon glazed Brussels sprouts; my own creation, a Hail to the Kale salad; chef AJ's Disappearing Lasagna (it did live up to its name); and the decadent, dairy-free chocolate mousse. Bottom line: The food and the company were brilliant, and we got to take the recipes home with us. I've already made a batch of the carrot-cake muffins. Yum.

A word to drinkers: You should know that neither wine nor any kind of alcohol is served in the dining hall. But thanks to the Insta-worthy Bazar Del Sol, located in Villas Sol, The Ranch isn't totally dry. The lovely indoor-outdoor space serves local vino from the Guadalupe Valley. (The two aforementioned pours I had were very good.) Bazar Del Sol is also an espresso bar and a stylish-but-teensy boutique where you can buy local artisanal goodies like ceramics, jewelry, and scarves. Yes, everything you purchase here will be added to your bill. But during my week, RLP hosted a fun, pre-dinner fiesta with sangria, and chips and guacamole. Quelle surprise, it was one of the best nights. Sure I was a little buzzed, but chilling on the patio with new friends—including the stunning mountain views—was glorious. P.S. Forgot to mention that wine (white and red) was served with dinner in the cooking class; a little, ahem, food for thought.



(Courtesy of Rancho La Puerta)

A final note.

There's so much more I would love to share about my magical experience, including the fascinating history of The Ranch and its spa pioneer founders, amazing stories of regulars who come back year after year, and insights from the topnotch staff. But alas, I'm already well over my word count (sorry, madame editor). The good news is you can discover these things for yourself. And speaking from experience, that's the very best way.

*// Weekly rates begin at \$4,350 for singles and \$3,850 for doubles;
visit [rancholapuerta.com](https://www.rancholapuerta.com) for deets, rates, special events and more.*