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Life's a beach

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For fun, sun and culture, look no further than sunny Santa Monica

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Sometimes you need to get away, but you just can't go too far. For a sweet escape, head to Santa Monica.

THE BEACH

Go surfing, build sand castles or just bask in the sun. Tourists and locals alike ride bikes, skateboards and rollerblades along the beach. If you don't have a bike, you can rent one for approximately \$25 a day. Bikes can include baby seats. Nothing can clear your mind like a walk on the beach. You will definitely want to stick around to watch the sun set.

ACCOMMODATIONS

If you are seeking a second honeymoon, stay at the Embassy Hotel Apartments. The Embassy is within walking distance of the bustling Third Street Promenade and dates back to the days when Santa Monica was the last Los Angeles rail stop. In 2001, it was designated as a historic landmark. It offers deluxe rooms, studio and onebedroom suites with fully stocked kitchens. The courtyard is lovely, green and inviting. It is a great place unwind after a day of sightseeing.

THE PIER

For inexpensive family fun, head to the 100-year-old pier. Go to Pacific Park, where you can play carnival games and ride the world's first solar-powered ferris wheel. The pier also features Heal the Bay's Santa Monica Pier Aquarium, historic Hippodrome and hand-crafted carousel, dining and shops. Watch beautiful sunsets, listen to music from different performers and just maybe you will see a school of dolphins frolic by.

The pier is full of history. On Sept. 9 1909, the pier opened with the purpose to hold pipes that would carry the city's waste away from the shore. It has since become an icon in Southern California. The amusement park and Hippodrome were built in 1916. The classic carousel was installed in 1947. The Hippodrome, which houses the carousel, became a National

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STAFF PHOTO BY KAREN YOSTEN
GREAT ACCOMODATIONS: The Embassy Hotel Apartments, a historic landmark in Santa Monica.

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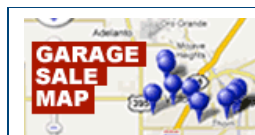
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Historic Landmark in 1983.

For a thrill, take a class in the Trapeze School of New York. Fly high as spectators cheer you on.

ART

The entire city of Santa Monica is full of culture. There are more than 90 museums and galleries, and outdoor art is seen throughout the city.

DINING

Santa Monica is also a great place to try new restaurants. For a new experience, try the FIG in the Fairmont Hotel. It features only local, fresh, organic ingredients. The menu is exquisite. On the cocktail menu, I tried the blueberry and thyme, which features TRU organic vodka. This drink awakens your senses. It is not the typical syrupy, sweet cocktail — it is fresh and has a truly unique taste. If you have dinner, be sure to try the seafood pot. This jalapeno-tequila broth with scallops, prawns and mussels will definitely have you hooked. The short rib and pancetta meatloaf is a great selection for the finicky eater. The dessert menu features many choices, from fruity sorbet, apple pie to the rich Nutella and Chocolate Tart with candied hazelnuts and marshmallow cream. You can't miss with any choice. There is even a children's menu if you dine as a family. Dress is casual, but you do want to leave the flip flops at home for this restaurant. Reservations are recommended.

The Ye Olde King's Head British Pub is famous for their fish and chips and all the traditional British fare. I recommend the New England style Clam Chowder. It is creamy, chunky and just delicious. There are definitely no cans used here. Also, try the flavorful bangers and mash.

For Asian cuisine, visit the Monsoon Cafe on the Third Street Promenade. From sashimi to Peking duck, the Monsoon has it all. The Rainbow Roll is a delicious exploration of sushi, featuring shrimp, albacore, salmon and red snapper. The Monsoon has a very unassuming appearance. It may look like a small outdoor cafe, but as you enter, it is a lovely, softly lit restaurant with classy bamboo booths and Chinese lanterns. You can dine indoors or outdoors. It is perfect for lunch with friends or a romantic dinner for two.

THIRD STREET PROMENADE

Everyone has to stroll the Third Street Promenade. It is lined with upscale boutiques, restaurants and specialty shops. The evening is when this area really gets exciting. The street is illuminated by the lights of the stores and in the trees. Musicians use the street as their stage. Breakdancers captivate the crowd with amazing stunts set to the music of the late Michael Jackson and more. These young men involve the spectators and making it a fun show for all ages.

Children, will love the dinosaur fountain topiaries and lights.

VENICE BEACH

While in Santa Monica, you can't help but make your way down to the eclectic melting pot of Venice Beach. Check out the boardwalk and see many vendors along the way. You can get hot dogs, funnel cakes, pizza and more. There are no shortage of tattoo shops, specialty T-shirt stores, jewelry and art displays. There is something for everybody.

Stop and check out the Venice Beach Freak Show. Admission is \$5 a person. See the Rubber Girl, a sword swallower and more than 60 attractions. If you want to see a two-headed turtle, this is the place. It's not for the faint of heart, but friendly enough for the whole family.

There is so much to see and do, you just can't see it all in one weekend. The wonderful thing about Santa Monica (and Venice Beach) is that it is close to home, so you can always go back for more. It is truly my little escape from reality.

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