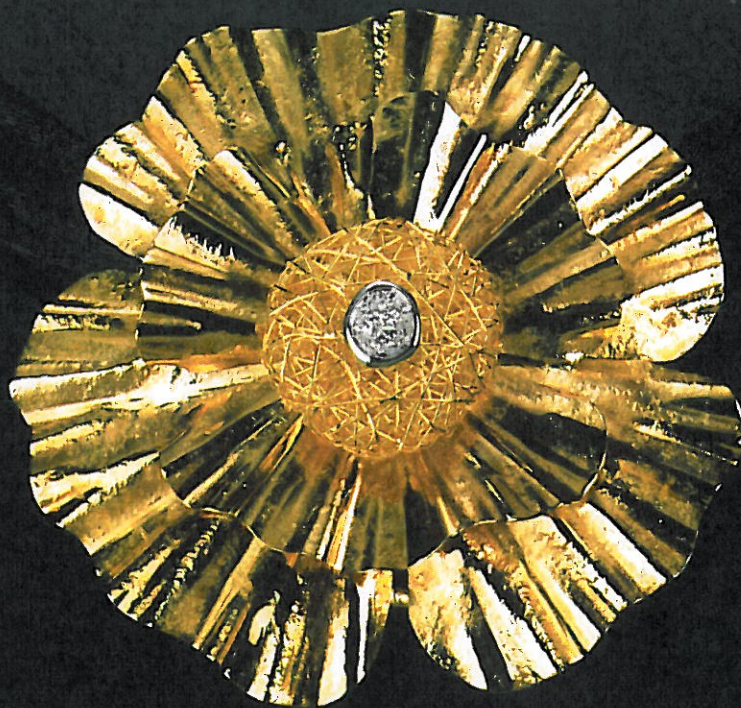


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HANDMADE
LUXURY





Weekend in the Country

BORREGO RANCH, BORREGO SPRINGS, CALIFORNIA

Hey, did you see *Man on Wire*?" I call down to my instructor, from the middle of a balance beam 30 feet above the ground. He's down there steadying the harness that's helping me walk the 35-foot-long beam. Yes, he says, he saw the documentary about Philippe Petit's high-wire act between the World Trade Center towers, then reminds me to pay attention to what I'm doing. That's the point of the exercise: to develop "mindfulness"—being in the moment. Not something I'm good at.

If I'm not having much success with being present, I'm having a great deal of fun. I'm rested and relaxed after two days at this wellness-lite resort in the desert two hours east of San Diego—an effect of the vast

saturated-blue sky, the 650,000 acres of nature preserve all around, that cushy bed in my guest room, and, best of all, the laid-back approach to the mindfulness mission.

I love serious spas, and I've happily flown cross-country to visit Canyon Ranch and Cal-a-Vie. But they're work—all that goal-setting and strenuous self-improvement. Borrego Ranch, in contrast, is like a summer love—a sweet memory, not a life-changing experience. It doesn't harp on rejuvenation or even getting fitter: When I sign up for four activities in one day, I'm reminded that I can cancel them. "We don't want guests to feel like they have to compete with themselves," says Sasha Itzikman, senior vice president

BORREGO RANCH RESORT & SPA

Rooms, \$245–\$295; one- to four-bedroom casitas, \$350–\$700. Rates include all scheduled fitness and mindfulness activities. Check the website for packages. (Some prices will change in January 2010.) 800-824-1884, www.borregoranchresort.com

[THE HOTEL RATES HERE AND THROUGHOUT THE MAGAZINE ARE THE HIGH-SEASON RATES, EXCLUDING HOLIDAYS.]

of marketing. (They certainly won't in the fitness classes, which strike me as geared toward the retirees at the affiliated residential community.) No one expects gung ho participation. There's no strict mindfulness curriculum. It just happens along the way.

Losing weight, however, may not happen unless you're disciplined. The food philosophy is that "good for you" means locally sourced and unprocessed, not necessarily low in calories, carbs, or fat. The menu has many healthy choices, and special requests are handily accommodated, but so are cravings—cheeseburgers and sundaes are on offer. I love the sweet greens and crisp veggies in the well-dressed salads, and the zesty seviches, which pair nicely with the noncloying margaritas made with fresh-pressed juice.

The spa treatments are the most sophisticated component. Chinese medicine figures prominently on the menu. Gigi Terinoni, the spa director when I visit, wins my trust so quickly that I let her perform acupuncture; moxibustion (burning herbs over the skin); and cupping, which uses fire to create suction in



Easy does it: Borrego Ranch invites relaxation on its spa deck (above), in the fire-warmed lounge (top left), in the 44 cushy guest rooms (bottom left), and on the Tom Fazio golf course (below). Opposite: The entryway sign.

glass jars that are pressed against the skin. Proponents say it stimulates energy flow. The treatment leaves me bruised—it looks far worse than it feels—but euphoric. (Terinoni has since left the spa, but new Chinese-medicine practitioners have joined the staff.)

Itzikman's brother-in-law, real estate developer Gregory Perlman, bought the property in 2007, put \$12 million into renovations and \$25 million into the nearby Tom Fazio golf course, and reopened it as Borrego Ranch in November 2008. Siblings and in-laws serve as CFO, design director, resort developer, and landscape architect. That accounts for the property's quirky family-run character, which is a good thing. What hotel conglomerate would have okayed a hefty price tag for a climbing rock instead of, say, expanding the cramped gym? Or developed a spa around Chinese medicine and fair-trade products? Or taken down a block of guest rooms—leaving 44 big ones, plus 19 boxy casitas—rather than adding more to increase revenue?

There's a colorful history too. Borrego Ranch started life in 1937 as the Desert Lodge and quickly became a winter playground for wealthy coast-dwellers. Itzikman tells me the manager cooked breakfast for Marlon Brando and his mistress. In 1960 newspaperman James S. Copley bought the hotel and rechristened it La Casa del Zorro, or "House of the Fox," because it's where his mistress (the fox) lived. Some fox kitsch remains—a mural behind the bar depicts Copley employees as foxes, reading newspapers and drinking martinis—but now the vibe is more decorous.

My last day, I take a gentle yoga class from a seasoned instructor who taught at Rancho La Puerta and the Golden Door. Without being pushed, I finally keep my mind in the room. At Borrego Ranch you can have martinis *and* mindfulness. —ANN ABEL

