

## Postcard From Golden Door Men's Week

Every busy life strays out of balance. My chance for a tune up came last March at the Golden Door. Five weeks a year, this premier women's spa, thirty miles north of San Diego, brings in male masseurs and lets its facilities only to men. Only eight of the fortunate occupants of the 39 rooms were new to the Door; the rest had been to Men's Week numerous times.

Some, like the restaurant critic for Gourmet Magazine come as a occupational necessity. Others come as part of a career interregnum or a life milestone. But most come for a sophisticated blend of R&R and the opportunity for mental, physical & emotional maintenance without the ties of family or business to chafe. The ex-chairman of Shearson Lehman came for his seventieth session. Not bad for an institution that as yet to turn forty!

The experience that has these guys so hooked is a kin to a fitness "fantasy island." A private limo fetches you to the Door from your arrival point. For many that is the nearby airstrip for private jets. A radiant "fitness angel" greets you at chased brass double doors (the "golden door") and escorts you over the walk way over a gently running brook into a quietly oriental world complete with Zen sand garden.

Packing is easy and ultra-light. All you bring is underwear, swim suit, hiking shoes, and sneakers. All other togs are fresh every morning and changes available all day. Each guest is assigned a large room furnished with Japanese antiques collected since the 1950's by Deborah Szekely the 75 year old founder/owner. Each has a *tokanoma* alcove with a scroll and *ikibana* flower arrangement that is changed twice a week. The Japanese decor re-enforces the break from the outside world.

Enter then the world of "Spa Brain," the condition of advanced detachment from the cares and worries of normal life, where all activities are pleasant and all decisions made for you. After the initial consultation on arrival when a guests fitness and dietary needs and goals are assessed, all the week's activities and meals are custom-tailored to the individual. Every morning your own day's schedule of activities, on a paper fan, shows up with breakfast.

Even without the four-to-one staff to guest ratio, life at the Door would be exceptional. The sunny, dry, low smog climate in the hills thirty miles north of San Diego supports olive, citrus, and avocado groves. After a week guests glow like the native camellias and proteas.

Most of the food served at the Door is picked fresh from their own garden behind the guest rooms only hours before serving, a vast change from the month or so most food in the US takes to travel from farm to supermarket. The meals are phenomenal assisted by the cooking magic of Michel Stroot, the talented Belgium chef. Because the flavors are so vivid, one naturally eats slowly and is satisfied with the reduced fat in the small, mostly vegetarian, portions.

Even though life is easy, you don't coast at the Door. The day starts at 5:30 with a five mile hike up the mountain to watch the sun rise. Hiking in all varieties is the most popular activity at Men's

week. Some men run up the mountain and others hike up to twenty miles a day. Since some guests coordinate their visits, hiking is also an opportunity for friends to catch up after not seeing each other since their last stay at the Door.

There are lots of ways to burn off calories here. Cardio-fitness classes, circuit training, weights, tai chi, and working with a personal trainer are part of the range of exercise options available all day. Noon water volley ball is another Men's Week favorite, a good time to get some sun, splash in the pool, rout, dis, and yell, and amaze others with one's wicked serve.

My afternoons can be spent at the pool swimming or lounging, working out or getting worked on. During the day, hot blanket wraps, herbal wraps, and a hot whirlpool bath are available. Each day I get an hour massage to work out the accumulated tension and stress. Besides massage, each day one gets a "beauty" treatment. Its somehow amusing to watch a curmudgeonly executive writhe in pleasure while having a facial or having his hands and feet paraffin dipped. And at bedtime you can get a "mini" 15 minute massage that is better for sleep than any sedative.

As important as the diet, exercise, and pampering is the intellectual stimulation of spending time with those at the top of their game. Although the blend is much CEOs and owners of major businesses, doctors, and lawyers, point of view is by no means uniform. Meal, hot tub, and hiking conversations encompass differing professional viewpoints emerge regarding holistic versus pharmaceutical health care, political trends in Russia, Arab coexistence in Israel, and global trade protectionism. With defenses lowered, men can confide in the challenges that they faced with illness, family loss, or business setbacks. There is generous sympathy, support, and experience to go around. Men's Week is a great time to be selfish in the best sense of the word.