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Nearing 100, Deborah Szekely Is Still The Mother Of Wellness



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Travel

I cover adventure, luxury and family travel.



In 1940, Deborah Szekely founded Rancho La Puerta in Tecate, Baja California, Mexico. RANCHO LA PUERTA

In honor of women's history month, we talked to Deborah Szekely a true pioneer of the balanced body, mind, spirit fitness movement. Szekely is the Brooklyn-born daughter of immigrant parents. Her father was in the garment business, her mother a nurse and vice-president of a New York vegetarian society. To escape the Depression, the family moved to Tahiti in 1930 where they lived until 1935. In 1940, she and her husband, the late Edmond Szekely founded [Rancho La Puerta](#) in Tecate, Baja California, Mexico. The family-owned fitness resort has since received hundreds of accolades and awards over its 82 years of operation and is considered by many to be one of the top destination spas in the world. Today Deborah, still active at age 99, lectures weekly at Rancho La Puerta on the principles of living a longer, healthier life.



Szekely advises people to spend 10 minutes each day feeling blessed and grateful for all the gifts ... [+] RANCHO LA PUERTA

What inspired you to open Rancho La Puerta?

Necessity. We wanted to eat. My husband had planned to open a summer health camp in Elsinore, California, but his Romanian visa expired and he knew that if he was found in the U.S. he would be returned to Europe. We moved to Mexico in June 1940 with very little money. Loyal guests who had planned to join us in Elsinore changed their plans and happily came to Mexico. We charged \$17.50 a week and asked them to bring their own tents and help with chores. There was no running water and no electricity.



The landscaping at the Ranch was designed by Sarah Livia. RANCHO LA PUERTA

What changes (at the Ranch) are you most proud of?

The landscaping designed by my daughter. I planted trees and ice plants mostly until she took over in high school, studied landscape architecture in college, and continued to transform the Ranch into an Eden ever since. She planted trees in the '60s that today are 50 feet tall.

Does The Ranch attract a primarily female clientele?

Yes, it does. Women really believe in the healthful living movement. They care about health and diet. They are strangers when they come in the door and they leave as friends. It's often easier to make new friends on a vacation than to get to know the strangers on your street. Women do love [the Ranch](#). As a rule, they like coming with their pals, but nowadays we get many single women as well.



The Ranch attracts women traveling in groups as well as solo travelers. RANCHO LA PUERTA

Your daughter Sarah Livia is currently in charge; what is that like?

It was simply natural for Sarah to take over the presidency, given her creativity and vision for keeping the Ranch a place that offers a complete body, mind, and spirit experience. I was pleased of course that Sarah Livia decided to follow in my footsteps. She brought us patience—her ability to really listen. She brought in youth. Everybody loves and respects me by habit because I've been "the co-founder" since 1940 when we started with absolutely nothing, but they love Sarah for what she has done to transform the property into a verdant paradise.



Travelers can spend three, four or seven nights at the Ranch. RANCHO LA PUERTA

Your 100th birthday is coming up. Can you share any longevity tips?

I can say probably (and only probably) that I've done the right things when it comes to food, sleep, and exercise. My good health, although my life has been uncertain and stressful many times, has been protected by my Pollyanna attitude. I just know things will work out, and they usually do. I often say, 'Do right, eat right, move right, sleep right, think right.' I try to live life the right way, and I do not worry. I do my best, and God does the rest!



Deborah Szekely RANCHO LA PUERTA

What is the most important piece of advice you've received, and how have you enacted it throughout your life?

I think I developed my own best advice. Hire only happy people. You can't make them happy; only their mothers can. If you stand on your head, you still can't make people happy. If our staff is not happy, your guests won't be happy.

If you could encourage people to do one thing every day that you believe contributes positively to one's overall wellbeing, what would it be and why?



Szekely tips for longevity: eat right, move right, sleep right, think right. RANCHO LA PUERTA

When you wake up, don't pop out of bed. Spend 10 minutes feeling blessed and grateful for all the gifts you have been given. What is the most important thing you've learned in your 100 years? Tomorrow is another day, and Pollyanna's always win in the end.



The Ranch is considered one of the best destination spas in the world. RANCHO LA PUERTA

What's next?

I'm deeply concerned about climate change and its effect on Tecate. I'm euphoric that we plan to launch a "green umbrella" tree-planting campaign on my 100th birthday—May 3 of this year. I wish for only trees. It's a gift that has no end in sight, for it will grow and grow and cool Tecate for many years to come. I hope it will be a model. We will begin by planting in schoolyards, churchyards, and parks. Little by little, we'll create a giant green umbrella for the town that has done so much for us, and provided us with the most wonderful staff members.