

THE CLASSIC SPA GOLDEN DOOR

CALIFORNIA'S FIRST DESTINATION SPA PIONEERED AN ALL-ROUND, MIND AND BODY APPROACH TO HEALTH IN 1958. DOES IT STILL LIVE UP TO THE LEGEND? WELLNESS EXPERT DAISY FINER, WHO'S VISITED ALL THE WORLD'S TOP RETREATS, FINDS OUT



PHOTOGRAPH BY JESSICA SAMPLE



I FINALLY MADE IT TO THE LEGEND that is Golden Door, one of the USA's most exclusive and expensive health retreats. This is the inside track. One that few get to see. At around \$10,000 for a week's stay, it keeps its doors tightly guarded. But here in the soft, exquisitely designed enclave of zen gardens – streams, swings and dappled sunlight – it doesn't matter whether you're a top-level diplomat dealing with Trump's relentless social grenades, a high-end travel blogger conquering the world, or a Jewish mother preparing for the 500-guest wedding of her gay son: this is a space where you can drop into anonymity, and forget your duties and dependants. Instead, get physical and deal with mental wellness. Reconnection to the inner self is the touchstone of California's most renowned spa. No wonder Oprah is a fan.

The closing ceremony on night seven of my stay is one of many memorable scenes. Dressed in matching kimonos, our group of around 20 silently walks the on-site labyrinth, a metaphor for life's path, barefoot by candlelight. Each of us carries a small square of tightly folded paper upon which we've written what we want to let go of and what we want to invite in. We gather in a circle of solidarity and release our bits of paper into a cauldron of water, watching the words disappear. We have all surrendered to the unexpected depth of a retreat more renowned for its stratospheric levels of comfort than for authenticity. And herein lies the surprise of this place. While, for example, Canyon Ranch delivers strong medical know-how, Golden Door is as close to a soulful American spa experience as I've ever got – and is one of the most aesthetically and spiritually uplifting retreats I have come across anywhere on the globe.

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Its success can be credited to Deborah Szekely, who founded The Door, as fans refer to it, in 1958. Nicknamed the godmother of wellness, she was formerly married to Edmond Szekely, a renowned linguist, philosopher, psychologist, visionary and natural living mentor. The couple met in Tahiti. Deborah's mother was once vice president of the New York Vegetarian society; for a while the family lived as fruitarians. Together Deborah and Edmond set up what might now be viewed as the world's first destination health escape, Rancho La Puerta, in Baja California, Mexico. In 1940 they charged \$17.50 a week for guests to set up a tent, work the soil, snack on germinated wheat crackers and soak in the sun.

Deborah then went on to establish Golden Door as the smarter, sharper option, frequented by starlets such as Elizabeth Taylor and Zsa Zsa Gábor who preferred monogrammed stationery and breakfast in bed to commune-style living. After the couple divorced, Deborah steered both properties to new levels of success. While there are many parallels in approach, Golden Door remains the glamorous younger sister and is twice the price of its more rustic sibling, although I have to admit that I found Rancho La Puerta's landscape unbeatable (more than 3,000 acres where hares hop and sunflowers grow six feet high). But it attracts a big crowd, sometimes 140 guests a week, which necessitates microphones for lectures. The Door offers a more intimate and cossetting way of doing things. For those looking for discretion, the choice is obvious.

Your health goals are assessed before you arrive; once in situ, there's a bespoke daily schedule, delivered each night to your room

on a piece of paper shaped like, and lovingly referred to as, the fan. And what an offering. My advice is not to overdo it: pace yourself, nothing is compulsory. The timetable begins at 5.45am with a choice of hikes ranging from two-mile meadow walks to five-mile mountain conquests with names like Red Hawk and Blue Jay. The exertion and dawn light are exhilarating. The rest of the day spans out with possibilities; the staff encourage you to step out of your comfort zone. It's almost impossible not to when it comes to the group sessions: water volleyball, Pilates, cardio max, hula-hooping, archery, fencing, all manner of yoga, blindfolded pottery, self-hypnosis for sleep, bio-feedback for stress, silent walks. The dance classes with 75-year-old itty-bitty-tiny Japanese choreographer Yuichi Sugiyama are especially fun. There's something very special about watching a tightly wound-up New York psychiatrist on her 49th visit let loose. For many of the alpha females who visit the inclusions are key: daily in-room massages (tension-melting), facials, PT sessions, three body wraps, a hair treatment and mani-pedi. Everybody returns home as immaculately groomed as when they arrived, just with added zest.

Naturally, food is key. Most of the ingredients come from the kitchen garden, orchards and beehives, with dishes such as Vietnamese spring rolls, lentil burgers and aubergine-potato dumplings. Lunch and dinner are served either in the dining room or on flower-strewn tables set up poolside. Breakfast is eaten in the peace of your room (no TVs, cloud-like beds). Everything is delicious but don't expect to lose weight. This isn't a European detox clinic. There are sweet treats, which, while small, are by London standards dated in approach. No substitute flours or replacement sugars here; those ginger cookies are

100-per-cent real, and especially good. It's all about sustenance rather than deprivation. The amount of exercise crammed into a day means you feel truly deserving, and that's the joy. As a consequence, both blood-sugar levels and emotions start to balance out.

I am daunted by the group element at first, but it soon transpires that the camaraderie of the collective experience is the winning factor of a stay here. Not only is the guest talent dazzling (Susan Sarandon had just left) but everybody is on their own emotional journey. I don't think a single person didn't cry at some point. But this is no wail and whine cleanse. What happens on retreat stays on retreat. Especially when it comes to the shamanic healing with Dani Burling (be sure to see her if you can). I floated out of her room, filled with feathers, crystals and rattles, high on a bubble of happiness.

By the time I leave Golden Door I am so pumped up with embrace-my-life spirit that I feel ready to face another British winter, preferably without lying on the sofa and crying. It may not be hip or new (the Japanese bathhouse is almost retro cool), but it successfully harnesses the energy of transformation. Deborah, now 96 and living in San Diego, still does Pilates four times a week. While she's no longer at the helm (she sold Golden Door in 1998), I hope she's proud to see the affirmative ethos she put in place is still in action. It is proof that, when it comes to health, the comfort and expertise of a classic shines through every time. Wellbeing trends come and go, but there's a lot to be said for the vigour of collaborative wisdom filtered through the ages and delivered with passion. 🔗

Healing Holidays (+44 20 7843 3597; healingholidays.co.uk) offers seven nights in a Courtyard room at Golden Door from £8,559 per person full board, including flights, transfers, a daily massage and group activities

Clockwise from top left: the Japanese-style garden; a bedroom; wisteria; an organic chicken and vegetables; swing seat; the dining room deck; the bathhouse; Louisiana-blue-crab cake. Previous page, fireside seating