

## Rancho La Puerta

For 60 years, clients have come to the world's oldest fitness spa to exercise mind, body and spirit, with a goal that's nothing short of "transformative change."

### Day 2: 9 a.m., Arroyo gym

The dozen or so of us who have dragged our stiff and sleepy selves into Morning Stretch class open all of the sliding glass doors in the light, carpeted gym to let in the cool morning air. In an attempt to direct our attention to something other than our aging exteriors, this room contains no mirrors, but three of its walls are glass, and overlook a beautiful landscaped arroyo that sits in the shadow of sacred Mt. Kuchumaa.

I've chosen Morning Stretch from a menu of optional classes because, like most of the other "first timers" to the world's oldest fitness spa, I'm nursing sore muscles, despite good advice to not do too much on the first day. As women straggle in and arrange their mats on the carpet, our instructor, Barry, introduces himself.

He's in his 30s, with chestnut hair and a square jaw, and wears a U.S. Army T-shirt and two-tone silk boxing shorts. Picking his way around the room, he briefs us: "Just so you know: married, divorced, one child, here three years, mostly happy."

When he's sure he's got our attention, he continues: "While you're here, it's important to drink a lot of water. Your brain is about 80 percent water,

so if you can't think anymore, you might be dehydrated." (he pauses) "Some of us walk around dehydrated most of the time."

But if Barry appears pleasant enough, it's not long before I realize his easygoing manner is only a ruse. With the zeal of a drill sergeant, he's soon got us twisted into positions that would challenge a yoga instructor, torturing muscles I hadn't become acquainted with in all my 40-some years. As some of us groan, Barry clicks his tongue. "This class isn't called Stretch and Relax, after all," then coaxes us into even more sadistic postures.

"Keep your tailbone to the floor," he scolds. "If I can drive a small truck under you, you're probably not doing that.... You should feel this stretch on the outside. Where some of you are putting your hands... that's exactly the place."

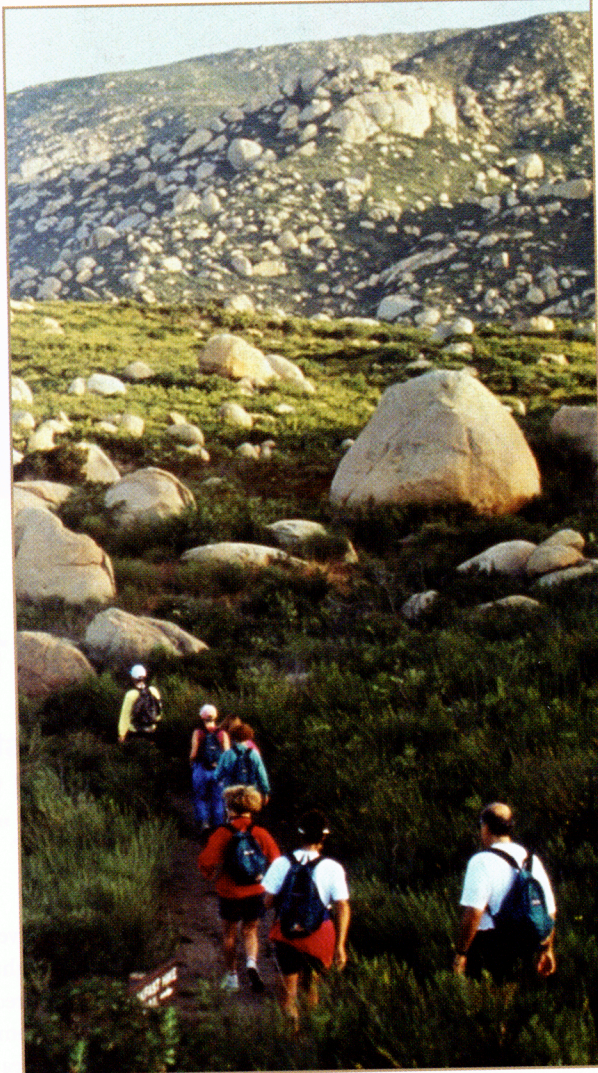
Miraculously, at the end of 45 minutes, I emerge intact, with my initial fondness for Barry returning, as I nurture the quiet inner glow that the regulars who recommended this class said I would.

In some ways, Rancho La Puerta has evolved light years from the austere Essene School of Life that Edmond and Deborah Szekely founded on a vineyard some 60 years ago. Without the comforts of electricity and running water, early guests paid \$17.50 per week, pitched tents, chopped firewood and took turns at kitchen duty for the privilege of hearing Edmond, "the professor," lecture on the way to a long and vibrant life through a regimen that exercised mind, body and spirit.

Today, "Rancho" encompasses 3,000 acres, including 150 acres of lushly landscaped gardens vibrant with Mexican poppies, cosmos, daisies and iceplant. Eucalyptus and olive trees shade rose gardens, vine-covered trellises, reflecting pools and brick walkways. The vineyard remains, though it's now ringed by a running track, and the tents have been replaced by luxurious, Mexican-style casitas.

Equipped with kitchenette and fireplace, mine boasts polished salt-tile

floors, exposed brick walls, beamed ceilings, and — my favorite feature — a floor-to-ceiling transom window that slides open onto a garden patio. I could be perfectly happy if I never stepped foot outside. But I do, as the point of attending Rancho is still to exercise mind, body and spirit, with a goal that's nothing short of "transformative change."



Over the course of a week-long session, my body is nurtured by means of an alcohol-free, lacto-ovo vegetarian diet, as well as a selection from some 75 optional classes and activities, including morning hikes at all exertion levels, tennis, fitball, modern dance and water aerobics. Low-cost massages, herbal wraps and other spa treatments ease the inevitable sore muscles and help me relax. Through intervals of rest, and activities like meditation, yoga and the Labyrinth, I tend to my spirit. Meanwhile, my

mind is stimulated through evening lectures, arts classes and workshops led by a well-known author.

Rancho is coed, and men enjoy their own therapy centers with saunas, steam rooms and hot tubs, but most of the clientele is made up of women in their 30s, 40s and 50s. Seventy percent are repeat visitors, and many return year after year. One woman I encounter on a morning hike is celebrating her 40th year at Rancho. Another, in a meditation class, tells the group that she attributes a sense of well-being that persists for months to having come every year for 17 years.

"My whole life has changed since I started coming here," she tells us. "When I started coming, I was single. Then I got married, and people said, 'Well, now that you're married, certainly you can't go.' But I said, 'This is my week.' Then I had a child, then another, and people said, 'With a baby and a toddler at home, certainly now you can't go.' But I said, 'This is my week.'"

"I've gotten a lot of pressure. I've missed weddings, christenings. People say, 'But this is my wedding.' And I say, 'Yes, and I'll be happy for you and write you a nice letter and buy you a nice gift, but this is my week.' Now my kids are 9 and 11, and they're hysterical. They know when my week is coming up, and they start talking about 'mommy's week.'"

#### Day 4: 6 a.m., Garden Breakfast Hike

Despite the early hour, I feel energized. My muscles no longer ache. Having gone to bed each night following the evening lecture (about 9 p.m.), I awake with the sunrise, feeling refreshed. My body has new energy. My inner voices have quieted. I am starting to understand the devotion of the regulars, as I embark on what is one of the most popular activities at Rancho — the breakfast hike to Tres Estrellas, a 6-acre organic garden.

The breakfast hike reflects Rancho's emphasis on food as essential to overall well-being. It's an idea handed down from

the professor, who believed it was necessary for good health to connect with nature, and that there is no more elemental way to do it than through food.

So on this crystal-clear morning, about two dozen of us tramp up two miles of chaparral-covered hillside to the Tres Estrellas garden where Bill, the resident horticulturist, gives us a tour. A former "oilpatch kid," Bill is tall and thin, sporting blue jeans, a baby face and a Texas drawl. It's here, he explains, that about half of the vegetables used in the dining hall and most of the herbs used for spa treatments are grown.

"Five hundred pounds of kitchen scraps are composted here each day," he says. "I always tell people at the ranch not to worry if they don't finish all of their vegetables. We'll take them, and give them back to you next year."

After a tour and a primer on the virtues of organic farming, we settle down for a breakfast of fresh fruit, granola and oatmeal on a brick patio shaded by plum trees and edged with blue and yellow snapdragons. Then we head back to Rancho, where I attend... what else? Morning Stretch class.

Six months post-Rancho, can I say I have experienced "transformative change"? Maybe not. But that's not to say that Rancho didn't leave its mark. For one thing, it did kick-start the exercise program I had abandoned following surgery a year before and somehow never found the time to begin again. Having had a taste of many disciplines, when I returned, I signed up for yoga classes, took meditation workshops, studied Pilates and reacquainted myself with my elliptical trainer. I also discovered, to my delight, that a kitchen contains more than a freezer and a microwave (who knew?). I even prepared some of the recipes in Rancho La Puerta's cookbook. And when I can't think anymore, I drink. OK, I admit that's not a big change. But more often than not these days, I reach for water rather than wine. As a result, I am a bit leaner, stronger, more flexible and, I'd like to think, a little smarter. I seem to remember hearing, somewhere, that the brain is made up of 80 percent water.

PM

## ELEVATION

1,700 feet

## DIRECTIONS

Rancho La Puerta is located in Tecate, Baja California, three miles from the U.S. border, and 40 miles southeast of San Diego. Transportation is provided without charge every Saturday to and from San Diego International Airport.

## PROGRAM

A seven-day visit runs from Saturday to Saturday. Guests choose from among 75 classes and activities, balancing 45-minute exercise sessions with relaxation, spa treatments and mindfulness practices.

## CUISINE

Menus are primarily vegetarian, with fish at some dinners, and eggs as an option at breakfast. Breakfast and lunch are served buffet-style. Dinner is sit-down, with wait staff attending.

## LODGING

Guests stay in cottages or casitas, all designed with a Mexican-Colonial theme, and decorated with folk art and native crafts. Most have private patios surrounded by gardens, and fireplaces.

## RATES

\$2,800-\$3,510, single occupancy

\$2,240-\$3,360, double occupancy

Summer and pre-holiday rates:

(June 28-Sept. 13 and Nov. 29-Dec. 13)

\$2,460-\$3,090, single occupancy

\$1,970-\$2,960, double occupancy

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

800-443-7567, 760-744-4222 or  
www.rancholapuerta.com

