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**1924 Riders in front of Hacienda**

**Unplugged at Rancho de la Osa**

**By Sandy Bornstein**

My unplugged dude ranch adventure began as my husband and I drove about 40 miles from Tucson, AZ through the arid terrain that led to Rancho De La Osa.

We arrived at lunch to find the guests conversing around an oversized rectangular table in a large dining room inside the aqua colored 19th-century hacienda. I squeezed in between a cluster of middle-aged women wearing identical T-shirts. On the other side were several couples and a family. Other than the group who was part of a yoga seminar, everyone else appeared to be unrelated. Soon I was busy chatting with the yoga ladies while I ate my salad of vegetables grown in the onsite garden.



We

*Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Chamber*

checked into the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Chamber, a simple, rustic room frequented by LBJ and his wife Lady Bird Johnson whenever they visited Rancho De La Osa. While the room has been renovated, the structure dates to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The bold geometric fabrics on the bedspread and floor rug stood in sharp contrast to the tan adobe walls and rustic floor slabs. A wood burning stone fireplace occupied one wall. The room didn't have a TV. Even though there was Wi-Fi onsite, my phone and computer didn't connect. I chose to live without and not complain.

### **Instead of being fixated on electronic devices, the group of former strangers enjoyed talking.**

Upon investigation, learned the room were uniquely decorated with striking color combinations. I later learned that many notable individuals, (Vice President Humphrey, Adlai Stevenson, Joan Crawford, and Margaret Mitchell, to name a few), were former guests at this ranch and that each room is named after one of them. History buffs will love this bit of trivia— the Marshall Plan was drafted at this ranch.

Since 1924, when the ranch opened the property has changed hands several times, most recently in 2016. The new owners, along with an historic preservation organization, are working to restore the dude ranch to its former glory.



*Sandy and husband out for a ride*

Since it is a dude ranch, of course, we had to ride horses, or at least animals close to horses! We saddled up; I mounted my mule and followed our guide, Lynee, on a sandy trail.

Our destination was the controversial U.S.-Mexico border wall that was constructed under the Bush administration. For about 10 minutes, we rode on a path that ran parallel to the tubular wall. While the ride only traversed a tiny portion of the wall, we were told that the barrier ended just a bit up the nearby hill. A couple of U.S. Border Patrol trucks passed while our group was taking pictures. While this border location may concern some, I felt safe.

A bit later, we stopped for two additional photo opportunities— one was at the ranch's cemetery and the other was at a high point where we had a panoramic view of the ranch buildings below.



As we headed back to the stable, the sun was sinking toward the horizon and rays of sunshine cast a golden glow over a nearby mountain range. While I was mildly aware of rhythmic hoof beats and an occasional bird chirping, my head pivoted back and forth so that I could capture a mental image of this serene desert landscape. No wonder so many famous

people chose to stay here decades ago.

At the ringing of the dinner bell, the guests filtered into the hacienda. This time, the wooden table was dressed with a white tablecloth and red napkins. The young chef confirmed dietary restrictions and allergies. Like a large extended family, we shared in one couple's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration. Most were still seated at the table when the kitchen staff was ready to leave for the evening. Instead of being fixated on electronic devices, the group of former strangers enjoyed talking.



Later, I explored some of the other rooms of the hacienda. Artwork, antiques, and historic photographs brought to life a bygone era. Amazingly, this ranch has the oldest continually used building in Arizona, a former 1700s mission outpost built by Jesuit priests, currently called the "cantina" and used for social gatherings.

On the next day, we enjoyed a two-hour horseback ride, a motorized flat tire bicycle adventure, and an ATV ride into the mountains. At first, I was a bit reluctant to try a motorized bicycle but by the end of the ride, I was sold. I didn't have to be the caboose because I could simply push a button to go faster. It was great fun to pass my husband while pedaling uphill.



The ATV ride was thrilling as we zig-zagged up the mountainous countryside. We stopped to view some ruins. However, I received conflicting information about their history and relevancy. Everyone walked away with a souvenir from the desert— head to toe dust.

On our last morning, we visited the nearby [Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge](#). The park ranger provided an overview of the work that is being done to reestablish the population of the endangered masked bobwhite quail and to restore the native grassland. He casually mentioned the 42 species of western diamondback rattlesnakes that reside in this Sonoran Desert refuge. Fortunately, we didn't come across any so at least snakes weren't a desert souvenir!

Given the drive back to Tucson for our afternoon flight on our last day, we only had time to explore the Aquirre Trail. The ranger felt that we had a good chance of seeing wildlife since the Grebe Pond had some remaining water. Migrating birds, deer, pronghorn and javelin oftentimes come for a drink. We only saw a few red-tailed hawks and sparrows soaring overhead.

Nowadays, it's difficult to unplug from technology at home or on vacation. The laidback culture at Rancho de la Osa provided a welcoming, southwestern environment where modern conveniences lost their appeal. Couples and families relaxed without disruptions. For those few days, I rarely thought about the world outside the ranch's perimeter. I was refreshed and ready to return to my daily life.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR – SANDY BORNSTEIN



Sandy Bornstein's visit to Rancho de la Osa was sponsored by [Visit Tucson](#)

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