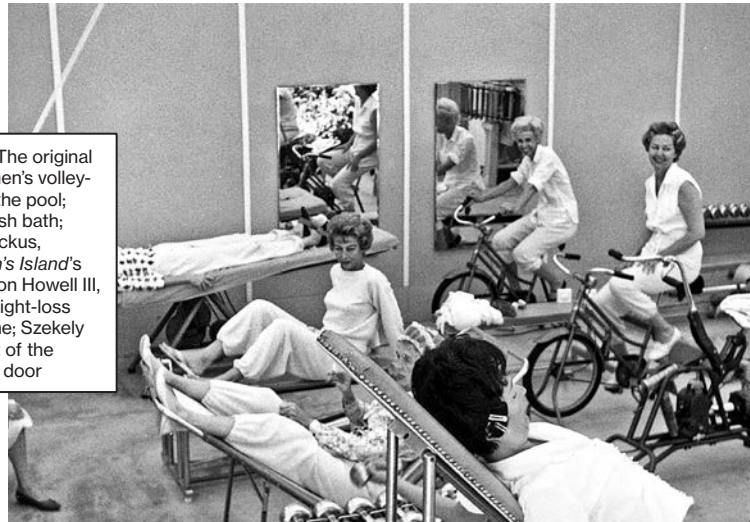


GETTING THE GLAMOURPUSSSES BACK

Golden Door spa, once the “it” retreat for Hollywood A-listers, tries to reclaim its lost glory. By Michael Callahan

Then: The original gym; men's volleyball in the pool; a Turkish bath; Jim Backus, *Gilligan's Island's* Thurston Howell III, in a weight-loss machine; Szekely in front of the golden door



It was the place for Hollywood to recede, refresh, and renew. Or more accurately, to drop out, dry out, and lose those stubborn last 10 pounds before the next project. Burt Lancaster, Bob Cummings, and Johnny Weissmuller went on hikes here; Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, Natalie Wood, Kim Novak, Barbra Streisand, and a thousand lesser lights hid out here. Aldous Huxley loved the mud wrap.

The place was the Golden Door, a 300-acre oasis in the desert hills of San Marcos, Calif., less than an hour north of San Diego. In 1959, Deborah Szekely and her husband, Edmund, a famous philologist and linguist, opened a mountain-lodge-meets-Japanese-tea-

garden spa here, promising restoration and sanctuary. “In those early days, Golden Door was known as a fat farm,” says Susie Ellis, a former staff member and now chief executive officer of the Global Wellness Institute in Miami. “Every woman was given pink warmup suits called pinkies, with matching pink turbans. And they all had avocado oil in their hair. It was quite a scene.”

Golden Door remained a scene, weathering competition from spas such as Canyon Ranch and the Peninsula and drawing visitors like Nicole Kidman, Oprah Winfrey, and Arianna Huffington. However, some tarnish started to appear in 1998 after Deborah Szekely sold the spa to a hotel chain, which in 2005 sold it

to an investment group—each owner in turn cutting staff and amenities to help the bottom line. Oddly, this downward spiral began right as the U.S. spa movement started booming, cutting further into profits. Resort hotels amped up offerings to lure tourists, and the day spa, once considered a strip-mall afterthought, manifested in upscale incarnations, giving women who couldn’t afford to drink guava juice for a week in the desert a taste of the wellness life.

Golden Door’s savior was an apostle: Joanne Conway, the wife of Carlyle Group LP co-founder and co-CEO Bill Conway Jr., who purchased the property and its 40 guest rooms for \$24.8 million in 2012. Since then,

Conway, who’d visited 22 times, has been on a mission to return the spa to its rightful place. And she’s succeeding, albeit with a different clientele. “Our demographic was people who were here to lose weight,” says Kathy Van Ness, Golden Door’s chief operating officer and the former CEO of Diane von Furstenberg Studio LP. “Now we get people who are as fit as you could possibly be, and they’re exhausted. Their stress levels are so high.”

To better cater to these exhausted, stressed-out people, Van Ness doubled down on the idea of Golden Door as a luxury respite and diversified its revenue streams, investing in a line of high-end organic beauty products and a farm stand. “It needed a complete

overhaul,” she says. “It wasn’t in need of a brand—it was a brand that needed to come back to life.”

Van Ness spent \$15 million, doubling the spa’s grounds, opening a boutique, and expanding its farm: The majority of the food that ends up on spa-goers’ plates is cultivated on-site. There are 45 varieties of vegetables (Golden Door just put in 10,000 tomato plants), honey from beehives, and eggs from a chicken coop. Van Ness says that by 2027, farming could account for 5 percent of total revenue. Of course, there’s also a pool, a salon, and access to daily massages, as well as a bamboo garden, 20 miles of hiking trails, and intangibles such as lush groves of orange, pear, and lemon trees; century-old oaks; and a

weathered bell that gongs nightly, beckoning kimono-wearing guests inside for dinner.

Occupancy, which was 55 percent in the first quarter of 2013, hit 71 percent in the first quarter of this year. A new generation of A-listers—Amy Schumer, Rooney Mara, Lauren Conrad, Olivia Wilde—has discovered the place, and to attract more of them, the spa included gift certificates for free weeklong stays (price tag: \$8,850 each) in the gift bags of this year’s top Oscar nominees. Conway, meanwhile, donates all the profits to children’s charities. “My decision to buy the Golden Door was never about personal financial gain,” she says. “It was about preserving a special place.” **B**

Now: A Watsu massage; the spa’s chef prepares dinner from vegetables harvested that morning; a facial in progress; orange groves line the property’s entrance; the on-site farm; Van Ness

