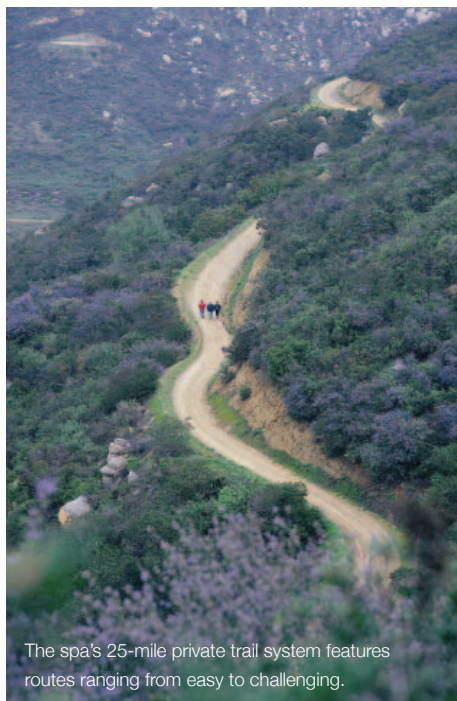




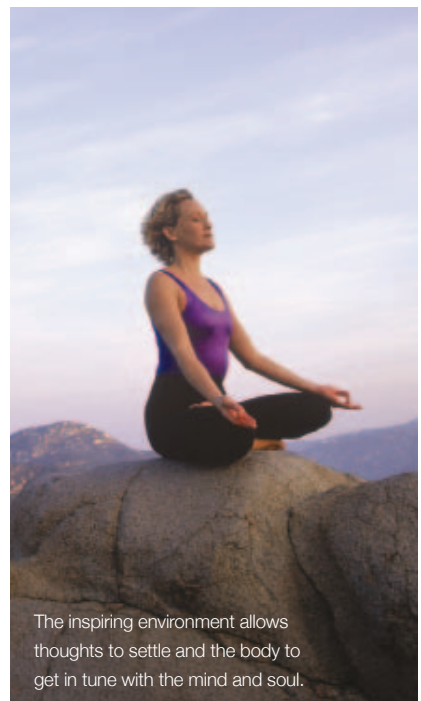
Waking up is easy to do when it's to a sunrise at Golden Door.



Golden Door's outdoor labyrinth is designed for quiet meditation.



The spa's 25-mile private trail system features routes ranging from easy to challenging.



The inspiring environment allows thoughts to settle and the body to get in tune with the mind and soul.

Good As Gold

JEZEBEL's editor checks out of her busy life in Atlanta for the calming confines of SoCal's flagship spa—the life-changing Golden Door.

As I stepped through the shimmering gold entrance and crossed over the wooden bridge onto the rolling grounds of the Golden Door spa for a week of retrospection and wellness, I felt a lot like Elizabeth Gilbert on hiatus from life. I, too, was seeking soul-inspiring adventure, and—minus globe-trotting encounters with fine-looking foreigners such as Javier Bardem—I found it. After hearing raves about Golden Door (the nation's first true luxury destination spa) and fantasizing about recreating the entire trek made famous by Gilbert's tome, *Eat, Pray, Love*, something clicked. A week at "the Door" was exactly what I needed after endless deadlines and a constant flow of caffeine.

The word "sanctuary" gets thrown around in spa circles a lot, but not only does it absolutely apply to the Golden Door, it is the mantra here. Turning off my iPhone (never happens), detaching from my laptop (no!), and sitting quietly to breathe (what's that?) are by no stretch normal activities for me, nor are they my preferred pastimes. But fitness is, and hitting the spa? Well, who doesn't love indulgence? And so, desperately needing to rest and restore, I opened myself up to the Golden Door and stepped into a world like nothing else.



Privacy is paramount inside the Golden Door.

EARTHLY DELIGHTS

Tucked away in the countryside of northern San Diego in Escondido, Calif., this exclusive hideaway has catered to the notable for more than half a century. Privacy is paramount, hence the limit of 40 guests per week. Asian-inspired grounds lend the mood-uplifting spa its sense of Zen-like antiquity—think *Seven Years In Tibet*, only without Brad Pitt. But believe me when I tell you that the place is so transporting that it has the power of reducing the thought of Pitt to a mere glint in the distance.

Hippocrates mused that nature and good health are inextricably linked. Golden Door takes this sentiment seriously. Awe is inspired by 377 acres of pastoral hills; a 3-acre organic garden blooming with 425 citrus trees and 122 acres of avocados; 25 miles of hiking trails and a full-scale replica of the 12th-century labyrinth in Chartres Cathedral.

All nods to Deborah Szekely, who opened the then women's-only retreat in 1959. This organic food-touting fitness guru, now in her late 80s, still conducts evening lectures at the award-winning refuge, which today welcomes both genders for weeklong, life-changing experiences envisioned by its trailblazing founder. Golden Door has seen many changes during the past 50 years, but its mission to restore a sense of unity to the body, mind and spirit through food, fitness and nature remains constant.

JUMP START

My journey began a couple weeks prior to arriving at the spa (they don't mess around). A comprehensive guide arrived at my home shortly after I booked my trip, which, for a Virgo whose life hangs by a deadline, was beyond appreciated. In it, I learned about all the fine details of my week at the Door, which would include a customized exercise program, daily massage, meditation, lectures and beauty treatments. Excited, I promptly filled it out and sent back the comprehensive health and fitness profile to assist the spa's team in providing targeted service based on my objectives. Then I thoroughly combed through an everything-you-need-to-know guide like any self-respecting Type A would.

For once, packing was a breeze. The Door provides guests with a full line of all-natural facial, body and hair products (all phenomenal) as well as sweats, T-shirts, shorts, robes, jackets, sandals, sun hats (daily laundry service is included). Personal workout clothing is welcome, of course, but you don't need much more beyond what the spa provides, save for requisite underthings, socks, sneakers and hiking boots. And don't bother bringing along your face—makeup and baubles are not needed. Even a water bottle and carry-all tote are provided and yours to keep (as are leftover beauty amenities).

Narrowing down the options—everything from spinning, cardio kickboxing, and T'ai Chi to Pilates and Feldenkrais classes to luxe spa treatments and nutritionist-tailored meals—is difficult, but that's why there are 160 Golden Door staffers there to give a directional boost to the 40 guests; that's a 4:1 ratio for anyone keeping track, ensuring the highest level of service possible, including



Inside the guest room, simple styling and Japanese influences foster balance.



Inspired by millennium-old Japanese *honjins*, the Door provides just enough luxury to keep its well-traveled guests comfortable.

The Door's Zen design creates the perfect backdrop for focusing on oneself. Authenticity, such as the presence of rare antique stone lanterns, further adds to its appeal.



housekeeping visits five times a day. The Door's guest return rate of 60 percent is no accident, and it starts here.

Needless to say, when I got to the Door I was eager to jump in.

READY, SET, GOAL...

During my stay, I met with a Golden Door advisor who helped design an overall plan based on my needs (a high-energy fitness program consisting of Balletone core strengthening, water-based exercise, outdoor cross-training, boot camp, personal training sessions and Yuichi, a choreographic calorie-scorcher).

I also powwowed with various other specialists and nutritionist Dr. Wendy Bazilian. After reviewing my health and fitness profile, we discussed my goals: to participate in as many fitness classes as I was able, force myself out of bed for morning hikes and slip into a Zen state as often as possible (myriad spa therapies helped along this endeavor). We also talked weight goals and desired caloric programming. I went middle of the road, choosing a plan for 1,500 calories per day based on what I had heard about the fabulous food (all true) and my intense workout schedule—a girl's gotta eat!

Then it was off to meet Carol Tibbetts, the personal trainer assigned to kickstart my metabolism. It was the first of four sessions that were all about me. I wanted to be pushed, and Tibbetts obliged. Because she took the time to ask pointed questions, my workouts were improved by the use of a heart monitor. Sessions also featured intense cardio and a ton of information, including a recommendation that people walk 10,000 steps a day for optimal health. Tibbetts also gave me two DVDs and a slew of on-the-go take-home workout sheets that have proven to be invaluable tools.

PURE INSPIR-ASIAN

The conclusion of every exercise-filled day came with a welcome retreat to my room. Accommodations at the Door are gorgeous, but intentionally spare to clear what is cluttering the mind. Simple styling and Japanese influences foster balance. Inspired by millennium-old Japanese *honjins* (country inns designed to welcome the weary traveler), the Door, while minimalist, provides just enough luxury to keep its well-traveled guests comfortable. TV-free rooms feature traditional *tokonamas*, or meditative shrines, with Japanese flower arrangements and sliding glass doors that lead to aromatic Asian gardens. While guests are able to use cell phones and computers in their room (Wi-Fi is available and complimentary), total disconnection is encouraged.

These spaces are so calming that it is tempting to stay inside them, but the Door, comprised of four Japanese courtyards, stone walkways, waterfalls, fragrant sages, wildflowers, a koi pond and a wide variety of meandering animals provides a magnificent backdrop perfect for strolling and ideal for meditation and quiet inquiry. The presence of rare antique stone lanterns dating back to the Edo era adds to the step-back-in-time atmosphere of your respite.

Three personalized gourmet meals and two juice/snack breaks

per day are included with every stay and, based on personal objective, are crafted accordingly. Of course, guests can do as much or as little as they want and are not required to go to any classes or seminars or follow the recommended schedule—lying by the pool, reading a book by the Zen garden or shopping in the Door’s well-stocked spa boutique (lululemon, anyone?) are perfectly acceptable.

After getting settled in my room, I slipped into my Japanese kimono, slathered on an all-natural moisturizer and headed to dinner, which began with hors d’oeuvres in a quaint gathering room adjacent to the dining room where guests mingle. Dinner is served on communal tables to make solo travelers feel welcome.

Executive Chef Kayla Roche’s cuisine is excellent, big on flavor, low in fat and calories, and brimming with organic ingredients, more than 75 varieties of which are harvested in the Door’s organic veggie garden; dietary restrictions are always considered. Cooking classes are offered weekly by chef Kayla, the Door’s first female chef in 20 years, whose tasty selections include a protein, a healthy starch and a vegetable, leading to full-stomach satisfaction. The kicker: there’s even dessert!

It was wonderful to learn that the Door subscribes to the “everything in moderation” philosophy. Post-meal is a Door ritual: walking to the resort’s gate, knocking on the doors and strolling back while citrus trees and aromas fill the senses. The remnant working ranch orchards boast extensive orange groves and ornamentals. Lectures and discussions covering topics on everything from weight-loss strategies and astrology (an individual reading is highly recommended) to educational sessions led by scientists, authors, and health and fitness specialists also follow nightly dinners.

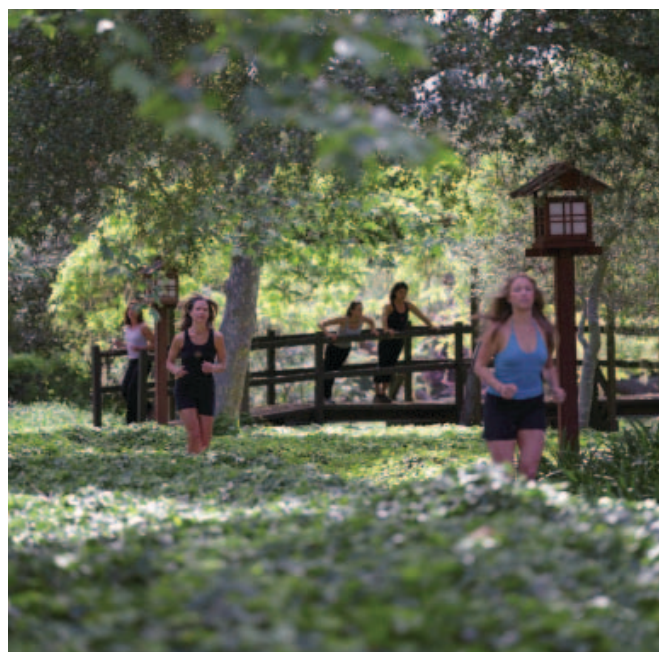
INTO THE GROOVE

Golden Door boasts the most extensive on-site spa hiking program in America. The spa’s impressive 25-mile private trail system features routes for varying levels, from easy to challenging. While an early rise is required, the hiking experience is well worth it. Quietly determined, I enjoyed moderate hikes up stairs and a few hardy hills in the company of friendly, chatty women. Unique to the Golden Door experience is the bond it establishes among guests. After invigorating morning walks with my new friends, I would retreat back to my room for a delicious breakfast, usually consisting of oatmeal, eggs or another healthy staple.

Filling up is requisite as morning fitness classes are highly intense. Afternoon, however, transitions into yoga, stretching, core work and meditation. Lunch is enjoyed poolside, weather permitting, and highly anticipated snacks appear between main meals. After that, it’s spa time. Straight-in-a-row spa days don’t get much better than they do at the Door. I couldn’t get enough of the facials, wraps, balneotherapy, massages and cleansing treatments, and the best part is that unlike other luxury resorts, you don’t pay extra for the spa menu, it’s all part of the deal. Trust me when I tell you to request a massage at the end of your day—you’ll drift off soundly, trading one dreamland for another.



In-room massage makes for the perfect end to a fitness-filled day.



The Door’s Boot Camp takes advantage of the great outdoors.



Classes like Yoga Ball help to strengthen and tone.

Golden Weeks



The cuisine at the Door is fresh, tasty and satisfying.

Rates start at \$6,500, depending on season. For more information or reservations, visit goldendoor.com/escondido or call 800.424.0777.

What's Next!

Join Golden Door's Executive Chef Kayla Roche and guest chef, Atlanta's own author of *Bon Appétit, Y'all: Recipes and Stories from Three Generations of Southern Cooking*, Virginia Willis, for the second annual Culinary Week, March 27 to April 3. The event includes lectures and discussions that are both fun and educational. Tours of the Golden Door's 3-acre organic veggie garden, fat-banishing culinary lessons, and a Southern Comfort Spa Style dinner are also on the menu.

What's New!

The following events are new Golden Door additions for 2011.

"Writing From the Soul with Anya Ushakova-Crain," July 31–Aug. 7 (\$6,500)

Tap into your creative side and immerse yourself in the words of mystics and poets. Transformative artist Anya Ushakova-Crain leads this week's writing workshop, which will help you to discover your soul's language. Writing experience is not required.

"Taking Control of Your Health with Dr. David Finn (co-ed Week)," Sept. 11–18 (\$7,750)

Board certified Dr. David Finn will address today's most pressing health care issues and the state of the health care system during this interactive weeklong event. Dr. Finn is a primary care physician at the Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, as well as an instructor of medicine at Harvard Medical School. He will provide a comprehensive, personalized Executive Health Profile to guests for an additional fee.

"Cancer Survivorship with Carolyn Scott Kortge and Gail Sheehy," Oct. 16–23 (\$7,750)

Walk in the footsteps of *The Spirited Walker* author Carolyn Scott Kortge, who will share her insights on cancer survivorship. Lessons from her book *Healing Walks for Hard Times* will be discussed to complement those best-selling author Gail Sheehy put forth in her tome, *Passages in Caregiving: Turning Chaos Into Confidence*, which chronicles her 17-year journey as a caregiver to her husband. This poignant paired event will take place during Breast Cancer Awareness month.



Beautiful waterfalls are found throughout the Door.



Relaxing by the pool is a perfectly acceptable activity.



More than 75 varieties are harvested in the Door's 3-acre veggie garden.

The experience of walking the spa's outdoor labyrinth was new to me. I had seen one before, but never quite knew what it was or why walking it was the key to meditation. No surprise—I can barely sit for a minute without thinking, talking or both. Did I find the experience transformative? Not exactly, but I did take the time to stop and assess life. The spa's inspiring environment allowed my thoughts to settle and my body to attune with my mind and soul. On this level, maybe it actually was transformative. Beyond the labyrinth, six exercise studios, two swimming pools, along with a Kiatsu Water Therapy pool, a bathhouse for herbal wraps and body scrubs, and a Yama Koya (mountain hut) for specialty massage comprise the total spa experience.

EXITING THE GOLDEN DOORS

Integrating the lessons learned (and there are quite a few) at the Golden Door into your life after departure is really key to the spa's total experience. Of course, because life has a way of interrupting even the most well-intended plans, guests have the opportunity to write a letter to themselves that will be mailed six months later, serving as a reminder of the experiences that are possible and of how rich life can be when lived well and fully.

Now I only have 180 days until I can relive the experience again, in my own words. —Beth Weitzman