

A close-up portrait of Jennifer Lopez with long, wavy brown hair, wearing a large, star-shaped earring and a strapless, sequined top. She is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile, her hand resting on her forehead. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene with green foliage and pink flowers.

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**JENNIFER
LOPEZ**



RANCHO LA PUERTA: DESTINATION SPA

GODMOTHER OF WELLNESS: DEBORAH SZEKELY

By R. Couri Hay



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Deborah Szekely, founder of Rancho la Puerta



MOTHER OF THE MODERN SPA MOVEMENT

Deborah Szekely, 99 years young, is known as “the Mother of the Modern Spa Movement.” She and her husband, Edmond Bordeaux Szekely, founded Rancho la Puerta, North America’s first wellness spa, in 1940. In the ensuing 81 years, Rancho’s team has continually adapted the resort’s offerings to suit modern tastes, and today it remains one of the world’s top spa destinations. Fans include Kate Winslet, Madonna, Governor Jerry Brown, Claudia Schiffer, Arianna Huffington, and Judge Judy.

RESIDENCES

AT RANCHO LA PUERTA

The latest innovation could not be timelier. The Residences at Rancho la Puerta, a planned village of 108 private homes set amid the resort’s 4,000 pristine acres in Tecate, Mexico, is only an hour from San Diego. Sited beside a vineyard and a pond, boasting spectacular mountain views, the village will be separate from the ranch, yet connected, with access to the ranch’s extensive wellness amenities. Deborah is thrilled to bring private residences to the property. “People have asked for years and years, saying that they would like to retire here,” she says, “and their community will consist of people with common goals and common thoughts coming together.”

INTEGRATIVE HEALTH AND MEDICINE CENTER

The Residences will also have a state-of-the-art Integrative Health and Medicine Center specializing in personalized, predictive, and proactive interventions to prevent and treat chronic disease. This holistic model not only gets to the underlying cause of health issues, but also uses a functional and natural medical approach for personalized treatment protocols. Each offering blends the best of Western medicine with the wisdom of all-global healing traditions. Planned treatments will include stem-cell therapies, personalized IV nutrients, high-dose vitamin C infusions, mistletoe therapy, and more.

New Residences



THE SPA EXPERIENCE

Rancho, as insiders call it, began as a rustic wellness retreat: \$17.50 a week and bring your own tent. The full spa experience includes a plethora of exercise classes: Pilates, stretch, tai chi, and aerial yoga to name a few. Massages, reflexology, water therapy, facials, manicures, and pedicures are newer amenities at Rancho. “We never offered massage until I started [California spa] the Golden Door, 18 years after the first guests arrived at Rancho la Puerta,” says Deborah. One of the first treatments during the spa’s early days was an herbal wrap, created out of necessity. “Without it many of the guests, because they never exercised at home, were so stiff they literally crawled out of their beds after their first day of hiking and exercise,” Deborah says, laughing. “Herbal wraps were the answer. The heat relaxed the muscles.”

HAPPIER AND MORE ENERGETIC

Later, the Szekelys hired experts to begin programs in skin-care, and they were an immediate hit at Rancho. “Guests worked hard all day, and they looked forward to having the soothing attention of facials and massages.” Today, the spa has health centers for both women and men, and Deborah says they are as important a part of each guest’s stay as the hikes, exercise classes, cooking school, and other programs. “We emphasize balance,” she says. “Long ago I said it never has been enough that my spas simply make you better looking. I believe people can be happier and more energetic, and altogether more fulfilled human beings.” The number of spa treatments offered has quadrupled over the past decade, and there is an experienced staff of 75, many of them long-term employees.

FOUR-TIER HEALING PROCESS

Cleansing spa treatments comprise four types — cleansing, restoring, relaxing, and energizing. Cleansing rids the body of toxins, and treatments include a detox massage and the original herbal wrap, Rancho’s signature treatment that purifies and eliminates toxins. Fresh plants and herbs like eucalyptus, rosemary, or sage grown in the organic garden, or that grow wild in the nearby mountains, are used in treatments. The 30-minute wrap is often combined with a 20-minute massage, which opens up pores and allows moisturizers to penetrate skin. Rancho’s experts employ a method of cupping with plastic suction cups instead of glass, which don’t leave those horrid red marks on your skin.

Restoring might include a rosemary-loofah-salt glow, which starts with a loofah glove that helps remove dead skin cells, followed by a scrub and shower, and ending with a massage. This treatment will renew your skin, making it feel silky smooth.

Relaxing involves treatments like a head-to-toe massage with warmed candle oil in your choice of luxurious fragrances.

Energizing entails healing therapies that activate and strengthen, like reflexology on hands and feet; energy balancing, a special massage using figure-eight movements to open up chakras throughout the body, followed by the scent of fragrant herbs to relieve stress; craniosacral therapy, acupuncture, and reiki. The result is to remove energy blocks, allowing healing energy to flow and harmonize your whole body.



Residence Living Room

SPA AND FITNESS CONCIERGES

Rancho la Puerta's spa offers over 55 treatments, and choosing among so many options may seem overwhelming, but stay calm. There are concierges and other experts on staff to help you figure out what works for you. You are free to consult with experts, ask questions, and revise your program at any time during your visit. What you do on any day at Rancho is entirely up to you, but most guests enjoy a morning hike followed by breakfast, and then perhaps a meditation class or a visit to the gym. And you decide when to incorporate spa treatments throughout your day. Some people prefer to take a few classes in the morning, followed by a spa treatment, and then relax for the rest of the afternoon.

And while many guests want to exercise, no one needs to be huffing and puffing at Rancho la Puerta, unless they want to. You may simply choose to relax and be pampered. A popular choice for both women and men is the moisturizing treatment for the scalp and hair.

VISIBLE RESULTS IN ONE WEEK

You can actually see results after a week at Rancho. At the end of the visit your skin will look different — healthy and glowing because of the nourishing diet from the organic farm, healing body treatments, and exercise routines.



Garden Path

HEAVENLY VILLAS

Rancho accommodations include several *villas cielo* or "heavenly villas," secluded private residences that offer a den that can be converted into a private gym or an office, with Wi-Fi. You can also receive private spa treatments in your villa.

Residence Bedroom



These villas were added in recent years as a bow to the modern world for guests who are unable to completely unplug from daily life for a week. At a villa, you get the full resort experience, but you can also work as much as needed.

NATURAL ORGANIC DINING

Food is an important part of the spa experience. From the beginning in 1940, Rancho la Puerta was ahead of its time, growing its food on the resort's organic farm and grapes in its vineyard. The rest is sourced from local farmers and fishermen — perhaps the original farm-to-table venue. Over eight decades, the resort has developed hundreds of recipes through extensive experimentation and dietary research, resulting in a superb all-natural menu.

CHEF REYNA VENEGAS

The executive chef, Reyna Venegas, was raised in Baja, California, and at the beginning of her career she worked as a hostess at Rancho's dining hall. She later traveled to Lyon, France, to intern at a two-Michelin-star restaurant under the chef Philippe Gauvreau, and after graduating from the Culinary Art School in Tijuana, she earned a scholarship and was a pastry major in Monte Carlo. Venegas honed her skills at acclaimed restaurants and eventually came full circle, back to



Salad and fruit bar

Rancho la Puerta where she combines French techniques with local ingredients for delicious, healthy meals.

COOKING CLASSES AT LA COCINA QUE CANTA

Cooking classes are offered at La Cocina que Canta — “the kitchen that sings” — which is set in the resort's six-acre organic garden. Venegas teaches classes, as do world-renowned visiting chefs and cookbook authors who regularly come to offer lessons. The “singing kitchen” is a reference to the sen-

The Singing Kitchen



sory experience — aromas, colors, and sounds as well as the energy of a lively group of people cooking together with just-picked ingredients. It all comes together in an explosion of taste: You dine on the meal you have just created.

STATE OF MIND: HEALTHY WAY OF LIFE

Dubbed the “Godmother of Wellness” by the media, Deborah calls herself a health nut. “To me, that’s a favorable term,” says the nearly 100-year-old wellness warrior. The most important key to leading a healthy life, Deborah believes, is a person’s state of mind. “It’s more than just positivity; people should enjoy what they do,” she says. “Whatever they work at should be a joy or pleasure, not work,” Deborah says. “Delight in the little things in nature and life. I think it’s hard to be truly healthy without that. I think the psychological aspects are very important, and that’s why the ranch is so successful. There’s a spirit here and that spirit is so important.” These are the basic tenets with which she started Rancho la Puerta in the forties, and they continue even though the resort has evolved from a barebones summer camp to a full-fledged luxury spa resort with every conceivable amenity.

WORLD WAR II SUMMER CAMP TO LUXURY SPA

The original no-frills camp had its origins in World War II, when Deborah and Edmond, a native of Hungary, were living in southern California. Because he refused to return to Europe to serve in the military, an order was issued for his arrest as a



Aerial Yoga

deserter. “We got a letter from U.S. Immigration and Naturalization saying that if he was found in our country on June 1, 1940, he would be arrested and shipped back to his country. So, we went to Mexico.” Her husband, a renowned scholar, had planned to teach a summer-school session in Oslo. “We knew we would have to hold the summer school because we were counting on the money from the students, and they had already signed up. So, we just wrote them and said the summer school instead of being in Oslo is going to be in Tecate. And we had to make it cheap because they had to bring their tents.”

Main Pool



HOLLYWOOD ELITE

What they started as a summer health camp was so successful that several participants wanted to come back and spend the winter because of the perfect weather. Soon, Rancho La Puerta became popular with Hollywood stars.

The Szekelys rented the land for many years before buying some, and gradually added more and more. “We acquired a lot of land because little old ladies would come and say, ‘My daughter married and lives in Los Angeles and we want to move there, won’t you buy our land?’” says Deborah. Although the locals originally thought the spa folks were somewhat odd, eventually several young women in town sought jobs at the ranch, and today the resort is one of Tecate’s largest employers. “So naturally we contribute to the community,” Szekely says. A few years ago, when a serious fire destroyed over 100 houses in town, they reached out to spa guests and raised over \$100,000 within a week. They help to educate Tecate’s children on the environment and sustainability and offer summer classes at the resort’s organic garden. They built the first public park in Tecate and bought the town’s first school bus. The children had to walk to school and often skipped classes when the weather was inclement. Deborah decided to buy a bus to bring her workers to work in the mornings, and on the way, it also picks up the kids and takes them to school. “It’s been sort of a double blessing,” she laughs. “The ranch has a very long, blessed history,” she says, “and I really do believe that doing good is rewarding, and we’ve been beautifully rewarded.”

MEANT TO BE HERE

“I had no dreams for the ranch,” Deborah says, adding that once the war ended, they expected to move to England. “We had no intention of staying. So — and I say this all the time — we were meant to be here. It was nothing that we planned, created, plotted, none of that.” Local lore asserts that Kuuchamaa, the mountain that overlooks Rancho, is spiritually special. “Kuuchama was a sacred mountain to the native people for generations,” she says. “And I do believe that the mountain has had a great influence on us. And you can believe, take it or leave it. I took it and kept it.” Today, Deborah’s husband is buried

on the mountain, as is her late son, Alexander. “That’s their home,” she says firmly. “We have a family cemetery. I’ll be buried there too eventually. No rush.”

SARAH LIVIA SZEKELY BRIGHTWOOD

Deborah’s daughter, the landscape architect Sarah Livia Szekely Brightwood who created Rancho’s world-class gardens, now runs the resort full time. But her mother is still at the resort at least once a week. She says her daughter is doing a terrific job. “Sarah is gifted, and I think in some ways it reflects her personality,” says Deborah. “She is very spiritual. She’s very musical. She’s an artist, and I think most of the classes reflect more of her.”

A PARADISE

But there are forces at work beyond human endeavor, she insists. “I know that we’re here because we were meant to be here. I believe that. And the reason it’s so successful is that we’re on the path that we’re supposed to be on.” Recently, Deborah roamed around the entire property, into every nook and cranny. “If you were trying to describe paradise, honestly I don’t think it could be much lovelier than Rancho La Puerta.”

Rancho La Puerta
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