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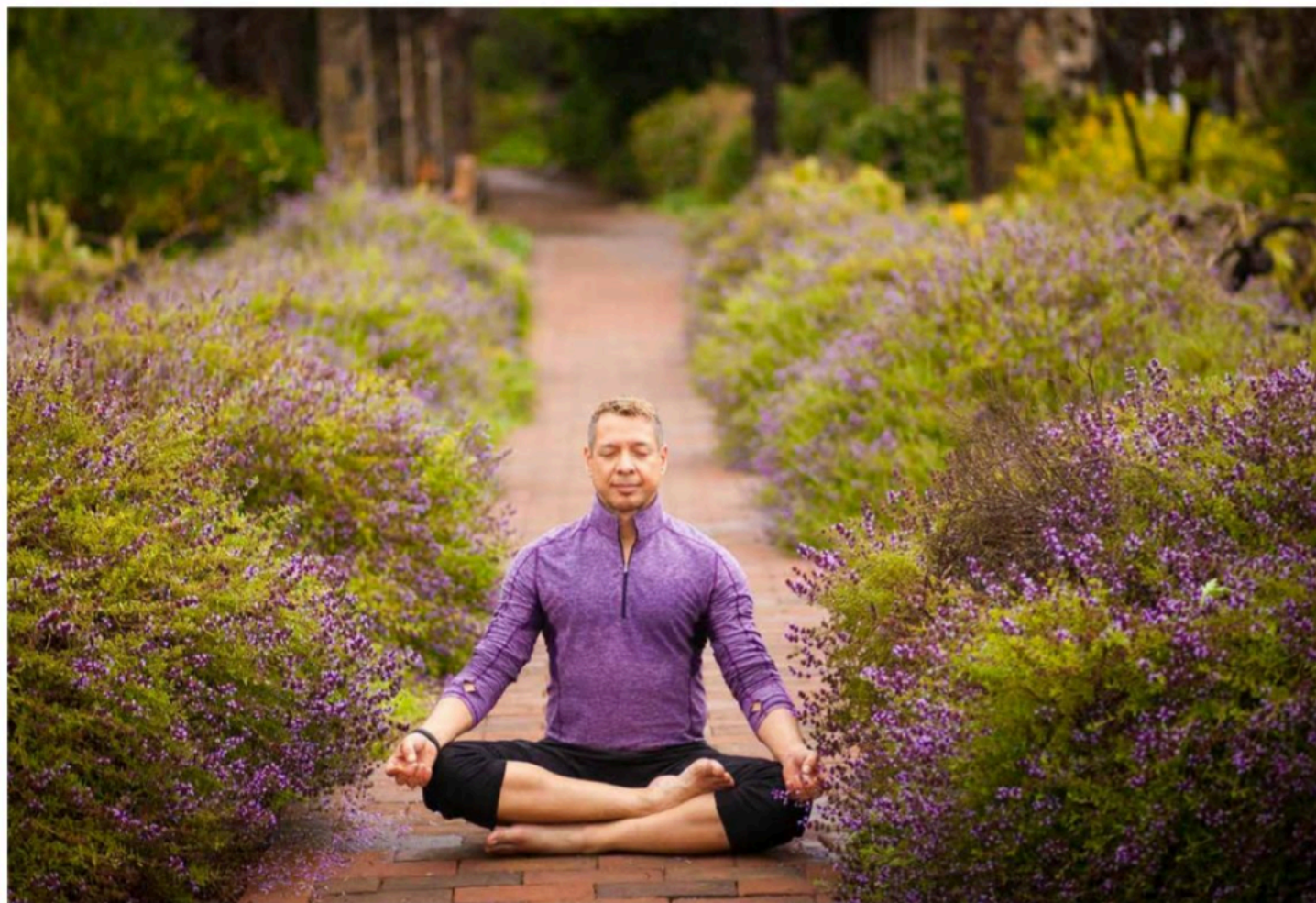
## THE WELLNESS ISSUE

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## TOTAL RENEWAL

Let your spirit soar at Rancho La Puerta wellness resort. BY IRVINA LEW



ONE WITH  
NATURE:  
*Meditation*

PHOTO: © RANCHO LA PUERTA

**AT RANCHO LA PUERTA**, wellness opportunities incorporate a multitude of mind, body and spirit modalities that refresh, renew and reenergize. I am convinced The Ranch, as it is affectionately called, offers another singular element that contributes to its reputation as one of the world's best destination wellness resorts. That component is the natural beauty of the 4,000-acre nature preserve which encompasses a landscaped, artistically enhanced, 150-acre parcel on which most ranch activities take place.

During my recent — and fourth — visit, I relived my first property tour of some decades back and experienced a Proustian madeleine moment while following a guide and walking along clay-tile paths with geranium borders that wind across stone bridges and past beds planted with sage, rosemary and lavender. Beyond the enticing aroma, the sound of trickling fountains, the views of sculpture-studded gardens and the vista of an imposing Mount

Kuchumaa backdrop all triggered the same sense of *bien-être*, or well-being, I first experienced at this magnificent, Spanish-style, red-tile-roofed, hillside village-like complex. Even the handcrafted, folk art-style directional signs to the dining hall, women's and men's health center, exercise gyms and pavilions, the Mercado, pools, library, museum, art studio and TV and WiFi lounges reminded me The Ranch takes advantage of every opportunity to create beauty and reduce stress. (Poor signage can cause *agita*, even while trying to get to a massage appointment.)

Yoga? Pilates? Tennis lessons? Read by the pool? The number of activities impresses: 50 daily classes, seven-mile morning hikes, five-mile Road Runner Trail Run and an array of fitness classes. With so many physical, intellectual and spiritual activities — and beauty and body treatments — each guest develops his or her own daily itinerary.



I've hiked and attempted to learn how to meditate, do Pilates, take better photographs, dance salsa and cook healthfully. Cooking classes have been my favorite activity since my first session in the original ranch kitchen. (We made balsamic-topped pizza, no cheese!) These days, the three weekly hands-on sessions often feature guest chefs and cookbook authors. The classes begin with a garden tour of Tres Estrellas — the six-acre organic garden — outside La Cocina Que Canta ("The Kitchen That Sings"), a stunning, state-of-the-art culinary center.

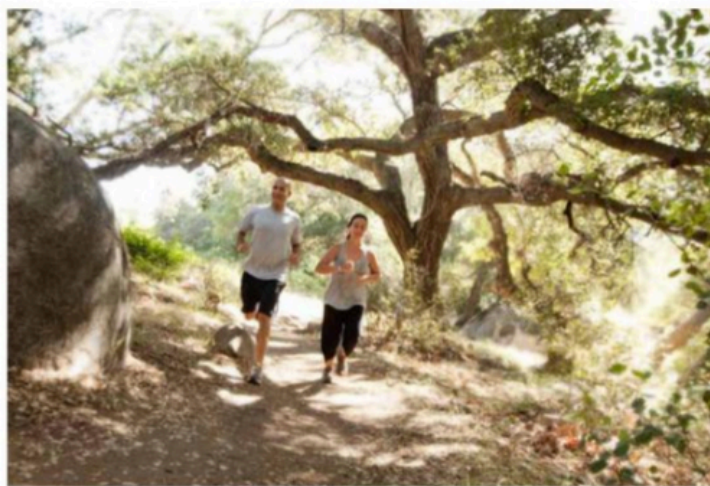
Colorful, farm-to-fork, healthful meals are served within a spacious, art-filled Dining Hall and adjacent terraces. Breakfast and lunch feature self-serve buffets; at dinner, the printed multicourse menu offers two entrées, including a vegetarian option and locally caught seafood several times a week. (Many guests request half orders of both.) Mexican favorites count among the ethnic dishes: guacamole; salsa; huevos rancheros; tacos on house-made tortillas; and, for dessert, an apple-, cranberry- and nut-stuffed empanada (no empanada for gluten-free guests).

Wellness has been the core principle at The Ranch since a teenage Deborah Szekely (now 96 and long-established as the "Godmother of the Wellness Revolution") and her professor-husband, Edmond Szekely, founded The Essene School of Life. Even in the 1940s the program featured (his) lifestyle lectures, (her) fitness activities and two hours of daily garden chores, all for "\$17.50 a week; bring your own tent." (Idyllic weather was and is, still, part of the appeal.)

From the start, farm-fresh, organic food and a mostly plant-based diet have been intrinsic to its mission. Now the ranch's organic farm grows 250 varieties of produce; supplies 40–80 percent of the menu; and practices sustainable methods, resource conservation and educational outreach. Even the new La Puerta Core Essentials skin-care line is made with organic, eco-certified ingredients and sustainably harvested plants and herbs.

Education is the element that distinguishes resort spas from destination spas. At The Ranch, a variety of experts teach specialized sessions each week. Ms. Szekely, my hero and role model, continues to share her impressive knowledge of "how to live and age well." She incorporates her lifestyle choices, experiences and up-to-the-minute nutritional and wellness information in the insights she shares with guests — including two of my three daughters — about "the longer-living, younger life."

Some of her life lessons: Eat (smaller) portions appropriate to your size. Follow a mostly organic, vegetarian diet. Get daily



**ROAD TO WELLNESS:**  
*Fitness training (above), and  
running (left)*

PHOTOS: © RANCHO LA PUERTA

exercise. Appreciate nature. Make friends with younger people.

Accommodations are comfortably lovely, with traditional Mexican tile floors and counters and handcrafted wall hangings. Like many, ours featured a fireplace, an expansive terrace and a mountain view. (Three newly built, luxurious Heavenly Villas include WiFi and plunge pools.) And the warm, local and nurturing staff is as impressive as the ambience.

Some guests find spiritual sustenance in meditating, doing tai chi, circling the labyrinth — a replica of the one at the medieval Chartres Cathedral — or dining in silence or alone. For me, what sets The Ranch apart are those stunning walks from here to there and back again, repeated during an eight-day week. Being immersed in beauty while not giving much thought to one's personal looks — casual dress, natural hair and no makeup is the norm — simply makes me feel good.

Thousands agree.

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