

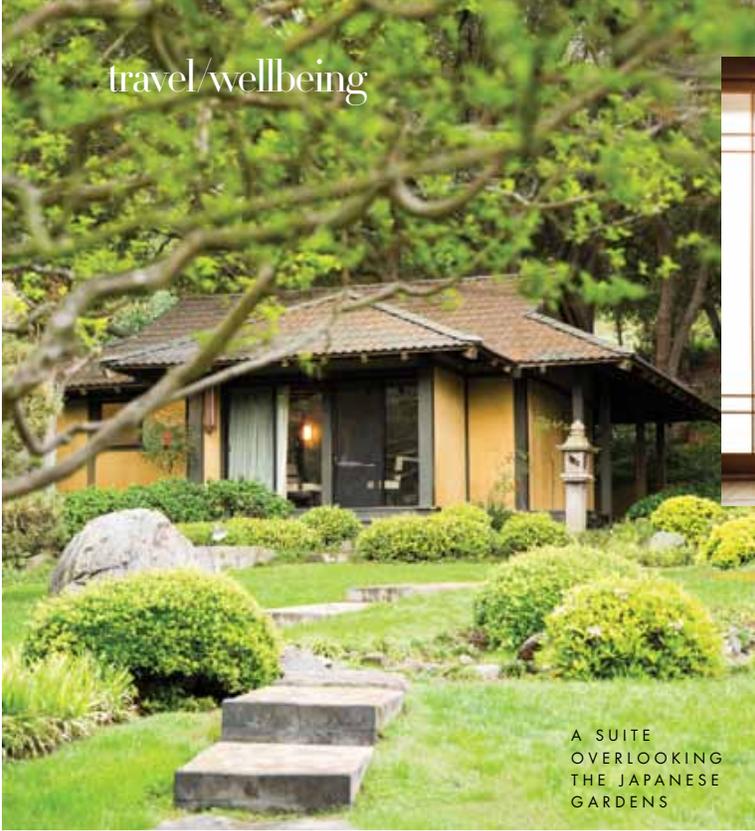


# BEYOND THE GOLDEN DOOR

FOR MORE THAN HALF A CENTURY, AMERICA'S ORIGINAL WELLNESS RESORT HAS BEEN A HIDEAWAY FOR ROCK STARS AND ROYALTY. ITS NEW MANTRA COMBINES GOLD STANDARD HEALTH WITH A MISSION FROM THE HEART

WORDS: GINA JOHNSON

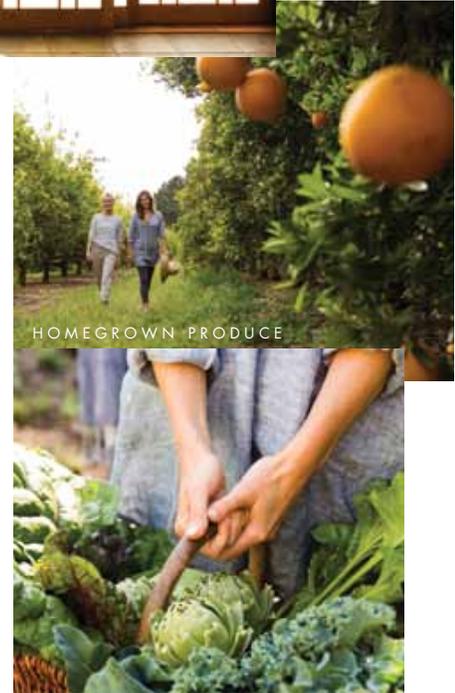




A SUITE  
OVERLOOKING  
THE JAPANESE  
GARDENS



A TRADITIONAL  
YUKATA ROBE



HOMEGROWN PRODUCE

In the aristocracy of the global wellness resort business, there are few names as revered as the 57-year-old Golden Door in California, a hallowed institution of glow-giving moxie that has been primping, polishing, motivating and coddling the world's elite for decades.

A mind boggling 70 per cent of the guests who come here have returned more than ten times, content – delighted even – to part with the US\$9,000 (Dhs33,000) it will cost them for an all-inclusive week of inner peace and outer vim, certain that the return on their investment will be reaped in multiple dividends.

Those who have sipped the elixir of Zen are convinced: this is not a five star spa holiday; it is a life changing experience.

It's a mantra firmly endorsed by Golden Door's Managing Director and COO Kathy Van Ness, the stylish former fashion industry exec who successfully carved a professional reputation as a lifestyle brand aficionado as the former president of Diane von Furstenberg and Speedo.

Van Ness's maiden venture into the world of hospitality – a competitive, mostly male-centric industry populated by lifetime corporate stalwarts – was a bold

move. Coming on two years later, and business is thriving.

'We're not a spa. There are a lot of places that fit this description but that's not what we're here to do,' says Van Ness emphatically.

'We're not a place for people to go and get facials and hang out and do spa things. This is life changing. And people who are really engaged in the experience want to be able to stop and regroup and gaze on the earth for just a moment and redefine themselves in some way.

'Of course, we can do beautiful work with your skin and help you to improve your fitness and food choices but it's more than that. Our

focus is the whole body.

'After a week with us, what happens to your cells and your mind and how it impacts upon you physically and mentally is what we're about,' she says.

'What you take away with you is just as important as the experience you have when you're here.'

The historical back-story of the brand is legendary. Opened by the eccentric wellness resort pioneer Deborah Szekely in 1958, Golden Door was positioned as Hollywood's uber health retreat; a private sanctuary where luminaries of the era such as Elizabeth Taylor and Barbara Streisand could unwind and recoup away from the prying eyes of Hollywood and all its vices.

Decades later as it labored under the weight of corporate mismanagement, a long-time loyal guest (who had herself visited Golden Door more than 20 times) came to its rescue. Its benefactor was Joanne Conway, wife of billionaire philanthropist and US businessman Bill Conway, who not only set about bringing the

resort back to life, but also pledged to donate 100 per cent of the business's profits to charity.

To date, Golden Door has aided several causes, including a centre in Ethiopia (supported by Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt) that provides medical care to children. Its raison d'être however is its own Golden Door Foundation, ➤



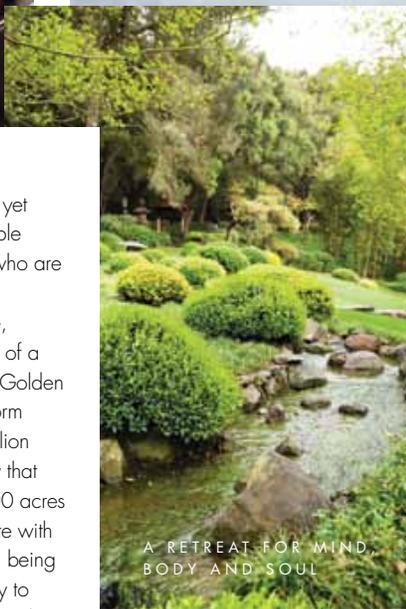
GOLDEN DOOR'S  
TRANQUIL ROOMS



ORGANIC HOMEMADE MEALS ARE PREPARED DAILY



THE RURAL LABYRINTH WALK



A RETREAT FOR MIND, BODY AND SOUL

an organization that quietly, yet purposefully, provides indelible lifelong support to children who are victims of abuse.

Altruistic endeavours aside, guests are enjoying the fruits of a reinvigorated experience at Golden Door that has come in the form of a sympathetic US\$20 million refurbishment of the property that included the purchase of 300 acres of neighboring land complete with an olive grove. The intention being that – in line with the strategy to become a holistic lifestyle brand - the resort will one day produce its own olive oil.

The 600 acre property set in hills of Escondido, outside San Diego, offers guests the opportunity to join one of the guided 6am morning hikes, a spectacular ritual that sometimes takes place while the stars are still shining in the pre-dawn sky.

Guests are rigorously interviewed before their arrival about their needs and goals, allowing staff to intuit bespoke programmes for their week that can include anything from Tabata boxing to yoga to chakra re-alignment. Daily massages, body treatments and a personal trainer are all included in the price, as are all meals, loving prepared by the ultra charming, organic-

championing, honeybee-cultivating executive chef Greg Fry.

Guests stay in simple yet elegant individual villas (there is no sharing with the exception of one couples' week a year) that are designed around beautiful Japanese gardens and Kai ponds in the style of a traditional Ryokan village. Your workout gear is freshly laundered daily and the room comes fully stocked with a week's worth of Golden Door spa and beauty products, work-out gear, water bottles, a gym bag and a beautiful Japanese robe that guests are encouraged to wear to the communal evening dinners. You really only need to turn up with your trainers and the rest is

taken care of for you.

Such is the gravitas of the 'whole self' experience that male guests have come looking for a slice of the (gluten-free) pie and Golden Door now offers six men-only weeks a year catering to everyone from Fortune 500 executives to fishermen.

And apart from the obvious health benefits, almost all Golden Door guests speak of the intangible bonding experience that comes from stripping back the facades of their regular lives and laying

bare their authentic selves; the fresh perspective they find from the bonding experiences that come out of communal dinners in matching Yukatas, a ritual labyrinth walk or the clandestine comfort of confiding in a stranger.

You leave feeling stronger, fitter, lighter and clearer with a testament of sorts – a final long-lasting touch point. On your last evening at Golden Door guests are asked to write a love letter to themselves. The letter is then sealed and stored safely and five months from the date of your departure, it is posted back to you serving as a reminder of the week that was and all that you promised yourself, and, if you're one of the 70 per cent of fiercely loyal return customers, what lies in store for your return. ■

● **PRICES:** FROM DHS33,000 PER WEEK ALL-INCLUSIVE.

● **HOW TO GET THERE:** EMIRATES FLY DAILY TO LOS ANGELES WITH ECONOMY AIRFARES STARTING FROM DHS5,500.

● **FOR MORE INFORMATION:** GOLDENDOOR.COM AND EMIRATES.COM



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