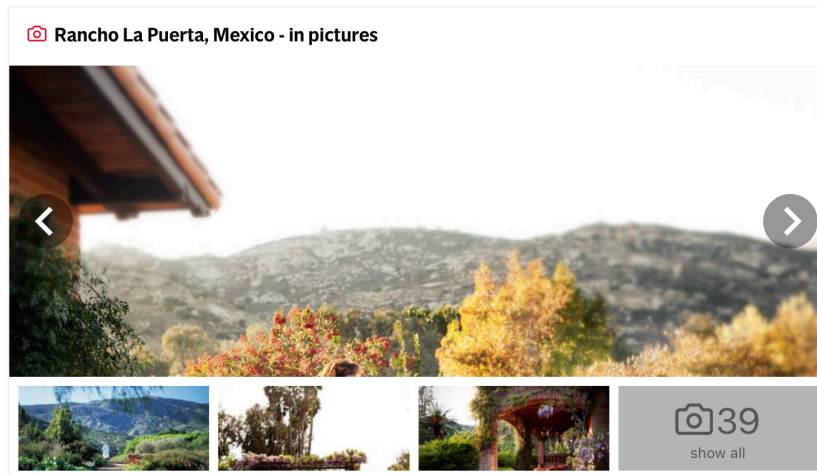


Rancho la Puerta: why a visit to one of the world's best wellness retreats will leave you feeling 'reborn'

Rancho La Puerta has been a shrine for wellness seekers for 80 years. Suzannah Ramsdale finds peace in one of the world's best spas

SUZANNAH RAMSDALE | 5 hours ago | 0 comments



So, is it your first time at the ranch?' This is how the majority of conversations at Rancho La Puerta, a 4,000-acre **wellness** retreat at the northernmost tip of **Mexico's** Baja California, begin.

During my stay, I met a woman who had visited the ranch more than 90 times, and many of the wealthy American clientele who live just over the border, 40 miles away in San Diego, make the trip several times a year. The stars love it too — Oprah Winfrey, Arianna Huffington and Kate Winslet are said to be fans.

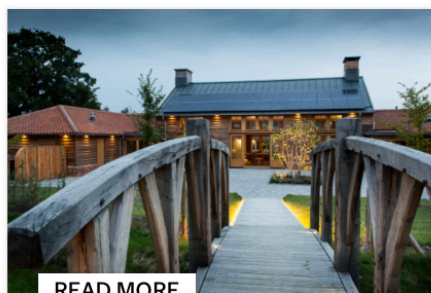
The devotion to the ranch feels like something bordering on a religion, and if that is the case, then 95-year-old founder-owner Deborah Szekely is its spiritual leader. You hear guests whispering about her by the pool, gossiping about her life story and wondering if she'll be at the ranch this week or not. Deborah set up what was then called the Essene School of Life in 1940 with her late husband, Dr Edmond Szekely, a philosopher and psychologist. Their Californian friends and work associates would schlep across the border, pitch up tents and spend a week hiking, and listening to ahead-of-their-time talks given by Professor Szekely about health and wellness. Deborah is still heavily involved with the ranch and one evening during my stay she held a Q&A for her faithful flock. Her secret to longevity? Pilates and walking.

These days, the multi-award-winning retreat is widely acknowledged as one of the best spas in the world and is known for its all-inclusive Fitness Week. All guests arrive on the Saturday (check-out is the following Saturday) and are presented with a thick manilla folder full of the activities, talks and treatments on offer. The schedule is packed from 6am to 8pm every day. But what very much appeals about this retreat is that you pick and choose what you do and, as I witnessed, it's perfectly acceptable to spend an entire day snoozing by one of the four swimming pools, should you want. However, the wellness goodies on offer are first class and you'll want to try as many as you can.

Ranch devotees tend to be women in their fifties and sixties, though during our stay we also spotted young couples, a few mother-daughter duos and the most wholesome of hen-dos. Over the course of a typical week at the ranch there will be 325 fitness classes to choose from, ranging from yoga and Pilates to hip-hop

dance classes and boxing. I took the opportunity to try things I'd never normally get to do in London, and among my favourites was a lively cardio drumming dance class and an upbeat trampoline session called The Bounce. Elsewhere, you'll find water-based classes in the pool as well as a tennis clinic and something called Pickleball, a hybrid of tennis, badminton and table tennis that Americans love.

Next, it's time to work on your mind. Guided meditation, sound therapy and yoga philosophy are available most days. Every Thursday there's an optional silent dinner — worth doing once you get past the initial awkwardness. Each week, too, there is a packed agenda of talks and educational classes. Learn about juice fasts in the Library Lounge, make your own jewellery with Alejandro in the art studio or discover how to manage stress with nutrition from one of the Ranch's visiting experts.



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Find balance with yoga outdoors in the grounds (Rancho La Puerta)

Spa treatments take place in one of three health centres. Many of the monied guests I chatted to treated themselves to at least one spa treatment per day (they aren't included in the all-inclusive package). Should your budget allow, the hot stone massage, reflexology and water-based Watsu seemed to be the most popular. I opted for an 80-minute facial using the ranch's own skincare line, La Puerta Core Essentials, and I'm still seeing the benefits weeks later.

The real highlight of a week at the ranch, though, is the hiking. There are over 25-miles of trails in and around the nearby mountains and woodland and there are routes suitable for nearly all fitness levels. The sunrise hikes are a life-affirming way to start the day. Each week there are several outings to the ranch's organic farm where, on arrival after the two-mile walk, you'll be served up a hearty farm-to-fork breakfast and have the chance to meet the über-cute La Puerta goats.

Food at the ranch is a treat. Breakfast and lunch is buffet-style in the main dining hall, while the four-course evening meal is table service, where you can eat solo or with a friend or join one of the communal tables. Menus are mostly vegetarian — much of the fresh vegetables are sourced from farm — with a seafood option most days. Dishes include sweet potato and fennel soup; pear, walnut and broccoli salad; and mushroom burritos. Alcohol isn't served in the main dining area but you can buy wine at the Bazaar Del Sol or bring your own; all rooms come with wine glasses and a corkscrew.



Sunrise hikes lead to a hearty farm breakfast (Rancho La Puerta)

Accommodation comes in the form of little red-brick casitas, each with patios and comfy sun loungers; the three most expensive come with their own plunge pools. Interiors are heritage Mexican with colourful cushions and locally woven textiles on the beds. There's no wifi or television and you're given a little sleeping bag for your phone when you arrive. If you're desperate, there is wifi in the lounge area. This isn't a punishing **wellness retreat** — rather somewhere to relax and reset with no judgment. Fancy a class of sangria? Bottoms up. Feeling lazy? Snooze in a hammock.

After my week at the ranch, I felt reborn. I don't know whether it was the daily exercise, the nightly 10 hours of kip or the unique and welcoming vibe at La Puerta, but one thing's certain: I'm a ranch convert.

Details

Fitness Week 2019 rates range from £2,890 to £4,560 per person, double occupancy plus tax. Seasonal and promotional savings packages and group rates available. rancholapuerta.com

BA fly direct from Heathrow to San Diego from £396 return. ■