

# ECHO Travel

in association with



## World of Weather

Weather forecast for parts of Europe, USA and Australia over the next five days (maximum daytime temperature from BBC weather centre)

**Madrid**  
 Today ..... 32c  
 Tomorrow ..... 30c  
 Thursday ..... 32c  
 Friday ..... 31c

**Paris**  
 Today ..... 20c  
 Tomorrow ..... 22c  
 Thursday ..... 23c  
 Friday ..... 23c

**Sydney**  
 Today ..... 20c  
 Tomorrow ..... 21c  
 Thursday ..... 14c  
 Friday ..... 16c

**Athens**  
 Today ..... 33c  
 Tomorrow ..... 33c  
 Thursday ..... 31c  
 Friday ..... 33c

**Miami**  
 Today ..... 33c  
 Tomorrow ..... 33c  
 Thursday ..... 33c  
 Friday ..... 33c

**Nice**  
 Today ..... 26c  
 Tomorrow ..... 26c  
 Thursday ..... 25c  
 Friday ..... 26c

**Pisa**  
 Today ..... 27c  
 Tomorrow ..... 28c  
 Thursday ..... 26c  
 Friday ..... 28c

### £ The pound abroad

£1 = 1.69 Australian Dollars  
 £1 = 1.19 Euros  
 £1 = 1.55 Swiss Franc  
 £1 = 1.59 Canadian Dollars  
 £1 = 1.59 U.S. Dollars  
 £1 = 8.76 Egyptian Pounds  
 Courtesy of Thomas Cook

# Nothing comes close to the Golden Coast



**STUNNING:** The multi-million dollar houses on Ocean Front Walk, Santa Monica (the one rented by the Beckhams is the white one in the centre)

**Dawn Collinson** discovers why Santa Monica is where celebs go to get beachy

I'VE always wanted to share something with **Victoria Beckham**. And now I do. If I'm honest, it's not entirely what I had in mind, but it is just as spectacular and considerably more available.

It turns out me and Posh have the same beautiful object of affection ... Santa Monica.

Only last week the entire Beckham clan were photographed lazing on the glass-bound deck of a rented £3.2million beachfront home there, entertaining chef **Gordon Ramsay** and family.

I knew this even before reading the magazine caption because I recognised it from our trip this spring. It sits on Ocean Front Walk, where fabulous, architecturally stunning homes edge the winding sandy route populated by

rollerbladers, cyclists and skateboarders.

Regrettably we were not staying in the same house, but we were overlooking the ocean only a couple of miles away. In this case, I must add, a couple of miles equals a couple of million on the price tag.

But nevertheless, Victoria and I made the same choice. Because, if Los Angeles is where Californians go to see and be seen, then Santa Monica is where they come to play, to relax and to

generally live the kind of lifestyle a frenetic nine-to-fiver can only dream of.

Not for no reason are those off duty family shots of celebrities on the beach invariably taken somewhere along its 26 miles of picture-perfect coastline. It's here where the *Desperate Housewives* go for a dip and where **Britney Spears** takes her children on the rides at the traditional end-of-the-pier Pacific Park funfair.

Those who don't own a house here – although many do – simply take a

short drive along Santa Monica Freeway from downtown LA and, 13 miles later, it's another world. Welcome to **Katy Perry's** Golden Coast: chill-out capital of the USA.

Californians in general are a friendly, effortlessly polite bunch, but here they take it to a whole different level. Maybe it's the outdoor, healthy lifestyle. Or maybe it's just a happy side-effect of an average 343 days of

● Turn to Page 20

## TRAVEL TIPS

**SANTA Monica** is just eight miles from Los Angeles International Airport. For ideas of where to stay and what to do, visit [www.santamonica.com](http://www.santamonica.com)

Find out more about bike or skate rental from Perry's at [www.perryscafe.com](http://www.perryscafe.com)

**Pacific Park Amusement Park** is located on the world famous Santa Monica Pier. Attractions include the

iconic solar-powered Ferris wheel, the only one in the world, which gives visitors unparalleled views over the Californian coast. Unlimited ride wristbands for adults and children can be purchased in advance. [www.pacpark.com](http://www.pacpark.com)

Follow in **Forrest's** footsteps with a film location dinner at **Bubba Gump Shrimp Company**, right on the pier. [www.bubbagump.com](http://www.bubbagump.com)



## Inside



Win a trip to Stuttgart

PAGE 21

## Travel



**A HANDSOME HOUSE IN HANDSOME GROUNDS:** Paddy Shennan outside Plas Dinas Country House Hotel and, inset, the view from the gardens

# Perfect Plas for peace and quiet

**W**E helped ourselves to drinks from the mini-bar, lay on our four poster bed and began to feel very much like royalty – which probably wasn't surprising as we were staying in the sumptuous Princess Margaret Suite.

The late **Princess Margaret**, and her former hubby, **Lord Snowdon**, aka **Antony Armstrong-Jones**, knew all about this place – and this very bedroom, said to have been favoured by HRH as it allowed her to see who was coming up the half-mile long driveway.

Located just a few minutes south of Caernarfon in Gwynedd, the Plas Dinas Country House Hotel used to be the country retreat of the Armstrong-Jones family.

It's currently owned by international party and events organiser **Peregrine Armstrong-Jones** (Lord Snowdon's younger half-brother) but, nearly four years ago, **Andy and Julian Banner-Price** took on a 25-year lease to run it as a hotel.

**Paddy Shennan** enjoys a luxury weekend break in a right royal location

And making a damn good job of it they are, too.

On the few occasions me and Mrs S have been fortunate enough to stay in classy hotels, we've sometimes felt ill-at-ease – because the people running the places did little to make us feel at home, while the atmosphere in such upmarket places can be stuffy and staid. This can't be said of Plas Dinas.

One of the first things we noticed about the place, after the warm welcome from our hosts, was the peace and quiet. Basically, if the madding crowd is driving you mad and you are able to treat yourself to a get away from it all break in idyllic and luxurious surroundings – then this is the place for you.

A handsome house in handsome grounds, Plas Dinas is set in 15 acres. After coming up the sweeping driveway, you are greeted by the house and

## TRAVEL FACTS

**ROOM** rates at the Plas Dinas Country House hotel in Bontnewydd, Caernarfon, Gwynedd range from between £89 to £225 depending on the grade chosen and time of year.

Guests can check live availability and prices of rooms online by going to [www.plasdinast.co.uk](http://www.plasdinast.co.uk) For more details, you can also telephone 01286 830214 or email [info@plasdinast.co.uk](mailto:info@plasdinast.co.uk)

gardens front and back – the front includes a water fountain, while the back leads to a pleasant spot called The Mount, where you can sit and gaze upon the rolling countryside which stretches out towards the beach and the Irish Sea.

Plas Dinas – which caters for private parties, celebrations and weddings and holds a civil partnership and wedding licence – also offers self-catering accommodation:

The Lodge sleeps six and the West Wing cottage four.

The hotel, which was a nursing home from the mid-1980s to 1999, makes just enough of its past, with family portraits, memorabilia and original items of furniture fitting in nicely throughout a building which dates back to the mid-17th century and includes extensive Victorian additions.

Princess Margaret regularly stayed here in the 1960s and you can almost smell the royal history.

We stayed at the hotel for two nights, enjoying an excellent evening meal on the first night – compliments to Andy, the chef – and a night out in Caernarfon on the second (we can also recommend Stones Bistro and the Black Boy Inn and Ship and Castle pubs. Well, you should do a little research when you're visiting a new place, shouldn't you?)

All this and an enjoyable visit to the must-see village of Portmeirion (of The Prisoner TV series fame), which is just 35 minutes away.

What a right royal weekend!

## Welcome to the chill-out capital of US

● From Page 19

sunshine every year. That's enough to make anyone kick back.

Of course, if you're on holiday like we were, there are still things you want to do and there's no shortage of options especially for families. You don't have to be in the Beckhams' earning bracket either; the Santa Monica Visitors Bureau kindly suggests 100 free things everything from window shopping on Montana Avenue, home of the top designer boutiques and frequented by many an affluent Angelino, to pitting your wits at the international seaside chess centre.

Not surprisingly, we spent much of our week on and around the beach although that didn't mean we just lay back and did nothing. In fact, we caught the outdoor bug and hired bikes from Perry's Beach Café & Rentals.

A Santa Monica institution, Perry's has eight locations along the oceanfront and has been providing various means of transport (they do bikes in all shapes and sizes as well as skates) for 25 years.

We rented ours for a couple of hours at a time, and cycled the beach path all the way to neighbouring Venice: an arty, weird and wonderful must-visit especially for fans of **David Duchovny's** TV series *Californication*.

It's an easy route, even for Sunday cyclists like us, and allows incredible views especially as the sun sets behind the world famous Ferris wheel on the pier. It also gives you the chance to spot places to return to. Shutters on the Beach, for instance, is apparently a favourite lunch spot of our soon-to-be panto star **Pamela Anderson**, while Muscle Beach with its extrovert iron-pumpers is an awe-inspiring spectacle.

Still, in keeping with that warm Santa Monica spirit, none of the bulked-up specimens were too wrapped up in their own importance to help Matthew

as he attempted to stretch all of his 4ft2in to swing from the rings. A helping hand, albeit one the size of a basketball, was never far away.

Most of the main attractions can be easily reached on foot or two wheels, but we did use the car just once to take the 10-minute drive out to Bergamot Station Art Center. Converted from a former trolley station, this is now Southern California's largest art gallery and cultural centre, housing more than 30 galleries including the Santa Monica Museum of Art.

But for every day of culture there has to be a little retail therapy too, so we set aside one to hit the shops along the Third Street Promenade (where Victoria's Secret is) and Main Street which offers a more independent quirky alternative.

Main Street, too, we discovered is a fantastic place to eat out at lunchtime and evening, although Santa Monica is brimming with nearly 400 fabulous restaurants from award-winning dining at its very finest to cool cafés and lots of healthy eating options courtesy of the city's regular farmers markets.

One eaterie not to be missed, though, is Bubba Gumps, situated on the iconic 101-year-old pier. It was here that the Oscar-winning Forrest Gump was filmed. **Tom Hanks'** character runs under the trademark sign and on to the end of the pier.

Bubba Gump Shrimp Company was opened in 2005 and is themed in honour of the film, complete with 'Run Forrest Run' signs on each table to attract the attention of waiters and waitresses.

It's not just a gimmick, though, the food is genuinely good: fresh catch of the day, and whopping indulgent desserts which make you glad you cycled at least part of the way.

I thoroughly recommend it, although to be honest, there's nothing about Santa Monica I wouldn't recommend.

Now if only David fancied sharing a bike ride...



**FAMOUS FACE**  
David Beckham