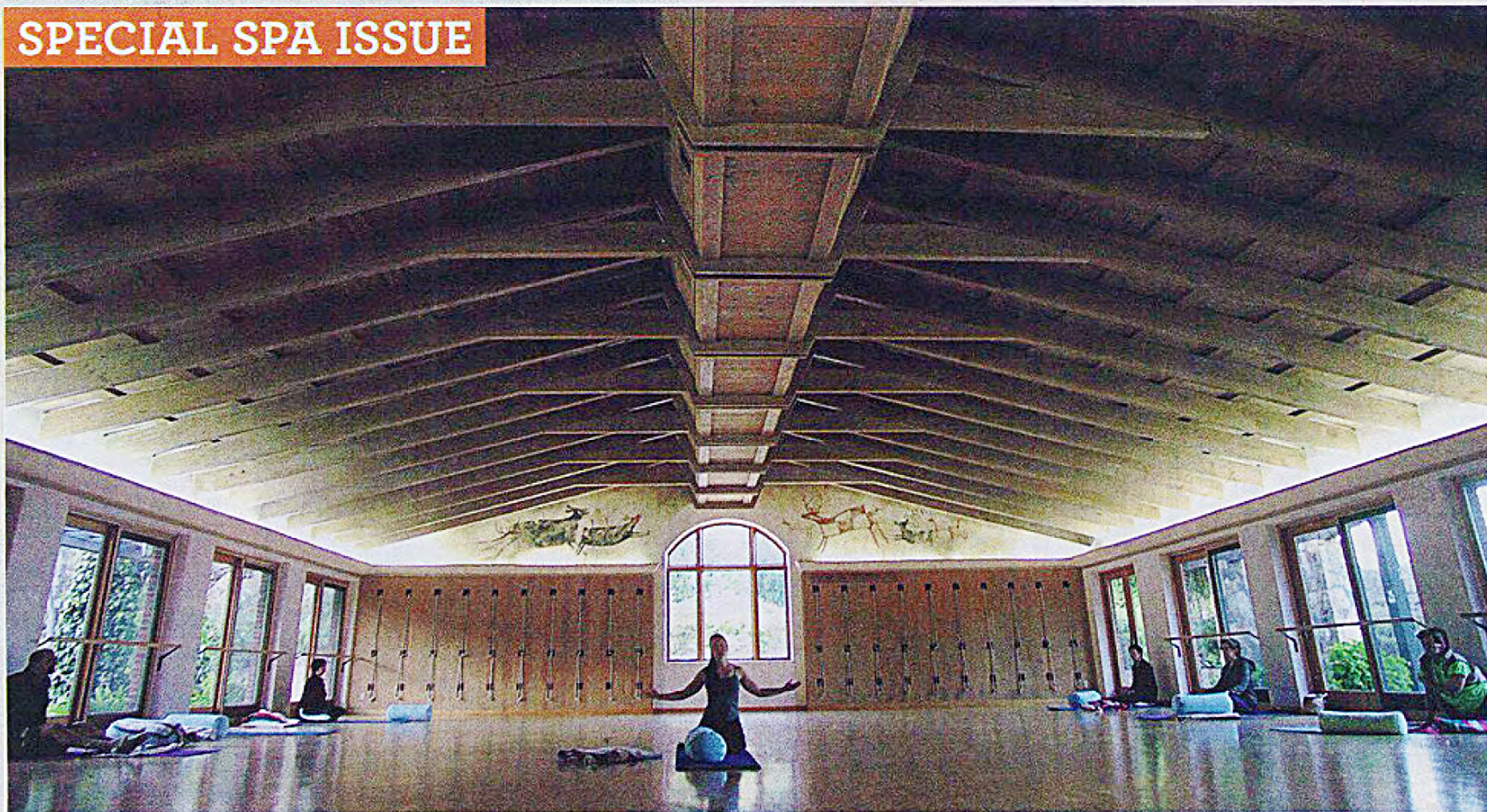


SPECIAL SPA ISSUE



Photos by David Maung / Associated Press 2006

Yoga instructor Hazel Stricker leads a class at the Tecate, Mexico, luxury health resort Rancho La Puerta, which is celebrating its 70th year in June.

TECATE, MEXICO

For spa ranch bliss, head for the border

By Cristina De Oliveira
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Vacationing in a border town may sound like an oxymoron to some, but to others it makes perfect sense. For decades, people have been making the pilgrimage down snaking Highway 94 through the mountains south of San Diego to reach Tecate, Mexico. Void of the bustle and bacchanalia that characterizes some of its neighboring areas, quiet Tecate has become a mecca for the wellness savvy thanks to the beloved Rancho La Puerta fitness resort.

Tecate only had 400 residents when 34-year-old Edmond Szekeley settled there with his 17-year-old bride Deborah in 1940. Living in their \$10-per-month, dirt-floored adobe hut, the newlyweds purchased a goat from a rancher and, before organic was a buzzword, planted a vegetable garden for sustenance that grew free of pesticides and artificial fertilizers.

Szekeley, a Hungarian philosopher and scholar known to many as the Professor, recognized the dangers of these chemicals and warned against them. He taught the importance of healthy living to groups that would gather and pay \$17.50 a week for access to his lectures. Guests would feast on the bounty provided by the camp and help with the farm chores, as well as swim in the nearby river and climb the revered Tecate Peak, known as Mount Kuchumaa.

From the time when campgoers had to bring their own tents and rough it sans electricity or running water, much has changed at Rancho La Puerta. Celebrating its 70th year in June, the property has expanded to 3,000 acres and is steadily championed by its passionate fan base, made up of people who have visited umpteen times, with a few devotees logging in more than 100 visits.

Throughout the years, the ranch has worked out any kinks and runs like a well-oiled machine, much to the delight of its 88-year-old matriarch Deborah Szekeley, who travels there from her home in

Mission Hills (Santa Barbara) once a week. She carries on the teachings of her late husband, while serving as creative director of Rancho La Puerta, as well as its sister property she founded in 1958, Golden Door in Escondido (San Diego County).

Putting the concept of destination spas on the map, Rancho La Puerta wasn't designed to be posh (or pricey) like its exclusive successor; instead, it revels in a refined rusticity. There are more than 80 cozy colonial-style casitas sprinkled throughout the ranch and, while no two are the same, they all offer a true taste of the area. Clay-tile floors and exposed wooden beams are accented by a cacophony of color courtesy of local folk art.

While soaking in the outdoors on a private patio, you can enjoy the fresh air infused with wildflowers and the occasional scent of rosemary and lavender from blooming bushes. The lush landscape feels like a modern-day Garden of Eden, proof that the ranch's president, Szekeley's daughter Sarah Livia Brightwood, is a brilliant landscape designer.

Here, the great outdoors coupled with a mild climate make it easy to partake in active pursuits or just while away the day on any of the hammocks that are tucked away throughout the grounds. More than 50 classes are held daily at the ranch, and you can divide up your time among exercise, nutrition seminars, guided meditation,



Source: ESRI John Blanchard / The Chronicle

If you go

RANCHO LA PUERTA

Arrangements for weeklong stays are booked through an office in San Diego; (800) 443-7565; www.rancholapuerta.com. Rates include room, meals, fitness classes, hikes, evening programs, lectures, use of all facilities and scheduled transportation to and from San Diego Airport. Cooking classes, private sessions and personal spa services are additional. Rates start (based on season) from \$2,715 to \$2,980 per person per week, double occupancy.

spa treatments and well-deserved alone time.

You are encouraged to choose your own adventures to achieve as much or as little as you would like during your stay, and any decision you make is celebrated. On average, guests take four to five classes each day and many slip into the spa a handful of times during the typical Sat-



Resort guests can pick from more than 50 health and fitness classes, including nutrition, exercise and meditation.

urday-to-Saturday visit. Offering indulgent massages, facials, scrubs and nail treatments, the straightforward menu does not overwhelm and serves up dependable spa services.

Although gym junkies will be more than satisfied with sweat-inducing options, such as Cardio Cycling and Super Cross Training, there are also classes that cater to beginners. From the time Deborah Szekeley was the activities/exercise director (as well as the chef, housekeeper and secretary), she has been exploring ways to make exercise more fun, which is one reason she used to invite local children to hand-crank a phonograph during calisthenics. The ranch is still spicing up fitness through a host of engaging classes, such as Striptease and Hula Hoop.

Health might be the focus here, but you won't find stringent ashram-like rules. No, the eponymous local lager isn't an option at dinner, but the delicious four-course meal may

end with something indulgent sounding yet ranch-ified, such as Guava Crème Brûlée or Creamy Dark Chocolate Flan with Fresh Berries (one of Szekeley's favorite desserts). Haute spa cuisine is served at the convivial dining hall three times a day and is taught at the ranch's cooking school La Cocina Que Canta, adjacent to its organic garden.

Szekeley claims that there is no secret to what happens at Rancho La Puerta, but she has definitely figured out a way to deliver simple yet life-changing information that has cast a spell on thousands of people since its doors opened.

After spending a few days at the house the Szekeleys built, you'll find that there really is no mystery to what keeps people coming back for more: even after 70 years, it's simply about the way the ranch makes you feel.

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