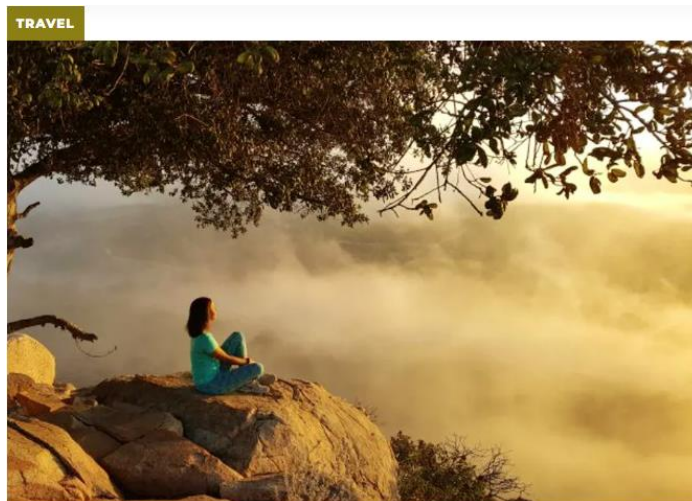


SPECTATOR
LIFE

Explore the Californian retreat favoured by Hollywood stars

Olivia Grant

21 OCTOBER 2019



I'm not a huge fan of this time of year. Not only is floating about in embroidery anglaise whilst mainlining rosé no longer an acceptable all-day activity but there is something about the Autumn that makes me feel like I'm about to be marched into Clarks to buy some sensible lace-ups before heading to Ryman to replenish my pencil case.

It was with this disconcerting 'back to school' feeling that I sipped a rather metallic tasting coffee on an early morning flight from New York to San Diego. Delta's 'protein pack' consisting of a floury pitta bread, mangled apple quarters and a block of waxy cheese did little to alleviate the feeling that 'wellness' really had been a major casualty of this particularly indulgent summer.

Fortunately, I was heading to a famed spa in the foothills of Mount Kuchumaa in Baja California and a brief look at the website made it look like just the kind of place to have repeated chaterangas whilst downing copious amounts of restorative green juice. I didn't know much about it apart from the fact that it was just across the Mexican border and that it was a favoured spot of Claudia Schiffer, Oprah Winfrey and Kate Winslet.

Where to stay



Rancho Puerta, Baja, California

We wended our way from the airport through dusty mountains peppered with undulating boulders and arrived at the gates of the Ranch itself. Many guests hugged staff members like old friends – one guest I talked to declared it was her fourteenth visit – and then everyone promptly disappeared down various meandering paths into the four thousand acres of beautifully landscaped gardens to their own private casitas.

Mine was particularly perfect I felt. A writing desk in my tiled living room looked out onto a sun-bleached hillside studded with cacti and tall cypresses whilst the bed was bestrewn with Mexicali embroidery. There is deliberately no wifi in any of the rooms to allow for a 'digital detox' and after sipping the sparkling water in my mini fridge I decided to attend 'Orientation' slightly discombobulated by the size of the place.

After many wrong turns past wooden yoga shalas and a stone-encrusted labyrinth I finally joined a handful of fellow newbies in a lounge area made of artisanal brick and carved wood. A quick tour revealed that the place has existed since the forties and was the brain child of the Hungarian-born Professor Edmond Szekely and his, at the time, seventeen year old Brooklyn-born bride Deborah. They rented a one-room stable building in the middle of a Mexican vineyard and charged their converts \$17.50 a week to pitch their tents on site, share in the west coast's first organic vegetable garden, tend to the goats and be educated about healthy living.



The interior of a casita at Rancho Puerta

This hippy low-fi set up has now expanded into a comprehensive fitness and hiking program conducted across ten buildings, three swimming pools and two health centres but the spirit of 'The Ranch' remains intact. "Deborah really is the heart of the place," a Texan lady told me as we wandered into the dining hall, "She's 97 now and still picks out all the art work." Both of us then took our seats at a three course supper conducted in a beautiful wooden hall with high vaulted ceiling where everyone is encouraged to dine together. It is this communal atmosphere which has sparked so many friendships and provokes such intense loyalty amongst its devotees.

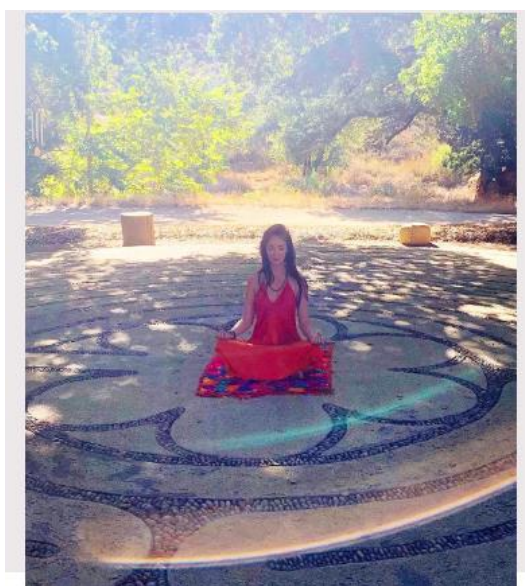
What to eat



Dish from the Tres Estrellas kitchen garden

Beautiful plates of jalapeño frittatas with courgette flowers and wild mushroom risotto produced by the in-house organic Tres Estrellas kitchen garden put my mind at rest that healthy was not going to mean culinary boredom. My dairy-free tiramisu was appropriately ‘spa-sized’ and although you can ask for seconds it does seem to defeat the purpose somewhat. My new Texan friend registered my momentary dismay at my postage stamp sized pudding. “I always bring donuts with me!” she whispered with a conspiratorial wink. Americans, it seems, share my dread of being denied carbohydrates.

What to do



Olivia Grant at Rancho Puerta

Morning consisted of an early morning trek up the surrounding mountains, a breakfast of scrambled egg whites and bircher muesli and a WATSU water dance treatment which involved being held and moved in water in a womb-like trance. After lunch I tried an art class where we started with 'automatic writing' to access our feelings polished off by sound meditation in one of the shalas which I found strangely emotional.

In the evening Deborah was speaking. About sixty of us gathered on meditation pillows to hear her. "Contentment is from within," she said pointing to her chest "...it took me a long time to find that out." The woman is still whipper smart with translucent skin so something about this lifestyle evidently works. As I looked around the room I imagined what it must have been like when Aldous Huxley was holding symposia here in the late 50s. Deborah elaborated that many of buildings had no walls at that time but there was a lot of 'passion.' Many of the woman smiled and looked at one another. I don't know whether it was gluten-free living, my opening chakras or that I was mildly hallucinating from a calorie deficit but it hadn't taken long for me to become a total convert to this beautiful destination.

A week-long stay at Rancho Puerta starts at \$3,850 with double occupancy.

