

INSIDER'S GUIDE TO
SPAS

Happy 80th Birthday, Rancho La Puerta!

JUNE 24, 2020

BY MARY BEMIS

VINTAGE RANCHO LA PUERTA



Cheers to a true milestone in the world of spa and wellbeing—and to eight decades of innovation!

I've been writing about “the Ranch” in Tecate, Baja California since 1987, and it holds a special, sacred place for me. Its 4,000 private acres of gardens, mountains, and meadows have served as a true respite through the years—a place to go to come back to myself. A place to think, breathe, move—and just be. It's where I went when I left *American Spa* magazine and needed quiet. When I launched *Organic Spa* magazine in 2007, Deborah Szekely, the legendary co-founder, was one of the first I called to speak with about the importance of sustainable spas. In 2008, when Deborah experimented by bringing a Swami from India to the Ranch, I arranged to join the editor of *Spirituality & Health* magazine—and years later, we returned to the Ranch to celebrate our wedding. When I launched Insider's Directory to the Best Independent Properties, Deborah and daughter Sarah Livia Brightwood were one of our first supporters.



The Ranch's original canvas tents

My week-long respites at the Ranch now add up to many months, and the simple reason is that this beloved property is at the heart of the modern destination spa movement. The initial vision came from Edmond Bordeaux Szekely (aka The Professor), who studied health practices all the way back to Mesopotamia and the Essenes, and searched the world for the perfect desert sun. He found it in Tecate, in 1940, and he and his 18-year-old wife Deborah began renting tents and building sunbaths and gradually a magical oasis was created. “The Ranch has become a family fitness wellness tradition for thousands and thousands of families, and that makes me very proud,” Deborah shared with me on the Ranch’s **75TH ANNIVERSARY** in 2015. It’s probably also fair to say that the Ranch has influenced every American spa built since 1940.

“We’re honored to celebrate eighty wonderful years of wellness,” says **ROBERTO ARJONA**, CEO. “Our motto has always been ‘Siempre Mejor,’ which means ‘Always Better.’ Deborah believes this must also mean ‘Always Changing.’ The Ranch reflects this from the ground up.”

A Simple Health Formula



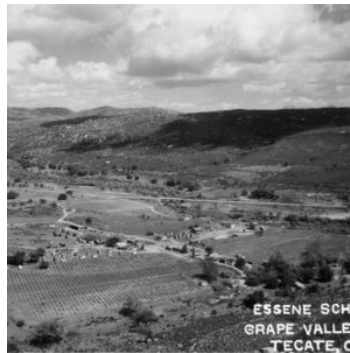
Deborah at 18 years of age

Deborah, now 98, embodies the Ranch ethos of health and wellness at any age. One of her greatest accomplishments, she tells me, “is the opportunity to teach hundreds of thousands, guests and **S T A F F** alike, to accept the joy and satisfaction of taking responsibility for their physical, spiritual, and moral wellbeing.” Her simple health formula? “The body is not a motel where you can check in and check out; it is your one and only home for life. Think of your body as a pen and the new day as a blank page upon which you will start to write your autobiography.”

On the Art of the Mission

“Our mission was never to make money, it is always quality. People look at the art throughout the property, and I tell them my son and I put that in our budget, about \$50,000 a year to buy statues. There are beautiful bronze statues everywhere that are now worth a lot . . . ”

Caring for the Earth, Caring for Community



Sarah Livia Brightwood continues the family tradition as President, keeping the foundation of Rancho La Puerta paramount by caring for the **E A R T H**, while offering a true destination spa experience. She continues to protect and guide the Ranch’s relationship with its natural world. A visit to the Ranch is not complete without a tour of its vibrant six-acre organic farm and a cooking class at its stellar La Cocina Que Canta. In 1977, the Szekely family, along with former General Manager Jose’ Manuel Jasso, created Fundacion La Puerta, the Ranch’s non-profit community-action foundation. Over the years, the Foundation has actively supported environmental, social, and educational projects in the Tecate and border area. The legacy and mission of the Ranch remains the same after 80 years—to inspire leadership, the pursuit of health, and planetary wellbeing in its guests, employees, and surrounding community.

On Spa Therapies



“All therapies come back to the basic source of water, earth, and plants, and are constantly evolving from those basic ingredients,” affirms Deborah. “At the Ranch we had an **HERBAL WRAP** room before we had indoor toilets. The first bathhouse with running water went into the herbal wrap building. We didn’t have much money, but we bought pure linen from Poland, because if you used muslin it would fall apart. We bought by the bulk from Poland and steeped the sheets in boiling water with herbs. Then we’d strain out the herbs, and be left with this blackish-brown water, sort of bubbling away with the linens. We had to use insulated gloves like firemen use to take them out. You get good at wringing them. Then we’d lay them on the bed and wrap people like a mummy for twenty to thirty minutes.”

“To me, the word ‘Spa’ is all-inclusive, it implies health and healing, not one modality but everything that is needed to bring about ease and wellness. I believe that is what people have in mind when going to a Spa, whether it is the massage Spa around the corner, or one of America’s great Destination Spas,” Deborah shared with me. “A spa must consider itself a leader, a teacher, a mentor, a counselor, and a hand-holder. People come for different reasons, but essentially, they’re looking for a respite . . . and for many, many people, a new way of life.”

The Ranch 2.0



“Ranch 2.0 is a vibrant place, and is the Ranch as you knew it—amazing food, amazing hikes, amazing classes, and presenters engaged with happy dedicated staff—but with a new reality, ” says Herve’ Blondel, General Manager. “We want our guests, our ‘family,’ to know that we are here and we care for them and that we will carry on. No matter what it takes, we will do it the Ranch way ‘Always Better.’

“I believe that the Wellness component will take the lead in tomorrow’s world. It may be easy to say and speak about it after eighty years of practice, but we still learn every day. We are in a world of constant change and evolution. Our role is going to be predominant, and we have to be true to ourselves and believe in the changes we are bringing, and teach people around us. This is not always about making money but about helping and making things right. It is a lifestyle, let’s make it the lifestyle of tomorrow and build communities around the world.”

Editor’s Note: As of this writing, [RANCHO LA PUERTA](#) is currently closed until it receives guidance of safe travel from the US and Mexico administrations. But you can still learn from their experts; for inspirational videos from Deborah Szekely and Barry Shingle, click [HERE](#) .