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Chasing Sunshine

BY MARY BEMIS

IF THERE WAS JUST ONE destination where a traveler knew in advance that every tiny detail would be impeccable without being fussy and where all the golden promises of tranquility and enlightenment could be found in gentle abundance—would this be the one place to return to again and again? Yes, and I do. Rancho La Puerta is that elusive combination of retreat, pilgrimage, rest cure, and nature immersion.

Just 30 miles from the San Diego airport and across the border from Baja California, a 4,000-acre nature preserve is home to a series of gardens, fitness centers, pools, and adobe casitas and villas where at every step sage, wild rose, jasmine, and lavender scent the high desert air. In our post-pandemic world, the quiet and solitude of each casita's private garden provides as much solace as the spa's blissful treatments. Camaraderie and friendship feel as if they have been baked into the sense of place. Perhaps this is because when Rancho La Puerta first opened in 1940, it was a gathering spot for seekers, mystics, writers, and an international community that

may have comprised the first global nomads.

A typical retreat week at Rancho La Puerta in the early days might have seen Oscar-nominated Burt Lancaster baking bread and playing croquet while students of cofounder Edmond Szekely gathered in the evenings to hear his health lectures. Szekely, affectionately known as the Professor, was a Hungarian philosopher and natural living enthusiast who authored over 80 books, including *The Essene Gospel of Peace*. He and his wife Deborah set up the camp, and in those years of World War II, prices were \$17.50 a week. Guests stayed in tents and helped milk the goats.

Deborah today, at 100 years of age, is known as the godmother of the wellness movement and is busy planting trees in Tecate to protect the village from global warming. Planting is a family tradition. Rancho La Puerta founded the first international organic garden before the Rodale family planted their garden in Emmaus, Pennsylvania. Daughter Sarah Livia Brightwood Szekely, who studied landscape architecture, now leads Rancho La Puerta as its president. In 1984, she regenerated the nearby



PHOTOS COURTESY RANCHO LA PUERTA

organic garden Tres Estrellas—which is why today every spa and hotel with culinary and social ambitions tries to do the same thing. Now you know who started it!

“The Path of Nature, in the fullness of its expression, has been my path,” says Brightwood Szekely. “This is where I feel closest to my father’s philosophy. This is where I meet God. Through my experiences in nature, I understand my father as a mystic. I know that when I keep a fearless open mind and drop into a place of inner stillness, I step into the river of life. I feel the Presence of Life, the Great Imagination, the unfathomable diversity and the great unity.”

All meals are included in guests’ stays, and so are all classes and workshops—more than 50 to choose from a day. Each plate and each glass of herbal-infused water and tea shimmer with the energy of hand-tended

ingredients. Guests are even invited to work on the farm, just as they did in earliest days. Most recently, a cooking school has been built by Brightwood Szekely on the grounds of the farm, and visitors to the ranch harvest and then learn to cook a plant-based diet during their stay. Retreats here are Saturday through Saturday, meals are communal, and the continuity and intimacy of shared experience includes an early morning hike each day under the watchful gaze of Mt. Kuchumaa—a mountain listed on the National Register of Historic Places for its sacred significance.

The friendliness and lack of pretention quiets stress and anxiety, and the all-inclusive price eliminates the a la carte conundrum found in too many retreats that offer solace and then present fine print. A Mediterranean micro-climate brings the gift of sunshine. In the summer,

it is cooler than every major American city, and of course, the winters here are golden.

A few weeks out of the year, Brightwood Szekely herself hosts special programs with a focus on fasting. These are not to be missed.

To learn more, go to rancholapuerta.com. **S&H**



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