

safe CROSSING

Mexico's leisure travel industry has, according to leading tour operators, been "decimated" by the escalating violent drug cartel turf war that, while not directed at tourists, in 2010 alone claimed 107 American lives, according to the U.S. State Department.

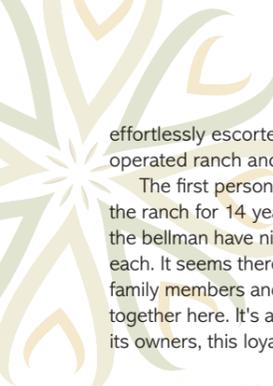
This year, the \$12 billion-a-year industry is seeing its biggest decline yet due to safety concerns along border towns, which, coupled with higher airfares, is causing the once thriving and popular travel locale to reach out further to their neighbors to the north. But undeterred by the chaos, *Coast* travel writers have set out to prove what Mexican officials claim: that tourist districts are still safe and thriving. Starwood recently opened a St. Regis in Mexico City, Westin opens in Guadalajara this month, Hilton Worldwide has plans to open five new hotels this year, and while vacancies are high in hotels and resorts across the country, there are good deals to be had in Mexico. *Coast* recently had writers travel to three different resorts in Mexico City, Punta Mita and Tecate, and they all returned safely, with glowing reports.



Rancho La Puerta

BY SUZETTE LIPSCOMB

From the moment I drove up to the magical gates at Rancho La Puerta, I felt as if I were entering my own secret garden. It was not like any other place I had been. I assumed the site in Tecate, Mexico, was chosen for the weather, but soon learned that its founders, Edmond (the "Professor") and Deborah Szekely, were lured here by the sacred grounds. While traveling across the border towns in northern Baja has been dangerous of late, Tecate is 25 miles east of Tijuana, a 45-mile drive from San Diego on beautiful U.S. roads that eventually reach the small and safe border crossing four miles from the resort. Ranch guests are picked up at the San Diego airport by resort motor coaches and are easily and



effortlessly escorted to the family owned and operated ranch and destination spa.

The first person that greets me has worked at the ranch for 14 years. The check-in agent and the bellman have nine and 12 years of seniority each. It seems there is no end to the multiple family members and relatives living and working together here. It's a testament to the property and its owners, this loyal long term staff.

WHY WE KEEP COMING BACK

By the time I arrive, I have missed lunch and explore my gorgeous Villas Studio, a Colonial-style casita with a large living area with a fireplace, a writing desk, high cathedral ceilings, and terra cotta Tecate tile floors. I rest on my outdoor patio looking out over a section of the 3,000 fertile acres of trees, meadows and flowering plants that make up this exquisite ranch. In the family-style dining room that accommodates up to 140 guests a week, one popular topic is the frequency of the guests' return. "Thirty eight times," the man sitting next to me says, although he admits he might be off by a year or two.

The lodging types are almost as copious as the staff. They are all unique and almost as diverse as the fitness instructors. The insanely hot Puerto Rican Pilates, Latin and striptease dance instructor Manuel crosses paths with Connie the African dance teacher who hails from Chicago, but has never been to Africa (though you'd never know it from the way she contracts her pelvis). You get the impression that David, who learned meditation techniques from Buddhist elders in the Tibetan plateau, has had interactions with mountain gorillas in the Congo and has worked with groups of teenagers leading 28-day Outward Bound mountaineering courses, should be in the gym teaching strength training, but instead is slowly rocking away blockages with aquatic shiatsu in the ranch's WATSU-designated pool.

The visitors have divergent paths. You are just as likely to sit next to a mathematical genius (as I did at dinner) that might be married to a novelist. In fact, in my entire stay, I never encountered a guest with the same job as another – not once. It's almost like they screen your employment without your knowledge prior to arrival in some Darwinian scheme to keep conversations engaging.



During my spring visit, temperatures were in the high 50s at night and days hovered around the low 70s. It's a little known fact that you can stay for four days instead of the whole program, which is for seven days, though to get the full experience, I wish I had gone for the full monty.

EAT, PRAY, GARDEN

The diversity of the people is only matched by the innumerable program offerings and the expansive grounds. I used to believe that two types of people came to spa destinations – those who wanted to be pampered and those who wanted to be fit. I was wrong. There are a thousand steps in between.

The Ranch does such an unbelievable job of blending nature and responsible business practices that it might just be the original "green" spa. There is a pervasive consciousness that permeates the 3,000 acres. The staff is excellent and unobtrusive – it's as if you only need to cross your arms and blink and they appear. They are all nice, but it's more than that – they are happy – every last one of them. Many have been employed at the Ranch for many years, and guest instructors, all of whom come on trade agreements, seem as happy to be presenting



lectures and classes as they are experiencing the resort. During my visit, Kevin Sullivan, a 25-year veteran in martial arts, was teaching tai chi and qigong; Newport Beach's own Whitney Bania, co-owner of The Bar Method, was challenging visitors with her bar classes; and Los Angeles wonder coach Natalie Caine was presenting a workshop on Life In Transition (which we are all in, by the way). Visiting performers included pianist Tom Barabas and guitarist Jason Vieaux, who ended the glorious days with intimate concerts. By each day's end, mind, body and spirit felt thoroughly overhauled.

My goal was to restore my balance through exercise, spa treatments and sleep. Highlights of the week included my personal favorite – the breakfast hike to the organic gardens, Rancho Tres Estrellas. The garden is shepherded by Sarah Livia (Szekely) Brightwood to serve the culinary needs of Rancho La Puerta's and La Cocina Que Canta's (the resort's cooking school) kitchens, as well as further Fundacion La Puerta's efforts to create an educational agricultural resource for the people of Tecate. Tours are led by the charismatic head gardener, Salvador Tinajero, followed by a fantastic breakfast at the farm – hot coffee, the freshest food, eaten outside amongst the flowers and a serene setting.

Before founding the Ranch with his wife Deborah, the Professor had met Sir Albert Howard, creator of the organic system of raising fruits and vegetables, and was familiar with Sir Albert's 1940 book, *An Agricultural Testament*. Sir Albert had been an employee of the British government's agricultural department when he went to India to teach Hindus to garden. He introduced the composting method and the use of earthworms – farming without chemical fertilizers – for he feared that chemicals altered the balance of the soil's living organisms, among other precepts. The Professor embraced these theories, as does his daughter, Sarah Livia, today.

OM TO JEWELRY

The Ranch also does an excellent job of blending spirituality without banging you over the head with religion. There are moments when you think the Ranch is Catholic or Buddhist or Hindu or Kabbalistic. I had my first walking meditation experience at sunset on a candlelit Labyrinth modeled after the one in Chartres Cathedral in France. It would make even the steadfast atheist feel spiritual.

Gorgeous statues by Victor Hugo Castaneda are sprinkled throughout the art-filled grounds on small walkway paths and under out-of-the-way trees. There is an overwhelming sense of peace and calm. When I rolled out of bed at 5 a.m. in the cold pitch black, I had to remind myself I paid a lot of money for this privilege. But then, as the sun rises pink and tangerine over the ridge you forget how tired and sore you are. Part of the reason why you come here is to try new things for your own personal metamorphosis.

The jewelry teacher told me he was the "jewelry therapist." You understand why they make jewelry in prison. It's soothing. Speaking of prison, if you fear turning into a vegetable like I did, you can admit that low sodium vegetarian cuisine with the occasional egg and fish does not fulfill your normally ravenous appetite and ask for more protein – peanut butter, and even

wine delivered to your room. Yes, it's true there are "snacks" 24 hours a day – fruit and veggies. I even tried the "Silent Dinner," a meditation to help you savor the flavors, textures and smells of your meal. Aside from an occasional guest bursting into laughter, this was an awakening experience in just how unconsciously and quickly we eat. After that, time and time again, I was swept away by another magical scent in the garden that showed up on the dinner table. This is why I could not resist La Cocina Que Canta, Rancho La Puerta's Cooking School, which hosts cooking classes that celebrate the magic that happens whenever good cooks use just-picked local, seasonal, organically grown ingredients.

Custom-built by skilled masons, tile masters and other artisans, the 4,500-square-foot hacienda-style center is the colorful and creative home of executive Chef Denise Roa, guest teaching chefs from around the world, and the school's friendly staff. In addition, La Cocina regularly hosts renowned guest culinary experts, cookbook authors and teaching chefs, including such stars of the cooking world as Deborah Madison and Patricia Wells. Retired Golden Door chef Michel Stroot is a regular teacher, as is chef and cookbook author Deborah Schneider, co-author of the cookbook *Cooking with the Seasons at Rancho La Puerta*, which was nominated for a James Beard award in 2009. (Schneider is also executive chef and partner of SOL Cocina in Newport Beach.)

Weekday classes emphasize the hands-on experience. Students gather around an immense chopping block island and work side by side with the chef and her assistants to prepare a full lunch or dinner. Conversation, questions and laughter fill the room, along with the savory scents of garlic, rosemary, roasting peppers, cumin, and other Mexican-Mediterranean flavors. Cooking completed, everyone sits down at long tables to enjoy the fruits of their labor, along with a sampling of wines from the nearby Valle de Guadalupe wine country in Baja California.

My villa faced directly at Mount Kachuma

PREVIOUS PAGE A candlelit Labyrinth walk, the design of which is modeled after one in Chartres, France. THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT A Castaneda sculpture hiding in a tulip garden; an early morning breakfast hike; guests get centered in an outdoor tai chi class; the Ranch's cooking school, La Cocina Que Canta

– the sacred peak in Tecate that is "the exalted high place" of the Kumeyaay Indians. The peak straddles the U.S.-Mexico border, and Native Americans consider its slopes and summit a sacred place – so much so that it was the first geographic feature in America to be named a National Historic Site by the U.S. Department of the Interior based on spiritual significance. Rancho La Puerta founder Deborah Szekely, who is a walking advertisement for the talk she walks (she meets with guests weekly – don't miss her lectures), says the ranch "provides space – that which is most lacking in today's life. Space to breathe freely. To relax. To renew, reflect and redirect one's longer-living life."

It is so clear: the diverse, happy staff, the interesting guests, the peaceful groups – it's why people come back for years. You are lucky to be in on the secret.

¡VIVA!

■ **GO THERE ::** All-inclusive rates include transportation to San Diego airport and back, accommodations, fitness classes, all meals and snacks, activities, and special presentations. Spa treatments are extra, as are cooking classes at the cooking school. **800.443.7565 :: rancholapuerta.com**

■ **CHECK IT OUT ::** To see Manuel's striptease dance class, go to Coast's website. **:: coastmagazine.com**

