

TRAVEL SECTION OF THE YEAR

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# Travel

## Turkey's best-kept secret

*Almost 1,000 miles east of Istanbul, Lake Van is vast, beautiful and little visited by tourists. It's time that changed, says Terry Richardson*



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## WELLNESS HOLIDAYS

# 'I felt like some kind of fitness goddess'

*Even after 70 years, the Rancho La Puerta retreat in Mexico is still transforming lives*

**A** year ago, I became one of those insufferably smug people who booked herself a yoga retreat. I went to the Spanish mountains, spent a week doing

downward dogs, eating vegan food and meditating while trying valiantly not to let my mind wander to pressing issues such as what I'd be eating for dinner (more vegan food, as it turned out). And despite being cynical and British and finding it all a bit much, by the end of the trip, I returned to London feeling transformed. Back home, the calmness and the daily meditation practice lasted for about two weeks before the familiar frazzled feeling settled back around my shoulders like smog. Twas ever thus.

But as any seasoned traveller knows, the best way to get over the post-holiday blues is to book another immediately. So I made myself a promise that I would try to go on a similar retreat on my own every year in order to reset: a bit like returning your iPhone to its default factory settings without the unnecessary photo-printing app you once downloaded and the 5,673 WhatsApp videos that appear to have snuck into the storage without you noticing.

So it was that I found myself flying to San Diego, California, where I was picked up by a man who circled the terminal building several times until he found me, in order to drive me across the border into the northernmost part of Mexico. Here, I spent four days at the Rancho La Puerta health retreat. The closest big cities are Tijuana (30 miles west) and



Mexicali (90 miles east), which either sounds like a cocktail or a medical health insurance programme, depending on your frame of mind.

Rancho La Puerta was founded in the Forties by Edmond Szekely, a man whose Wikipedia entry describes him as "a natural living enthusiast", which basically meant he moved to Mexico before it was a tourist destination and began expounding the virtues of grape



How it rates

**RANCHO LA PUERTA TECATE**

FROM £3,300 PER WEEK

7/10

Rate, for single room, includes seven nights with food and drink. (001 858 764 5500; rancholapuerta.com)

juice, vegetarianism and regular sunbathing. He spent the rest of his time translating obscure Aramaic texts and writing about his philosophies.

Szekely lived in a modest adobe hut with his young wife, Deborah, who was 19 when they married and seems to have put up with an awful lot, including milking goats and making her own cheese.

It doesn't sound like a barrel of laughs, but soon, the Szekelys were inviting like-minded souls to visit for \$17.50 (£14) a week, and the Rancho La Puerta health retreat was born. It's still going, some 70 years later, and Deborah, now a remarkably spry monogamian, gives weekly talks to the guests. When I attended, her top tips for staying alive included having younger friends, spending the first 30 minutes of the day lying in bed not doing anything and eating a fair amount of eggs.

The ranch is picturesque: a series of single-story, red-brick casitas, pleasingly furnished with colourful Mexican cushions and bedspreads, and interlinked by winding pathways along which the occasional maintenance truck will putter, but which is otherwise given over to flip-flopped Americans in leggings and designer fleeces. My casita looked out onto a mountain range and came complete with two sun loungers and the occasional exotically plumed bird, which I cannot put a name to.

Every day, the retreat hosts an extraordinary number of classes - from kettlebells to yoga to pilates to guided meditation and circuit training. The general atmosphere is more utilitarian than luxury, although there are three spas on site, multiple swimming pools, a gift shop, evening talks and film showings.

Most mornings, there is a guided dawn hike into the mountains. Despite never being a naturally early riser in London, I found that at Rancho La Puerta, I started to feel sleepy at around 8pm after a day of exertion and would go to bed at 9pm quite happily.

The dark, calming silence devoid of all traffic noises or street lamps, meant I slept better than I had done in months. I woke up before my alarm went off at 5.45am and enjoyed a stunning hike for 45 minutes up a steep but rewarding gradient as the sun rose, casting its buttery light over the smoothly rounded rocks, green scrubland and even more birds.

I made the most of the classes and the instructors were, without fail, great. It struck me, on day two, that I seemed to be the youngest resident by some considerable margin. The average age of my fellow guests hovered around the peppy 70-year-old



mark. The great thing about this was that it made me feel like some kind of fitness goddess simply because I didn't have arthritis or a hip replacement.

"You're so strong!" one of the instructors said to me approvingly as I managed to lift a dumbbell that weighed approximately the same as an (empty) tin of baked beans.

Many of these guests were return visitors, some of whom had been coming to Rancho La Puerta every year for decades. It speaks well of a place when it has this kind of repeat custom. Also, they all looked fabulous and at least 15 years younger than their actual age. So maybe Szekely was onto something with his grape juice.

The food is healthy and delicious - lots of Mexican-inspired fajitas,



beans and quinoa used in a variety of inventive ways and the inevitable endless jugs of green juice. No meat. But there is salt and pepper on the tables, thank goodness. Breakfast and lunch are served buffet style. Dinner is communal, which is one of my absolute pet hates. I spend so much of

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**the time is now**

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## FIVE OF THE BEST JUNE'S HOTTEST HOTEL OPENINGS

### 1. THE RESIDENCE MALDIVES AT THIGURAH

The southern Gaafu Alifu Atoll gets a second taste of Cenizaro's The Residence brand just six months after its first (the adjacent sister resorts will be linked by bridge). All of the villas, a pairing of contemporary style and traditional Maldivian architecture, overlook turquoise water, but this time there's a stronger emphasis on families: 12 two-bedroom villas, plus a free kids' club. Activities for all include snorkelling an untouched reef; however, simply lying back in a thatched pavilion, beside the ocean, while the Clarins spa's treatments banish any grain of stress is sure to prove a paradise island winner. **□ Doubles from £299 (00960 682 0088; cenizaro.com/theresidence)**

### 2. ELEWANA LODGE SPRINGS, KENYA

There are just eight luxury tents at this new outpost within the Loisaba Conservancy's 57,000 acres, so guests can expect a serious level of privacy as they take in the extraordinary Laikipia plains below their verandas, stretching all the way to the country's namesake mountain. Each room includes the services of a "guest ambassador" to ensure comfort is consistent, with field guides taking over during game drives. Horse riding and camel trekking are a hands-on way to experience Kenya, and you can experience authentic



life by visiting a Maasai village - and you'll be back in time for sundowners. **□ From £780pp (00254 750 127 000; elewanacollection.com)**

### 3. AL FAYA LODGE, EMIRATE OF SHARJAH, UAE

Two Sixties single-storey stone buildings in the Mleiha desert, one previously a clinic and the other a shop, don't evoke images of a swanky boutique escape. But thanks to the thoroughly modern reimagining by Anarchitect, an

architecture firm based in London and Dubai, the Al Faya Lodge is an alluring remote retreat. All five bedrooms are heavy on natural textures and have a pared-back industrial bent, plus a skylight for stargazing (retire after evenings spent around the firepit). Indulgence comes in the form of an open-air saltwater pool and three "salt spa experiences", while a restaurant serves Emirati cuisine. **□ Doubles from £240 (00971 6 538 7857; sharjahcollection.ae/al-faya-lodge)**



### 4. FOUR SEASONS HOTEL ONE DALTON STREET, BOSTON

Boston's newest skyscraper, the third tallest in the city with a height of 742ft, adds a modern, soft-triangular shape to the skyline. Inside is warmer than the glassy exterior, thanks to cream-coloured walls (though metallic hints and muted greys keep the vibe sleek). The entire seventh floor is given over to wellness, featuring five treatment rooms, steam rooms, a swimming pool, and a state-of-the-art gym. The location at the core of

Back Bay is excellent, with Boston's sports, art and music scenes all very accessible. **□ Doubles from £500 (001 617 377 4888; fourseasons.com/onedalton)**

### 5. CALILO, IOS, GREECE

Ios has gone to great lengths to stave off the blight of overtourism, and Calilo is one part of that ethos. The owners bought a quarter of the island a decade ago in order to preserve it, and part - a secluded cove fringed by rugged hillsides - has been sensitively developed to

create this 30-suite hotel facing unspoilt Pappas beach. Eco-credentials run high: it relies on solar power and geothermal cooling, interiors are dominated by granite and marble that was quarried on the estate, and produce is sourced where possible from the organic kitchen garden. If a dose of something more lively is needed, boat transfers to town can be arranged. **□ Doubles from £307 (0030 697 011 4922; calilo.com)**

Ben Parker

**RELAX...** Fitness classes in the pool, below; La Cocina Que Canta cooking school, far left; Elizabeth Day has some 'me time', bottom left



my daily life making conversation with strangers as an interviewer, that when I go on holiday, I value the opportunity for silence. Even worse, dinner is three courses, so you don't get to slink off as soon as you've chomped down. Hardly anyone else at the resort was travelling on their own, so each night I was palmed off on some poor, unsuspecting family group who were then forced into polite chit-chat about the British weather and what we all thought of the Duchess of Sussex. But this is a minor quibble, given that I left feeling more rested than I had done for ages. Obviously this went out of the window almost as soon as I landed back on the Heathrow tarmac, but it was good while it lasted.



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