

CHIGO ICHIE LEARN THE SIMPLE SECRET TO BEING HAPPY WITH LIFE

in the **moment**

WELLNESS • MINDFULNESS • HAPPINESS

ISSUE 35 FEBRUARY 2020

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A woman with long dark hair, wearing a teal t-shirt and blue jeans, is sitting cross-legged on a large, light-colored rock. She is looking out over a vast, misty landscape. Above her, the branches of a large tree with green leaves hang down, partially obscuring the sky. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and contemplative.

escaping

A balm to the soul

A birthplace of Western wellness, Rancho La Puerta, is a sanctuary that inspires and comforts in equal measure, finds Liz Schaffer ›



Rancho La Puerta is still a family business: Deborah (right), who founded the retreat with her then husband Edmond in 1940, has now passed the reins over to her daughter Sarah (left).

“People came, their friends came, and then they came back”

views on wellness that attracted participants, it was Deborah who made everything possible – assuming the role of general manager, cultivating the land, fostering relationships and feeding all who attended.

“We never had a vision. The ranch made the decisions. People came, their friends came, and then they came back; it’s hard to explain but the magic of Mount Kuchumaa touched us all,” explains Deborah. “I don’t think this place could have existed, except in Mexico... we have been so welcomed by the community, and the site has been blessed, with Mount Kuchumaa providing spiritual guidance.”

The mountain Deborah speaks of is sacred to the Kumeyaay tribespeople who knew it as the womb of the world, the place of creation. Once only shamans could venture to its summit and it remains undeniably powerful, a magnetic vortex protected by both Mexico and the United States, an ever-present beacon. It has awed Deborah since she arrived and has helped shape Rancho La Puerta, which works with (rather than distracting from) the natural surrounds.

Rancho La Puerta has grown organically over the years with Deborah and Edmond purchasing adobe bricks one at a time, and building what they could, when they could. The dining room – an expansive, pillared hall framed by fountains and cacti – took two years to build, while The Oaktree – one of 11 gyms – began as a cement exercise floor; the walls and roof added slowly over 10 years. To explain this growth Deborah calls upon a Hungarian saying; “You stretch as far as your blanket allows. As the blanket grows larger, we grow larger.”

Rancho La Puerta has soul. So much, in fact, that you can reach out and touch it. Covering 4,000 wild and glorious acres, this health and fitness retreat in Mexico’s Baja California is a wonder – a place to escape, nourish body and soul and appreciate the natural world. With eight decades of history, Rancho La Puerta is also a wellness pioneer, its ethos as inspiring today as it was when co-founder Deborah Szekely – now a sprightly 97-year-old who practises Pilates five times a week – first laid eyes on it.

“I cried,” laughs Deborah, remembering her reaction upon seeing the windowless, doorless, hay-filled adobe shack that was to be the then 17-year-old’s newlywed home. “There wasn’t even a threshold to be carried over!”

Deborah had travelled to Tecate in Baja California with her husband, Edmond (known in healthful circles as “The Professor”), in 1940 to host a summer health camp – the couple having relocated here to escape the atrocities of the Second World War. Early guests were charged \$17.50 USD – provided they bring their own tent – and while it was The Professor’s

Photograph by Rancho La Puerta

Each aspect of the retreat
has been carefully designed
to complement the thriving
natural world around it.



escaping

Guests are encouraged to choose whatever feels right from the myriad activities on offer.



The retreat has also helped shape Western wellness trends by promoting the link between body and mind, the value of nutrient-rich food, and the idea that workouts can be playful. Indeed, early on Deborah taught exercise classes but struggled with rhythm so introduced music to help her keep the beat – a practice adored by celebrity clientele in the 60s and now synonymous with aerobic workouts.

This sense of fun continues today at Rancho La Puerta, where the focus is simply on doing what is right for your body. You can be as switched off or active as you wish, seek solitude or connect, dive into a cardiovascular workout or swing through the air in an aerial yoga class. You can sculpt, paint, cook, hike or spend an entire day by the pool, fruit-filled smoothie in hand. The choice is yours – and whatever that is, it's the right one.

Should you decide to be active, there is much to entertain. Days begin with dawn hikes where you watch the ghostly terrain glow crimson, amber and

“This is a destination that reminds us that taking care of our bodies isn’t an indulgence, it’s a necessity”

Watching the sun rise over Mount Kuchumaa is best enjoyed on a morning hike.

gold with the rising sun. This is followed by an assortment of 45-minute classes, the programme changing weekly to adjust for visiting teachers and featuring everything from yoga, Pilates and guided meditation to water aerobics, Feldenkrais (gentle, mindful movement) and trail runs. Interspersed are chocolate, cooking and sculpting classes, talks from visiting artists and authors, and sessions in the spa.

Every fitness level, every injury, every quirk is catered for and there is no sense of completion, only respect for the body, the land and all that Rancho La Puerta is working to achieve. You talk to strangers and discover what has brought them here – or what has brought them back, for few retreats have quite so many repeat visitors. Even I, early in my week-long programme, was already plotting my return, aware of just how rare it is for a destination to remind us that taking care of our bodies isn't an indulgence, it's a necessity; for it is only when we have taken care of ourselves that we can really connect with others.

Photography/Rancho La Puerta



Photography: Rancho La Puerta



Photography: Luz Santhier

Anticlockwise from top left: lush paths connect the various areas of the resort; artisan signposts lead the way; organic and home-grown are key ingredients at Rancho La Puerta's cooking school.



Photography: Rancho La Puerta

All this activity unfolds against the most stunning backdrop. Rancho La Puerta is a verdant oasis found amidst weather-worn mountains, boulders and forest. The palette is bold yet sun-drenched, a blend of emerald, honey, ochre and peach. A labyrinthine network of pathways connect the adobe *casitas* (little houses), gallery, *Bazar Del Sol* (a store, coffee shop and wine bar that serves tipples from the nearby Valle de Guadalupe), fitness centres, spas, hammocks, reflexology path – everything. These twist around wildflower meadows, pepper trees, date palms, agaves, Mexican sunflowers and the bronze sculptures of artist Jose Ignacio Castañeda.

Such a setting is best appreciated on one of the many morning hikes. There are two to three guided options each day, yet for me the most delightful was the undulating trek to *La Cocina Que Canta* ('The Kitchen That Sings') – used as Rancho La Puerta's cooking school – and *Tres Estrellas* – their organic farm. Walking towards a garden-fresh Mexican-

meets-Mediterranean feast while colour returns to the earth is a joy, yet what makes this experience most delightful is head gardener Salvador Tinajero.

He has worked here for nearly 40 years and his passion is infectious, headily displayed as he leads you through his fields, sharing corn, chilli, basil and melon fresh from the earth. Spending a morning with him, appreciating the work and love that goes into production, makes meals here all the more magical, something we're once again encouraged to slow down and consider. Ardour, care and time – just a tiny slice of Rancho La Puerta's wondrous soul. 🍷

Getting there

Located in Mexico's Tecate Municipality in Baja California, Rancho La Puerta offers transfers to and from San Diego Airport, which is around an 11-hour flight from London. Visit rancholapuerta.com