

LAGUNA BEACH

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DESERT *Cleanse*

FROM HIPPIE RETREAT TO BOUGIE LUXURY SPA, WE CARE SPA IN DESERT HOT SPRINGS CELEBRATES 40 YEARS OF MIND, BODY, SPIRIT DETOXING.

By Justine Amodeo

Driving up the dirt road that leads to We Care Spa, just outside Desert Hot Springs, the outside world feels distant, left somewhere behind in the dust of the highway and the cinematic horizon.

This is not the austere, back-to-basics detox retreat I remember from decades ago. What was once a quietly radical, hippie sanctuary has been reimagined into a polished, bougie wellness destination where purification comes with plush robes, private patios and mountain views that glow rose-gold at sunset.

I've come for a three-day cleanse, the spa's signature reset made famous as much by its results as by its celebrity following. Over the years, guests have included Ben Affleck, Gwen Stefani, Cameron Diaz, Matthew McConaughey, Reese Witherspoon, and Andie MacDowell. Though here, fame dissolves into discretion as everyone blends into a kind of effortless, robe-clad elegance where snippets of conversations about film deals, publishing deadlines and wellness breakthroughs can

be heard between juice stations and pool loungers.

Set across 20 acres, the grounds unfold like a private desert estate: bougainvillea spilling in saturated pinks, citrus trees heavy with fruit, and meandering paths that lead to tucked-away meditation gardens. The design invites wandering. Here, some of the best therapy can be found in nature.

Helping the Body Heal Itself

The ethos traces back to founder Susana Belen, now 88 and still a presence at the property, teaching yoga daily and embodying the philosophy she built the retreat on: that if you remove emotional, spiritual, and physical toxic build-up, you can make space for the body to heal itself. Her original vision, born from personal upheaval and a search for balance, remains intact, even as the surroundings have evolved.





We Care founder Susana Belew

This includes breathwork, meditation and yoga, eating a mostly organic plant-based diet, eliminating gluten and alcohol, minimizing sugar, maintaining a home free of toxic cleaning products, keeping an alkaline PH balance in the body through alkaline water and diet, and conducting a weekly or quarterly fasting protocol, which increases the efficiency of the digestive system, stimulates the organs responsible for cleansing and elimination, and triggers autophagy and antiaging at the cellular level.

Easier said than done, of course, which is why getting healthy is a process that can be jumpstarted here. The liquid fasting protocol provides all of the nutrients needed while giving the five organs of elimination a rest to repair and rejuvenate tissues of the body, which enhances overall healing. Free workshops and classes teach you how to do the rest.

A Luxurious Update

Colonics and juicing are the core of We Care's detox program, which hasn't changed since it opened in 1986. But the earthy, hippie We Care Spa of the past has now been refurbished with luxury villas, a new pool, private saunas, elevated treatments, week-long workshops and shamanic healing. Between colonics, guests can bounce on their own personal rebounders while looking out to the mountains, vibrate on power plates for lymphatic drainage, tiptoe through a meditative stone labyrinth, relax in luxurious loungers by the pool and schedule spa treatments and spiritual healing sessions.

The full design transformation, which was completed during the pandemic, is a massive change from Belen's original three-room home, where she originally helped people with the knowledge she accumulated from her own healing journey after a difficult divorce. Consumed by anxiety and frustration, she sought out practices that left her feeling strong and was able to reform her relationship with food and nutrition and tap into her body's natural vitality through yoga and exercise.

The We Care Spa methods are derived directly from Belen's personal experience and ongoing education, paired with her daughter, We Care CEO Susan Lombardi, who began partnering with her mother 37 years ago after a fast-paced modeling career and melanoma scare. Lombardi's business acumen and love of hosting have created an inviting, nurturing escape for guests wanting to make a serious commitment to their health.

The convergence between ancient modalities and modern healing is reflected in the retreat's architecture and design. Lombardi worked with renowned interior designer Debbie Fogel of Fogel Interiors in Los Angeles on the redesign of the public areas and guestrooms and suites which can now accommodate up to 40 people. They sourced Buddhist and Hindu sculptures, large crystals and other artistic elements from around the world which grace the grounds of the property.

My spacious executive suite, one of 28 accommodations across the property, is less a room than a retreat within a retreat. Sunlight pours through wide doors that open to a private patio, where a rebounder trampoline sits facing the mountains. Inside, every detail anticipates comfort: a deep soaking tub, circadian lighting designed to support sleep cycles, an air purification system, essential oils diffusing softly into the air. There are weights, a yoga mat, a balance ball, all gentle reminders that movement here is encouraged but never forced.



Pool at dusk



Labyrinth

Learning to be Unbusy

Between treatments, guests drift through the grounds, some settling into loungers by the pool, others meandering the curves of a stone labyrinth or landing in hammocks or shaded nooks. There are hidden hot tubs, and quiet corners designed for doing absolutely nothing, a rare and underrated luxury.

The program itself is structured but feels fluid. First there is the fast that replaces solid meals with a rotation of pressed organic juices, vegetable broths, detox teas, and alkaline water.

The menu of more than 40 treatments is the heart of the experience, and We Care is known for its colon hydrotherapy, a practice that is approached with a calm, almost matter-of-fact professionalism. It becomes just another part of the daily ritual, as expected as yoga or meditation, and far less intimidating than its reputation suggests.

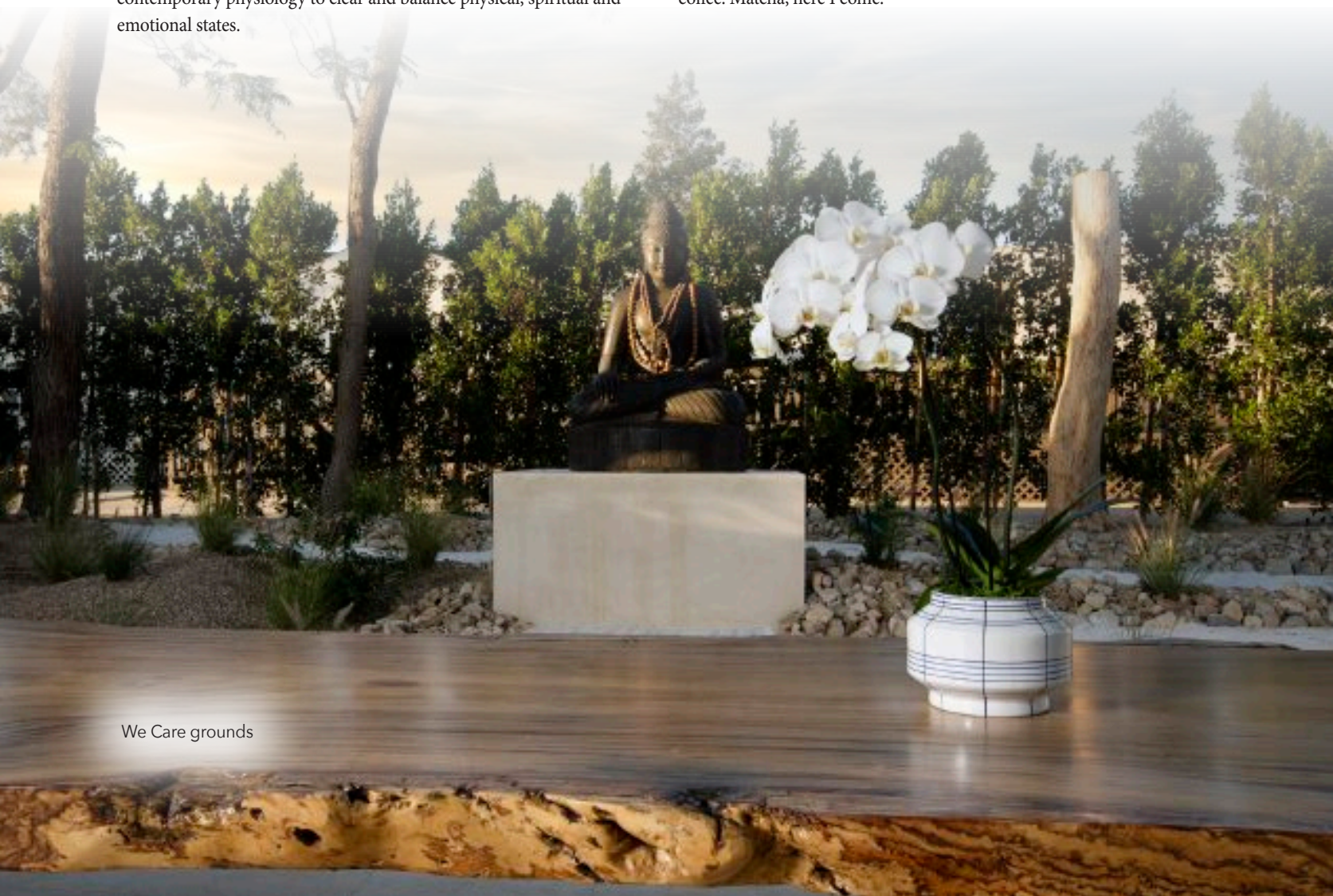
Based on your own unique goals and health challenges, the attentive staff creates a custom itinerary before you arrive, so you get the most out of your stay, whether it's two days or two weeks. Besides the daily colonics, I choose a series of treatments, all designed to facilitate the detoxing. One day it's the System Recovery Master Treatment, where I lay on a heated amethyst mat and get dry brushed before being blissfully wrapped in castor oil, followed by a soothing foot and scalp massage. On another day, I try the Magnesium Detox, another wrap comprised of mineral magnesium and aloe paste, relieving and calming overactive nerves. An enlightening scalp and nurturing shoulder massage follows with warm hydrating lotion. I also try the Crystal Cranial Sacral treatment, which combines the energetic properties of crystals with contemporary physiology to clear and balance physical, spiritual and emotional states.

All of these are meant to work in conjunction with the daily colon hydrotherapy, a closed system used to flush out toxins. It's a little awkward, strangely comforting and definitely makes you feel like you've just been given a new lease on life.

By the second day, the shift becomes tangible. Hunger and brain fog recede into the background, replaced by a sense of clarity that is both physical and mental. Without the usual rhythms of meals and distractions, time expands. I find myself drawn repeatedly to a floating lounge, a softly swaying, cocoon-like bed suspended from a single point. Lying there, gently rocking, I watch clouds drift across the desert sky and feel, for a moment, entirely unburdened.

There are daily classes — breathwork, sound healing, nutrition workshops — but nothing feels obligatory. The schedule is yours to shape. Some guests fill their days; others leave generous stretches of emptiness in between.

On the final morning, breaking the fast feels almost ceremonial. I am given a delicious salad and instructions on how to reenter the real world and it's going to involve a LOT of change. Following the fast, the staff at We Care recommend a healthy, mostly plant-based diet, free of toxins to help continual rebalance of the body. Belen advocates — and her book, "Detox & Revitalize," lays it all out in detail — starting each morning with a vegetable-based smoothie, and then enjoying salads, an array of vegetables, gluten-free grains, a range of herbs, as well as small amounts of fruit, nuts, seeds, and beneficial oils such as olive and unrefined coconut. She suggests avoiding microwaved, processed and GMO foods, preservatives, food additives, toxic oils, alcohol, processed sugar and coffee. Matcha, here I come.



We Care grounds