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FALL 2022



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RANCHO LA PUERTA: FINDING WELLNESS IN THE MEXICAN DESERT

A weeklong stay at this spa retreat provides the ideal setting for a memorable—and transformative experience

By Diana Ballon



I'm floating face up in a 36-degree Celsius heated pool as Watsu practitioner Ben Coolik supports the back of my head—at times cradling me, stretching my body and even gently dipping my head in and over the water's surface. As he does, I feel like I am swirling and diving through the water like a dolphin, with colours of yellow and red appearing over my closed eyelids.

This whole experience, of what is termed Watsu or Water Flow Therapy, is deeply and surprisingly relaxing. I have put my total trust in Ben, and in this process, which is strangely liberating given that I tend to be a control freak!

All this is transpiring at Rancho La Puerta, an internationally renowned wellness resort and spa in Tecate, Mexico on 4,000 acres just across the

border from San Diego. I had heard that celebrities like Oprah Winfrey, Kate Winslet, Claudia Schiffer and Jane Fonda had come as guests here, so I knew this place would be special. What I hadn't realized, was that my week-long experience at the Ranch would feel as transformative as it did, especially in a place so luxurious in its offerings, but entirely without pretension.

While at the Ranch, my husband and I lived in a pretty 1,000-square foot casita with wood-beam ceilings, an expansive bedroom and living area with fireplace, a colourfully-tiled bathroom and a private patio overlooking the sacred Mount Kuchumaa.





We quickly moved into a routine for our days, which began with one of several guided hikes around 6 a.m. before the thick heat of the day. This was followed by a series of wellness activities—broken up by delicious, mostly lacto-ovo-pescetarian meals with produce from their gardens. All activities were optional, so there were hours when we took a break to sit by one of their several pools, or—as evening approached—to sample local wines from the Guadalupe Valley on an outdoor patio of their Bazar del Sol, as the bright sun softened and the air cooled. But mostly, a printout of the day’s schedule, with our choices highlighted—and then sometimes crossed out and changed as our mood shifted—was our guide for how the day would proceed.

At the Ranch, “wellness,” a fairly amorphous term, applies to all forms of well-being, not just the mind and body but the spiritual as well. Activities ranged widely, with sometimes up to six choices per hour! There were fitness classes to address the physical—everything from water-based workouts and circuit training in an air-conditioned gym, to pickleball, tennis clinics and Pilates. There were practices like yoga, meditation, sound healing and silent dinners to nurture “the inner self.” And there

were inspirational and educational talks on a range of topics. While these vary depending on the visiting experts at the Ranch that week, we enjoyed talks by registered dietitian and plant-based cookbook author Jill Nussinow on superfoods, probiotics, managing cravings and building healthy eating patterns. We also learned some new ways of relating, thanks to healthy

lifestyle coach and author Lisa Lewtan, who provided tools to nurture self-acceptance.

In addition to these talks and activities, we tried things I had never had the opportunity to experience at home, like sound healing, which my husband and I jokingly referred to as “nap time” because it’s so relaxing that most people, including us, fall asleep. During the sound healing, which



took place in their beautiful Oak Tree Pavilion, you lie on mats on the floor while someone strikes crystal bowls emitting sounds and vibrations through the room that are purported to be great for your immune system—and they definitely make you relax. We were clearly hooked.

Other firsts for me included a session on drumming, and for my husband, a class on Feldenkrais. We also learned a lot about healthy cooking thanks to our hands-on cooking class with visiting chef Ramses Bravo (of TrueNorth Health Center), which took place at La Cocina Que Canta, the Ranch’s cooking school and culinary centre. Now back in Toronto for several weeks, we continue to drink Kefir with cinnamon every morning, are experimenting with antioxidant and green drinks and—to reduce sugar cravings, plan to try cold sweet potatoes with maple syrup for dessert. Much appreciation to Jill for that great tip!

Since I’ve been home, I admit to sometimes struggling to hold onto the great sense of wellbeing I got “back at the Ranch.” But I can tell you that spending a week at Rancho La Puerta was one of the best holidays in my life—for the quality time I had there with my partner, for the great activities, for the healthy and delicious food—and for the peaceful setting and kind people I met while I was there.

