

THE GLOBE AND MAIL 

Rancho La Puerta spa: it's summer camp for grownups

JOANNE KATES

MEXICO— From Saturday's Globe and Mail

Published Friday, Jun. 10, 2011 1:15PM EDT

Last updated Friday, Jun. 10, 2011 2:14PM EDT

I'm boarding the flight to San Diego. The woman behind me admires my (cleverly, if I say so myself) layered T-shirts. I respond with a brief sales pitch for layering. She (who is well upholstered) says that she already has too many layers to add more clothing. She then offers that her daughter is getting married in a year and she (the woman in line with me, not the daughter) is off to a "very exclusive" spa to "jump-start" her new body for the wedding.

The line moves slowly. We chat. This will be her seventh visit to the spa in question (one I've never heard of). I tell her that although I'm headed to Rancho La Puerta (it's an hour across the California border), my go-to spa has been Canyon Ranch. She says she went there once and hated it. Why? "The food." I'm shocked. Her complaint: "There was too much of it. How is a person supposed to lose weight there?"

Thus spake the veteran spa-goer who unfortunately is missing (most of) the point of a spa vacation. My delight in spa vacations is the opportunity to focus on multiple aspects of well-being – physical, spiritual and emotional. Go there to count calories and you miss a lot. The second stereotype – that spas are overblown beauty salons – covers about 10 per cent of what's on offer.

My first visit to Rancho La Puerta was five years ago. I went a week after my mother died and walked the labyrinth every day. It's a walking meditation that encourages contemplative self-reflection – something I would never cross the street to do. I found my mother in the mountains overlooking the labyrinth. And said goodbye to her.

Rancho La Puerta is a vacation with a mission – my goal this time is to find well-being of body and soul. The idea is to bring home more than curios and a tan. People go to get healthier, build exercise habits, sometimes to find a path through a life transition.

You choose from a large smorgasbord of five classes every hour. Dip your toe into Watsu (shiatsu in a hot pool), fool around with Feldenkrais, or stick with Pilates, yoga, spin, stretch, Bar Method, dance, aqua-exercise, strength training, tai chi (and there's more). Experiment with exercise to find your workout groove. Evenings are time for health and wellness lectures and the occasional concert. (Having fallen asleep in the third row of a nutrition talk, I choose bed.)

La Puerta resembles one-week summer camp for grownups. We arrive together on the bus (from San Diego airport) on Saturday and we leave the next Saturday – which creates community. We see the same faces all week, we groan together in classes, huff and puff up the mountain, sit together at communal tables at meals, find connections and camaraderie.

Sunday: They start you off easy with a short hike at 7 a.m. – the mountain is glorious in the morning. Many classes have intros today. Never done drum dancing? Now's your chance. The teachers are expert and helpful, and make it shockingly easy to try on a new exercise persona. Meditation class is at 4 p.m. daily. I learned (reluctantly) to meditate at a spa: Life is guaranteed to give you lemons, meditating makes it easier to make lemonade.

Monday: 5:30 a.m. Alarm beeps. This can't be happening. Back to sleep? No way. You don't schlep across the country to roll over.

The Pilgrim hike is lovely, winding through wildflowers up (and then down, hallelujah!) the mountain, huffing all the way. You go at your own pace. But up is up.

Tuesday: Having signed up for the optional silent dinner, I try to create excuses to bail, thanks to my horror of boredom. But the experience of dining silently in a group is shockingly delightful. I get very calm, and taste every bite of food to the max. We know outward bound – this is inward bound.

Wednesday: Thank goodness today's hike is on flat ground to the ranch's organic garden, an Eden of every vegetable imaginable. The master gardener gives an intoxicating tour (tastes included) and we then breakfast splendidly in their gorgeous cooking school. Muscles we never knew we had hurt. Thank the gods for daily massages. After one massage I discover the delight of the outdoor hot tub with garden and fountains.

Thursday: Today's hike traverses a long mountain ridge fragrant with sage. Hips and knees getting creaky. Hot tubs and massages ease the creaks.

Friday: Highlights include “Take the Ranch home” at 1 p.m. and Yuichi at 3 p.m. Taking the Ranch home helps us plan to do precisely that. Yuichi, an aging Broadway sprite, wordlessly leads us in Broadway dance. What few inhibitions remain fall away as we kick, shimmy and two-step to great show tunes. At dinner he gets us up and dancing. Only the knowledge that I will never see these nice people again allows me to let loose.

The place encourages that, as well as reflection. It is too beautiful to permit anything but bliss. Since 1940 it's been turning its more than 1,200 hectares into a magnificent garden: great swaths of rosemary and lavender to brush your hands along for scent; rose bushes as high as the buildings; sweeping lawns dotted with sculptures, with borders of blooms like great colourful ribbons; fountains under olive groves; a miniature vineyard outside the yoga studio, all with the mountains standing guard in the background.

Despite its breathtaking beauty, La Puerta is not a place of luxury. The rooms are homespun and rather spare, and the food, while it has improved significantly since the spring 2011 arrival of new chef Denise Roa, remains just this side of Spartan. It's semi-vegetarian and of course low fat. Some dinners are pretty serious: veg lasagna, salad, fruit. Some are more fun: grilled shrimp with a bouquet of garden vegetables and an eentsy scoop of charming ricotta sorbet. And by garden, I mean theirs. Most of the fruit and vegetables we're eating come from the ranch. Despite all this homegrown organic food, I am hungry all the time. You can have seconds, but who wants to be that person? It takes me till midweek to discover the snack of fruit at 10:30 a.m., smoothies and miso soup (from 2:45 to 3:45 p.m. daily) and veggies at 4:30 p.m.

Saturday: Everyone leaves on the bus together. Old friends, new friends, we all seem to be leaving a little lighter, but with more than we brought.

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR WEEK

- Rooms range from merely comfy to nicer. For the latter, request a Sol Villa (the newest and roomiest accommodations, with nice terraces and sitting rooms).
- From May to October breakfast is served outside at the Villas pool: Mountain view included.
- Sign up for the garden hike, spin class and other special activities the minute you arrive. They fill up way too fast.
- You can order an omelette for breakfast. Nobody tells you that.
- Eat outside by the fountains. It's nicer than inside.
- Dining is communal but you can ask to be seated alone (or à deux) and they comply.
- The second floor of the women's spa has a nicer hot tub than downstairs.
- Don't miss dance class on Friday with Yuichi. He could get a three-legged pig dancing.
- Book all your treatments well in advance, 5 p.m. sells out.
- Break in your hiking shoes a month before you go.
- Go to the Taking the Ranch Home class. It will help you do that.
- Bring a warm jacket. It's colder there than you think.

Planning to go?

Weeklong packages start at \$2,835 (U.S.) a person (double occupancy, including room, meals, airport transfers and most classes). 800-443-7565; rancholapuerta.com.

Special to The Globe and Mail

© 2011 The Globe and Mail Inc. All Rights Reserved.