

# spa business

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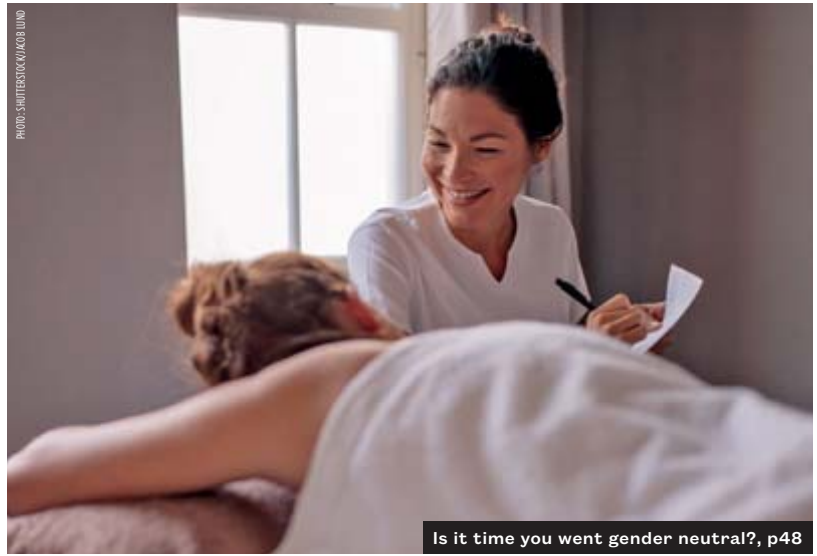
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PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK/POPEL



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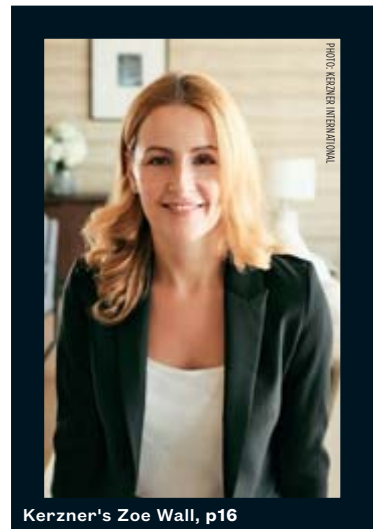
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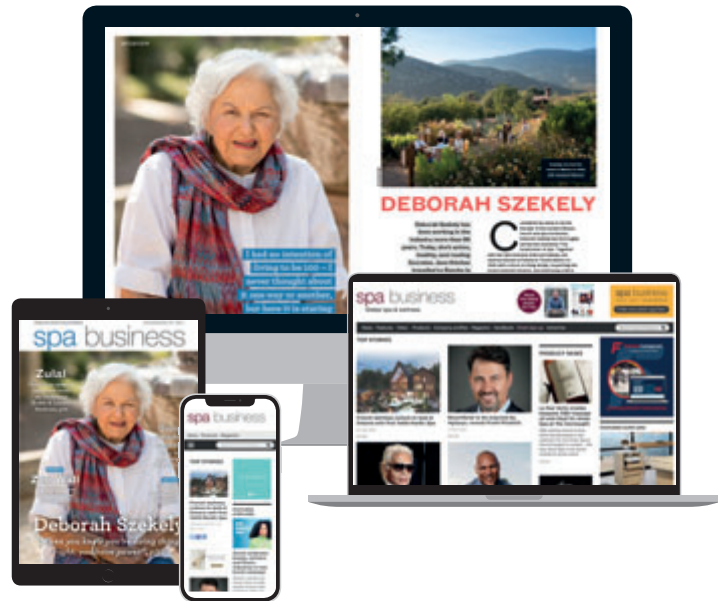
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I had no intention of living to be 100 – I never thought about it one way or another, but here it is staring me in the face

The soon-to-be-centenarian is a legend in the wellness industry

PHOTO: SANDO LA MIERA

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PHOTO: RANCHO LA PUERTA



Szekely started the ranch in Mexico in 1940, with husband Edmond

# DEBORAH SZEKELY

Deborah Szekely has been working in the industry for more than 80 years. Today, she's active, healthy, and reading Socrates. Jane Kitchen travelled to Rancho la Puerta in Mexico to talk about the industry, the power of nature and plans for her 100th birthday

Considered by many to be the founder of the modern fitness resort and spa movement, Deborah Szekely has thoroughly earned the nickname 'The Godmother of Spa'. Together with her late husband, Edmond Szekely, she started Rancho la Puerta in Tecate Mexico in 1940 with a focus on living simply, respecting the body's inherent wisdom, and embracing a life in nature – principles that still guide the resort today.

While Rancho la Puerta has come a long way since its start – when guests brought their own tents and paid US\$17.50 (£13.30, €15.80) a week – its motto of 'Siempre Mejor!' ('Always Better!') has helped it grow and change with the times while remaining true to its original mission of helping people live a healthier life in both body and mind.

Szekely will celebrate her 100th birthday on 3 May this year; she still travels from her home in San Diego to Rancho la Puerta once a week, where she holds a special evening talking to guests, regaling them with stories and answering questions.

Her status among guests – most of whom have visited numerous times – borders on celebrity. I sat down with Deborah on the sun-dappled

## Nature gives you faith – it's very hard to have dark thoughts when you're surrounded by trees



PHOTO: RANCHO LA PUERTA

► terrace of the Ranch's restaurant for a late breakfast, and we paused our conversation numerous times as guests snuck in a quick hello, or wanted to ask a question or recommend a book or just be briefly in her presence.

In our own industry, she is a legend, and we celebrate her as an embodiment of all we stand for: a life lived well, in good health in body, mind and spirit. As she approaches her centenary in excellent health, she is still sharing with others, finding joy in nature, and doing her best to make the world a better place for the next generation.

It was my honour to sit down with Deborah in the shade of trees she planted 80 years ago and discuss the industry, the democratisation of wellness, and plans for her birthday celebrations.

### How can the industry realise its true potential?

I believe that for the spa industry to go outward, we first have to go inward. Staff have to be given time for massages and exercise classes for themselves, so they know what they're talking about, and they can really be examples.

We have a whole wellness programme for all our employees that includes a doctor, family counsellor, psychologist, and nutritionist and all our staff are able to take treatments. All our employees also bring their kids to work every year so they see where their parents work and they understand. Being involved with the staff so the staff feels loyalty is key. In our case, we have those whose grandmothers worked for Rancho la Puerta, so they're not just people who come for a paycheck.

Part of the place's magic is the sense of community among guests, but you also feel it from staff members – they feel like part of the family, they're proud of their work and happy to be here. If you build that sense with the community and the staff first, then it will spill over into how guests interact and how they feel when they stay with you.

Spas also need to reach out to become part of the community, which is another way to focus first inwards, then outwards. You need to think from the ground up, whether it's your employees or your community or the food you plant.

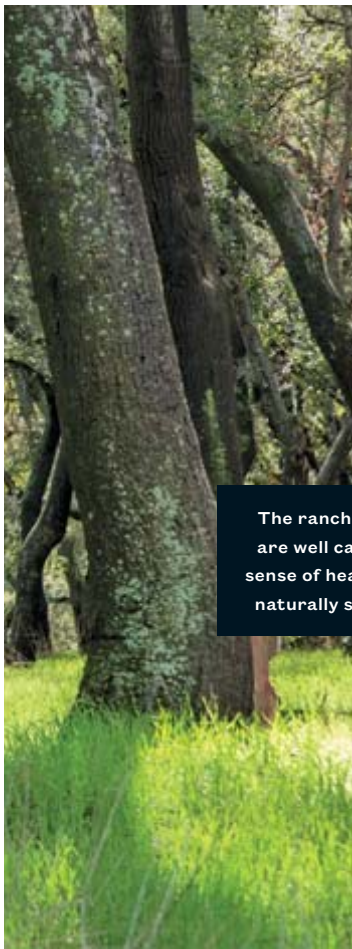
### How do you hope the industry will look in 2050?

I hope they'll be out of business because everybody is living the right way! I hope spas will work better together, support one another, train each other's staff, and share new ideas. I also hope there'll be less of a separation between spa life and everyday life.

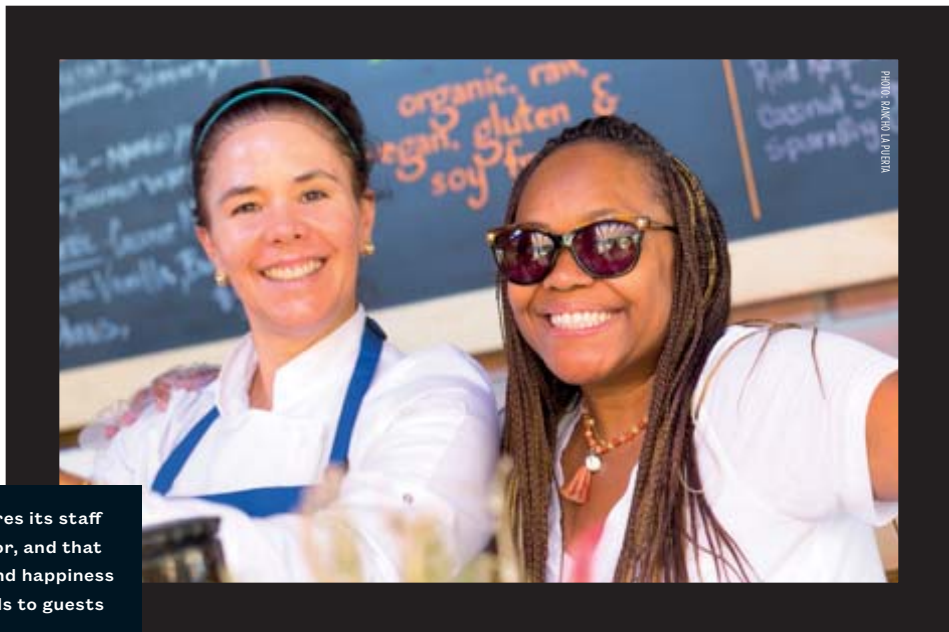
As an industry, we've gone from a focus on spa and massage, and now – especially with COVID – it's coming back around to a focus on the whole body and the mind/body experience. My husband, Edmond Szekely, was a brilliant man and ahead of his time. He was the inspiration for Rancho la Puerta and the destination spas that followed. He was talking about the mind/body connection long before anyone else.

### How can we democratise wellness?

People must develop an appetite for wellness first – they need to realise how important activity and food is to their health. We have to start in schools with



The ranch ensures its staff are well cared for, and that sense of health and happiness naturally spreads to guests



Szekely headlining at the GWS

more health and nutrition education, and work on offering healthy lunches. In the US, many kitchens in schools are gone because they were too expensive to maintain – now it’s all frozen food. Our whole culture will change when we’ve educated the next generation about wellness. Health begins in youth and pays off throughout a lifetime. I had no intention of living to be 100 – I never thought about it one way or another, but here it is staring me in the face.

Wellness starts with education. We must teach children that we humans are part of something immensely important – nature – and bring it into everyday life. People should take their kids to the park – they need the curing effects of greenery and it doesn’t cost a thing. Most cities have parks, yet we don’t see as many kids in them as we should. Nature gives you faith — it’s hard to have dark thoughts when you’re surrounded by trees.

Through the non-profit we started here – Fundación La Puerta – we teach children about ecology and environmental protection. That should be a course in every school, so children learn that we’re part of a phenomenal universe. We’re also part of a dying planet, and we have to slow and soon stop that decay because our planet is in trouble. The future is in all of our hands – it’s our responsibility and not our children’s – and we all have to be conscious of the fact that we’re building tomorrow and each of us must contribute to that.

**What do you consider your greatest achievement to date?**

My daughter. But beyond that, it’s the role I’ve had in politics. I’ve always been involved and when I was in my 60s, I ran for Congress. I didn’t make it, so I moved to Washington and

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The most important thing is for the food industry to clean up. We have a right to eat food that's good for us and not full of chemicals

The ranch fosters a sense of community, and lasting friendships are made

► ran a federal agency. I put together 12 retired Congressional chiefs of staff and we created the *Congressional Management Manual*, a 300-page book about how to run a congressional office, and nothing like it existed at the time.

Congress still uses it; it's in its 17th edition. I had the idea and I put together the people, and I'm very proud of that – it's had a real impact.

And of course I'm very proud of The Ranch, because my husband and I started it from scratch. We actually came up with the idea of the fitness spa – there was no such thing at the time. We had a mountain, fresh air, a river and a creek and guests had to bring their own tent. And we had lectures – my husband spoke every day at 4.00pm under the big tree, and everyone attended. Then we'd all have dinner later under that same tree. So the importance of the mind and the wisdom of the elders was always very important – there's so much that we can learn from them.

The Ranch has been carefully designed so there's an easy flow between the inside and the outside. I credit my daughter Sarah Livia with the siting and architectural thoughtfulness. My husband wanted everyone to walk three miles every day, and so the buildings are all scattered.

If you want to go to the dining hall, or the gym and get a massage, you walk at least

three miles a day – much more if you take one of our hikes. The people who come regularly exercise at home and watch what they eat. Yet they – and the very few other people who don't exercise – are still impacted by their stay, while the percentage who return is tremendous.

**You're building residences at the ranch now**

Yes, and with one exception, the people who've bought a residence are former guests. Many would like to retire and so they buy them as future retirement homes. And they know that they'll live in a community of like-minded people and they'll support one another, and the attraction will be nature – we happen to be enormously fortunate when it comes to nature.

**Is there anything you still hope to accomplish?**

At my age, no. But I still contribute through the Center for Science and Public Interest. The most important thing is for the food industry to clean up. We have a right to eat food that's good for us and not full of chemicals.

The cumulative effect of smidgens of this and smidgens of that makes a lot of smidgens. Everyone has hundreds of chemicals in their body that accumulate over time. We're in a constant battle between common-sense



PHOTO: RANCHO LA PUERTA



PHOTO: RANCHO LA PUERTA

Deborah with daughter, Sarah-Livia Szekely Brightwood, president of Rancho la Puerta (above); Everyday life at the Ranch (below)

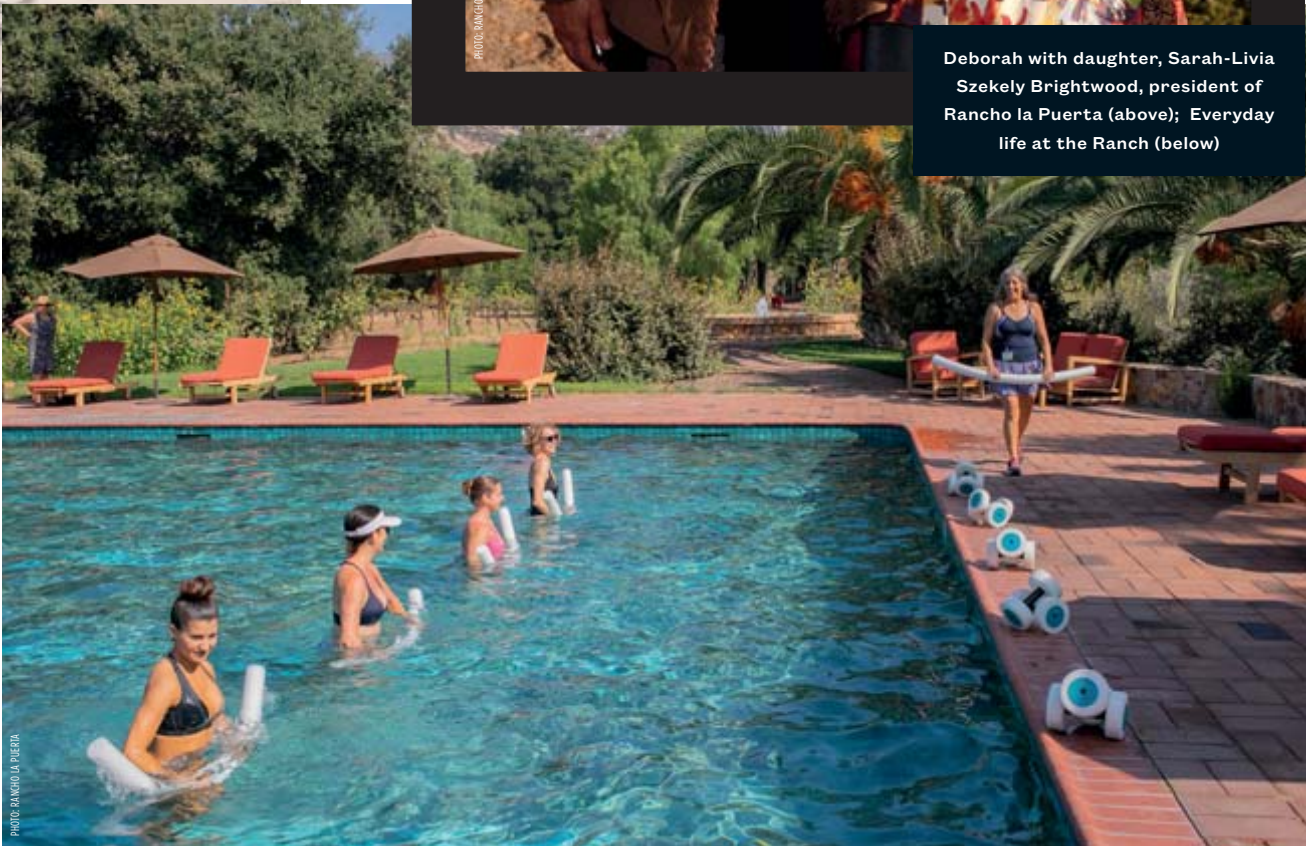


PHOTO: RANCHO LA PUERTA

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Rest and recovery are an essential part of the Rancho la Puerta philosophy

► practices that protect people, and businesses that protect their profits rather than people.

There's still a lot to learn – I'm always reading something for fun and something to learn from; right now it's Socrates and he addresses so many problems we can relate to today.

#### How will you celebrate your 100th birthday?

We built a huge park for the residents of Tecate, with a soccer pitch and tree-shaded terraces, and we'll celebrate there on 1 May, which is May Day. Everyone is invited – I like to think we're celebrating their contribution to the Ranch's success, rather than my longevity. We'll have entertainment, fireworks, and chefs cooking wonderful dishes.

Anyone who wants to give me a gift has been asked to contribute to a programme we're calling 'Green Umbrella' – a fund to plant trees in Tecate's schoolyards, churchyards, and parks. The idea has its roots at the Ranch, where we've planted so many trees over our 82 years.

I look at those and wonder at how much they've grown along with the Ranch ... and my own long life. So many were planted as saplings, and now I can barely get my arms around them.

Trees help give children a love of nature, cool the town, and cleanse the air. Kids are smart

and they're building their thought processes from a young age, so their environment truly contributes to their growth into healthy, productive, happy adults. We'll make sure they have a dose of nature every day.

#### Any further words of wisdom?

Throughout my life my friends have been my most important support system. They bring out different things in me and their interests in art and music, religion and medicine enrich me.

I like to say I always pick friends who are smarter than me, better educated, and younger!

Nobody should be lonely, and we must help those that are, especially later in life. Here at the Ranch, everybody makes new and soon-to-be permanent pals and they often come back together at the same time. We change people's lives – we offer so much to learn and when you leave you don't realise how much has crept into your mind – it's like a week of college. You'll experience and learn things to think about long after you go home. And then, when that begins to fade, it's time to come back again. ●

**More reading:** Access the Spa Business interview with Deborah Szekely celebrating her 90th birthday at [www.spabusiness.com/Deborah90](http://www.spabusiness.com/Deborah90) ►

The Ranch has land holdings that ensure an unspoiled setting



PHOTO: RANDO LA PIERTA



## DEBORAH SZEKELY

*A few things I like to say....*

**‘You can’t give with a closed hand’**

*In the act of giving, you receive*

**‘Right is might’**

*When you’re doing things right and you know you’re doing things right, you have power*

**‘Do your best, God does the rest’**

*Doing your best is all you can do, and after that, have faith that the universe or something bigger than you will take care of the rest*



PHOTO: RANDO LA PIERTA

The focus is on natural living and pure ingredients

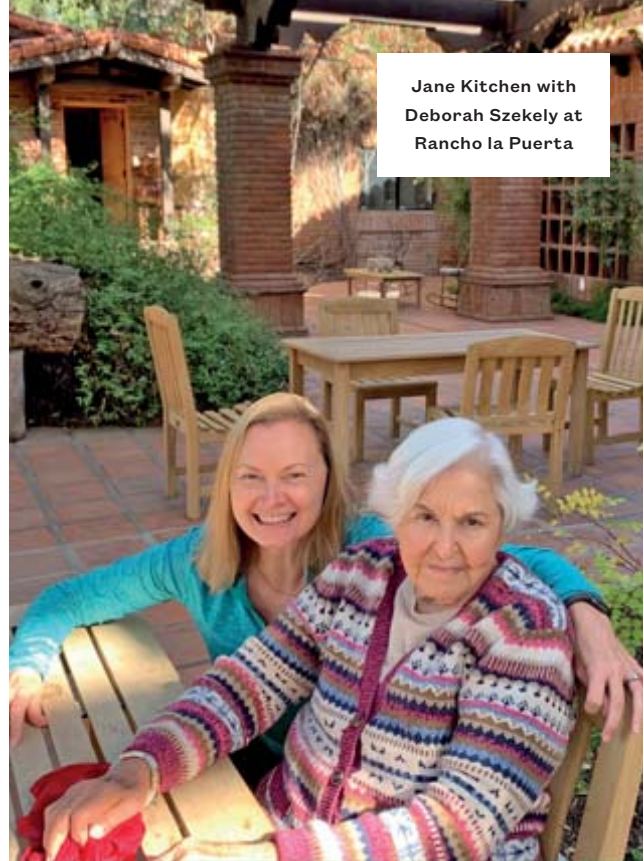


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# Siempre Mejor!

After 82 years, Rancho la Puerta is still beloved among guests around the world, who return year after year for a dose of holistic wellbeing. Jane Kitchen spent a week at the Mexican resort to discover how the spirit of 'Siempre mejor!' or 'Always better!' lives on in the 21st century



Jane Kitchen with Deborah Szekely at Rancho la Puerta

PHOTO: JANE KITCHEN

“I don't think I've ever hit my 10,000-step goal before breakfast,” my friend Caroline says on Day One of our stay at Rancho la Puerta. We were up before the sun, watching the day break as we ascended Mount Kuchumaa on a guided hike with a group of 30 other guests. Now, we're digging in to a breakfast we feel we've earned – eggs with homemade tortilla, avocado and salsa alongside bowls of mango, yogurt and bircher muesli. I feel hungry, exhausted and energised all at once.

Rancho la Puerta has been purposely laid out so even without tackling an early-morning hike, guests will get their exercise in throughout the day, walking from one of the 86 casitas to the dining hall, spa or a fitness class. Edmund Szekely, who founded the Ranch in 1940 with wife Deborah, had a simple philosophy decades ahead of its time: live simply, respect the body's inherent wisdom and embrace a life in nature. He was an early proponent of incidental exercise, and getting around on foot means Caroline and I will add at least another 10,000 steps to our day before it's done.

## FIRST-TIMERS

On our first hike, we meet Katy, a woman in her 40s from Los Angeles who's been coming to the Ranch with her mother since she was 14. She's the first of many friends we will make during our week at the Ranch, which is populated mostly by women, though a handful of men tag along. Nearly everyone comes for a Saturday to Saturday stay, and meals are served in a communal dining hall at set hours; at dinner the first night, we sit at a big table with strangers, but

we soon know each other's names and where we're from: there are two pairs of sisters, a couple of solo travellers and Caroline and me – friends of more than 20 years who live a few thousand miles apart.

Over the course of the week, we meet Steve and Holly, a vibrant Californian couple in their 80s who will hit the dance floor on the final evening; mother-daughter duo Laurel and Teal, visiting from Oregon on their second trip (though Laurel first came decades ago with her own mother); and visiting chef Joey and his wife Jaeme from San Francisco.

Almost everyone has been before – so much so that Caroline and I have nametags on our backpacks identifying us as 'first-timers'. “After a week, you'll see why people come back,” Katy tells us. “After a few months away, you'll start planning your next trip”.

Edmund Szekely had a simple philosophy: live simply, respect the body's inherent wisdom, and embrace a life in nature



### LEARNING FOR LIFE

But right now, over that first breakfast, Caroline and I are busy planning our day; the myriad of options is a bit overwhelming; in addition to the hikes, more than 50 fitness classes are offered – obvious things such as yoga, Pilates, and strength training, but also more specialised lessons in Gyrokinesis or Feldenkrais. Add to that art lessons, lectures, cooking classes, bird watching, history tours, sound healing and a wide range of aquatic and racquet offerings (it was Pickleball week during our stay) and we began to worry a week wasn't long enough. But it's thrilling, plotting schedules – a little like choosing your first university classes and thinking about all you'll learn. We try to find a mix of doing and being, and by day three we seem to have it down.

We try things we've never tried before (Gyrokinesis) and new takes on things we have (deep water aerobics), and if the key to longevity is to continue to make new neural connections, then Rancho la Puerta is the fountain of youth. We start each day with a guided hike at 6am among the 4,000 acres of the resort – the Professor's Hike, the Pilgrim, Alex's Oak, names that reflect the Szekely family's lasting imprint on the land – and we pass boulders of magnificent forms, horses roaming wild on the mountains and scale heights where we can see as far away as the partially built border wall, and down into the dusty valley to the nearby city of Tecate.

Jane Kitchen with friends new and old at Rancho la Puerta for *Spa Business* magazine

But we soon discover it's also important to schedule down time. Sitting by the pool, lounging beneath the unbelievable boughs of decades-old oaks in colourful hammocks, reading in the silence of our private terrace, taking time for a spa treatment, or enjoying a glass of wine at the Bazaar del Sol are all equally beneficial to our wellbeing – especially for two busy moms who normally only see each other once a year – and Rancho la Puerta's thoughtful landscaping, designed by Rancho La Puerta president, Sarah-Livia Szekely Brightwood – a trained landscape architect – is filled with hidden nooks for quiet and contemplation. Caroline and I take time to slow down and connect, sometimes trying activities together, but just as often, going our own way and meeting up for lunch or dinner. I can see why this framework is ideal for mother-daughter and sister combos, and start thinking about bringing my own daughter when she's old enough.

### MINDFUL EATING

With seven days and evenings to catch up without the distraction of husbands or kids, we feel we can spare one night to try something called the silent dinner – which is exactly as it sounds. We're not sure what to expect – the idea of eating a

## FIRST PERSON

PHOTO: JANE MITCHEN

Caroline harvesting at the Ranch's organic farm

- ▶ four-course meal in complete silence sitting across from strangers sounds both horrifying and challenging, and like nothing we've ever done before, which is why we sign up.

The dinner takes place in a private dining room away from the rest of the guests and about twelve of us gather around a large round table, where our host, Hazel – one of the Ranch's yoga instructors – gives us tips and instructions. The idea is to slow down and eat mindfully, she says, and perhaps to give thought to all that had to take place for the food to be served to us: the rich earth that grew the vegetables, the farmers who harvest the crops, the chefs who plan the meal and cook the food, the servers who bring it to us, the dishwashers who clean our plates.

Really take the time to notice how the food looks and smells before we put it in our mouths, we're told, and then chew slowly, noticing not just the taste, but the texture, so we're using as many senses as possible. We've been given a sprig of rosemary, which we bend one way to indicate to our waiter whether we want the vegetarian or the fish option for the main dish, and those with special dietary requirements are also given silent indicators. Hazel rings a small chime, and the silence begins.

It's easy at first, then unnerving. Caroline confides later that she found it hard not to laugh. I smile at the waiter as he brings and clears each dish, fighting the urge to say 'thank you' and attempting to communicate my gratitude with eye contact instead. The circular table means we're looking across at everyone, watching as

these strangers silently eat and mindfully taste their food. Many close their eyes (Hazel has told us this might help us to focus on the food), but I find myself looking into the faces of these strangers instead. At the end of the meal, which takes around two hours, Hazel again rings the chime, and invites us to share our experience with the group.

Many say the food tasted richer and more flavourful; one shared how the experience had him reflecting on meals where he'd come together with family to celebrate. For me, it was about connection – yes, the conscious connection to the food and the earth it grew from, but somehow, over a meal where nothing was said, I felt a deep connection to these people with whom I had not shared a word, but with whom I'd shared an experience.

### **CHANGE, GROWTH, CONNECTION**

It's that idea of connection that keeps coming back to me over my week at Rancho la Puerta; the time to reconnect properly with an old friend, the space to connect with myself, the magnificent setting in which to connect with the natural world, and the shared experiences that connected me to new-found friends.

Many have likened Rancho la Puerta to summer camp for adults, which might only make



La Cocina Que Canta cookery school sits in the heart of the organic farm

PHOTO: RANCHO LA PUERTA

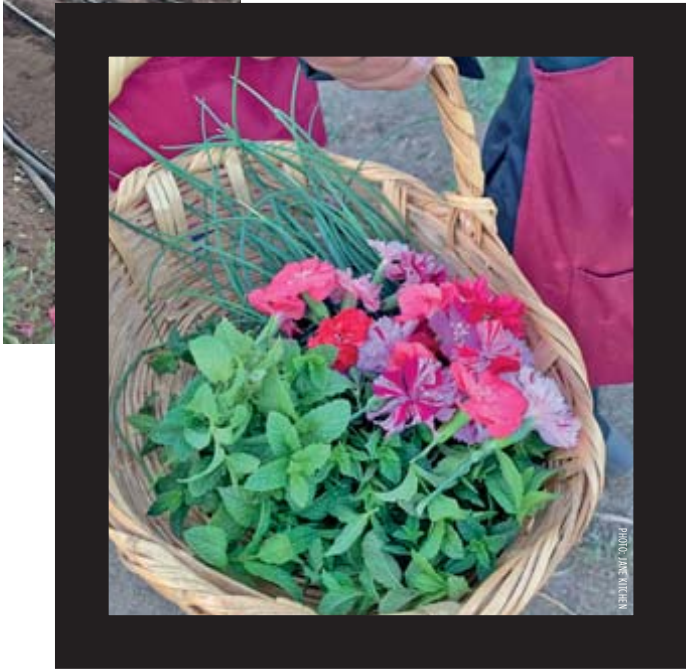


PHOTO: JANE BURNETT

If the key to longevity is to continue to make new neural connections, then Rancho la Puerta is the fountain of youth

surprising to hear her reflect on so many of these ideas: the importance of the natural world, the value of continued learning for mental wellness, and the fact that myriad friendships have been a key to her long and healthy life. The Ranch's motto, a favourite greeting of Edmund Szekely, is 'Siempre Mejor!' or 'Always better!', and reflects this idea of continued growth – mentally, physically, intellectually and spiritually – throughout life, no matter what your age.

The final night – the one where Steve and Holly tear up the dance floor – is a celebration; there's a live band, wine with dinner and hugs and phone numbers shared, photos taken and promises made to come back at the same time next year. Everyone lingers over their meal, not wanting the magic to end.

Caroline and I pack the next morning and wheel our bags to the reception at the front of the Ranch, where we've barely passed by since our arrival. Our suitcases stand ready for the bus that will take us to the border, and suddenly, it arrives, and a fresh round of guests disembarks, most smiling and exclaiming how good it is to be back, but with a few looking wide-eyed and hesitant, not quite sure where to go. "Was that us just a week ago?" I ask Caroline. It was. And I think Katy was right: this place changes you, and I get it now. I can't wait to come back. ●

More: [www.rancholapuerta.com](http://www.rancholapuerta.com)

sense if you're American, and grew up in a certain demographic where you were sent away for a week or two in the heat of the summer to sleep in dorm-like cabins filled with bunk beds and where, in the course of a week, you could come back a changed person, with new friends, having experienced your first taste of something like independence.

We're all of us years (mostly decades) into our own independence, but the summer-camp spirit that's rekindled is one of change and growth and connection. The idea that spending time in nature grounds us in a way that we often miss in daily life, that taking on new challenges is both hard work and rewarding and that making new friends is one of life's richest rewards.

When I sit down to interview Deborah Szekely, who will shortly celebrate her 100th birthday, it's not

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