

Seven Days' Peace

Written by Written by Amy Strand

Wednesday, 22 April 2009 10:34 - Last Updated Wednesday, 22 April 2009 11:48

Rolling hills, lush greenery, secluded accommodations and plenty of pampering; sound like paradise? If you desperately seek a little R&R, round up a spa buddy—daughter, sister, husband, or simply yourself—and head just south of the border to Rancho La Puerta for seven days of bliss and balance.



ONE HOUR SOUTH of San Diego and just over the Mexican border lies a serene and tranquil hidden gem of the spa world. Despite having been named SpaFinder's 2008 "Favorite Spa in North America," spending a week at Rancho La Puerta feels more like a stay in your own private mountain oasis rather than a jaunt to a high-profile destination spa.

Although Tecate—not typically known for its luxe getaways—is home to this nature-inspired, eco-friendly spa, it should be noted that while driving through the Mexican streets prior to your arrival at "the Ranch" (as it is called by staff and frequent visitors), the property's gates seem to appear out of nowhere. (Tip: Rancho La Puerta conveniently provides transportation from San Diego Airport.) Upon entering the Ranch, you're sure to sigh with relief and surprise at the pristine grounds and gorgeous Mexican Colonial-style architecture in which you'll spend the next week.



Today, Rancho La Puerta is one of the world's many fitness destination spas, but having been hailed as the first of its kind in North America, expecting great things from this health resort is easy. Opened in 1940 by Deborah Szekely (who still remains immensely involved in running the spa) and her husband Edmond, the Ranch began as a single adobe hut where the couple provided fitness classes and lectures while guests brought tents to sleep in, establishing the destination spa trend.

Despite its humble beginnings, the Ranch now encompasses a sprawling 3,000 acres of mountains, organic gardens, hiking trails and resort property. Aside from its perfectly manicured grounds, one of the unique aspects of the property is its layout. Initially a bit difficult to navigate, the Ranch's winding brick pathways twist and turn to each gym, spa center and the 84 casita-style guest rooms. With such a roundabout walk from place to place, you may suspect that you're getting more exercise than usual, and in fact, the walkways were designed with this idea in mind.

With some 150 guests in attendance each week, this locale proves to be a popular mother/daughter destination, and it's easy to see why. Whether you're due for some relaxation at the spa, or you'd rather remain active, the Ranch places equal emphasis on both endeavors. With approximately five classes offered every hour, ranging from the more traditional cardio cycling, cross-training and yoga to a unique selection of dancing, meditation and drumming, there is always something new to experience. And, there's no need to limit yourself, as all fitness classes and meals are included in your week-long stay. (The only extra payment required is for spa services, cooking classes and one-on-one fitness classes.)

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Rather spend your precious time outdoors? Hikes ranging from two-mile woodland treks to seven-mile mountain hikes are on the agenda every morning—strolling or climbing the trails of Mount Kuchumaa is a great way to recharge your batteries while getting a workout in as well.

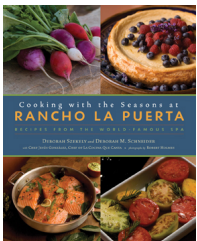
While the exercise options are fantastic, what's a week at the spa without a facial or massage? At the Ranch, a selection of 33 heavenly treatments are offered at three spa centers scattered across the grounds—the Men's Health Center, Women's Health Center and Villas Health Center (for both genders). Open all day every day, each location offers an array of body treatments; massages (a great way to work through sore muscles); facials; body wraps; and head, hands and feet treatments. For a full-body polisher and softener, schedule the Hydralessence Body Mask, made with hydrating warm algae. If it's firming and lifting you're interested in, the Optimizer Facial provides visible results.

When it's time to refuel, don't worry about bland spa food here; one thing that mothers, daughters and even the men in their lives can all agree on are the meals. With ingredients grown on the Ranch's six-acre organic farm, Tres Estrellas, each meal is healthier—and tastier—than the next. And, you won't go hungry here—snacks are available between meals (think fresh fruit, smoothies and cut veggies), plus all meals are served within a 90-minute time frame, ensuring everyone gets their fill. With each repast enjoyed in the Ranch's Spanish-style dining hall, you'll savor a buffet breakfast and lunch, while dinner is served at your table. Always a crowd pleaser: the Mexican lasagna made with fresh corn tortillas and Ancho Chile salsa.

When visiting the Ranch your days are open and you may fill them as you please; but whatever you choose to experience, this is one week in which the only schedule you're to follow is your own. And that, in itself, is magical.

Reserve Your Week

877.440.7778, www.rancholapuerta.com.



Bring healthy and delicious spa cuisine home with Rancho La Puerta's new cookbook, "**Cooking with the Seasons at Rancho La Puerta.**" The book emphasizes nutritious and flavorful recipes made with organic, seasonal ingredients. \$35.00. By Deborah Szekely and Deborah M. Schneider.

Barnes & Noble, www.rancholapuerta.com.