



Seeking a Taste of Paradise Across the Border? Here's a restorative spot just for you.

By [Diana Ballon](#)



Rancho La Puerta

I'm drifting in and out of sleep as I lie on a blanket on the floor. A soft light is casting muted colors of yellow and orange over my eyelids as vibrations from a woman playing crystal bowls reverberates through the octagonal-shaped pavilion. This is a Sound Healing class at Rancho la Puerta, a fitness and spa retreat in Tecate, Mexico, across the border from San Diego.

Sound healing is just one of a myriad wellness activities scheduled almost every hour, with sometimes up to six choices at a time. The place is like summer camp for adults, where you fall asleep at night, exhausted after hours of fun and physical activity, and are eager to start all over the next day — and where you make new friends along the way.

Some 60 percent of its guests are return visitors, and 80 percent are women, as the place is perfect for a girlfriend getaway.

The ranch's cofounder, Deborah Szekely, 100 years old, is a model of good health herself.

To a packed audience, she describes the place where she welcomed guests back in 1940, for as little as \$17.50 a week if they could pitch a tent. By the 1950s, the ranch was recognized worldwide as an originator of the modern fitness and spa resort.

At the retreat, activities begin at 6 a.m., with the option of choosing from several hikes starting in the cool dawn. As the day warms, guests can choose from a restorative roster that includes circuit training, Pilates reformer classes and aerial yoga in air-conditioned buildings around the property. Aquatic sports classes are also offered in several pools, along with tennis and pickleball on outdoor courts.

The ranch also hosts highly acclaimed speakers for inspirational talks on everything from nutrition to culture, psychology and science. While topics change each week, during my visit we learned about probiotics, superfoods and managing cravings, thanks to registered dietitian and plant-based cookbook author Jill Nussinow. I also got some great tips on decluttering from personal organizer Amy Carstensen.

Located on 4,000 acres in the desert, the Rancho la Puerta includes 40 miles of hiking trails, lined with flowering cacti, massive aloe vera with long dramatic spikes and other desert plants. Every day, the sky remained steadfastly blue. In Tecate, the summers are hot, arid and mostly clear, and the winters are chilly, dipping to 40 degrees, with intermittent clouds.

On this July day, the dry heat of the desert forms a comforting envelope over me. And the spiritual presence of Mount Kuchumaa looms large and impressive in the distance.

Before going, I was wary about what to expect — as was my husband, who accompanies me to the spa, works out on a spin bike in the basement and never goes to a gym. He was nervous about the idea of workout classes, though he found plenty of new fitness and enlightening paths to pursue, from taking a drumming workshop to yoga classes.

We slept in one of the 86 casitas (small houses) tucked away a distance from our neighbors, so that the landscape (rather than other guests) is our morning view. Our little Mexican home has an outdoor patio overlooking the mountains, a wood-beamed ceiling, an open-concept bedroom and living room, a colorful tile bathroom and a fireplace.

One morning, we hiked to the ranch's organic farm for breakfast, also the site of the cooking school, La Cocina Que Canta (The Kitchen That Sings), where guest chefs like Caroline Chambers and Beverly Gannon teach culinary classes.

Dinners are served, while breakfast and lunch are buffet-style, with multiple stations that include antioxidant drinks and green juices; a salsa bar; nuts, seeds and fresh herbs; and elaborate salads and soups. Entrées range from cauliflower tacos to sweet potato pancakes and squash risotto — all with minimal fat, salt or refined flour and sugar.

Spa treatments are also first class. My Watsu treatment, or “water flow therapy,” was so relaxing that it may have been even more enjoyable than a massage.

At the beginning of the week, we were encouraged to set our intentions for our stay and then, on the last day, to consider “How to live your ranch experience at home.” As someone who’s used to being compulsively busy and active, “stillness” is not a state that comes easily to me.

Though, through the course of the week, I learned ways to calm my mind. And, as spa director Arturo Aguilar recommended in my wellness consult, to show gratitude to my knee — which I had broken, and then had surgery on — for the healing that has been happening.

He encouraged me to accept and appreciate my efforts to recover, rather than having contempt for my “aging body” letting me down. I suspect that I am not alone in using my ranch time to cast off some inner demons. As Arturo told me, many people who consult with him are coping with depression or grief or are detoxing “gut, mind and body.”

Now back home, I am working hard to sustain the feelings of well-being and ease that I felt while I was away. What I do know is that wellness comes in baby steps. I have committed to doing a daily yoga practice. And I am trying not to get so angry at myself for what I could have done to preempt my dog’s death a few months ago. Oh — and I have already emailed a couple of the new friends I met on my retreat. I can only hope that I will meet them again, back at Rancho la Puerta.