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## Santa Monica: LA's best side

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A view of the Santa Monica Pier and its world-famous ferris wheel at sunset.  
*Courtesy R. Landau*



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The Third Street Promenade, located three blocks from the Pacific Ocean in Santa Monica, has hundreds of shops, bars and restaurants, and dozens of street performers.  
*Santa Monica Convention and Visitor's Bureau*



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The pool at the Le Merigot offers an alternative to the beach, which is just steps away.  
*Courtesy Le Merigot Hotel*

SANTA MONICA, Calif. — It's a joy to be a tourist in your own town, and there's no better place to do that than a beach city with so much to do and see in an eight-mile radius.

Recently, I had the opportunity to return to my old stomping grounds of Santa Monica, Calif., and truly enjoy visiting.

For the five years I lived in Santa Monica, I was too busy with the grind of launching a daily newspaper to really appreciate the resort. Of course, I never took working and living at the beach for granted and, as a journalist there, I had more insight than most on the amenities and happenings.

But it wasn't until I returned after having moved back to Aspen that I rekindled my love and admiration for Santa Monica.

Located on the west side of Los Angeles, Santa Monica is sandwiched between Venice and Malibu. Depending on traffic, Santa Monica is minutes away from Hollywood, Beverly Hills, cultural attractions like the Getty Museum, as well as the seediness and charm of downtown Los Angeles.

So it stands to reason that Santa Monica is a popular destination for millions of people around the world. I mean, why wouldn't you stay at the beach and then travel inland if you were so inclined?

A major selling point for me is that a car isn't necessary in Santa Monica. All you need is two feet, a beach cruiser or a Segway to get around. Unless you plan to go east of the 405 Freeway (inland, in other words), you can vacation car-free.

Although I don't like to venture east of the 405, I did so on this recent trip and was able to rely on friends to drive me to a few golf courses in the valley, as well as reality-check drive down Skid Row before a Lakers game.

To get the full effect of being a tourist in my old town, I stayed at one of my favorite beach hotels on Ocean Avenue instead of crashing at friends' houses.

I had never stayed at Le Merigot, but spent a lot of time on the patio sipping cocktails and dining at Cézanne, the hotel's acclaimed restaurant that has a menu inspired by fresh, seasonal ingredients from local farmer's markets.

I stayed in a room on the top floor, overlooking the beach and the Pacific Ocean, with the famous Santa

Monica Pier lighting up the night sky and reflecting on the waves.

The balcony attached to this particular suite was bigger than my apartment and, in my opinion, worth every penny of the nightly rate. I spent all of my waking hours on that balcony, taking in the ocean breeze, the salty air and the sun beating down.

Going to sleep was just as much of a treat, with a king-sized bed that Le Merigot has trademarked as "Cloud 9," with Frette linen, down duvets and feather pillows.

Le Merigot blends European elegance with the casual lifestyle of Southern California. The pool, outdoor terrace and a full-service, European-style spa made the stay complete.

There's nothing like spending a morning surfing Bay Street (located just feet from the hotel), lounging by the pool and then having a deep tissue massage.

Hundreds of restaurants, shops, hiking and biking paths, historic buildings and modern architecture are all within walking distance of Le Merigot.

The hotel's proximity to the famous pier, and the city's outdoor pedestrian mall, the Third Street Promenade, and the funky and eclectic Main Street, made it extremely convenient to get around via foot and beach cruiser. Venice Beach is just a mile down the boardwalk.

Until I experienced Santa Monica through the eyes of a tourist, I hadn't fully realized just how much goes on in that town of 80,000 people. Farmer's markets three times a week; cultural events daily, bars and restaurants everywhere, live music and a zillion other things.

But I spent most of my time taking in all the nearby opportunities for hiking, biking, surfing, swimming and golfing.

The beauty of the place I never forgot. Elevated views of the Pacific Ocean, Santa Monica Bay and the mountain of Malibu can be seen from Ocean Avenue, which sits above the Pacific Coast Highway.

And fortunately, the recession has made Santa Monica, which has been traditionally a pretty pricey destination, more affordable. There are deals at every turn and a round-trip ticket on Allegiant Air from Grand Junction to LAX can be snapped up for as little as \$55. Yes, \$55. The airline offers one-way tickets for \$9.99 and then tacks on a few fees.

There are tons of spring packages available. Check santamonica.com for details, or the website of the Santa Monica Daily Press, my newspaper's website.

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