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FULL DETAILS, PAGE 39

The



Mail

ON SUNDAY

SEPTEMBER 5, 2010 **£1.50**

SUNDAY NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR

THIS elegant Pacific coast resort is the antidote to the big-city stress of nearby Los Angeles. The breezes blow pure and cool off the ocean, the sunsets are spectacular and, as GARETH HUW DAVIES discovers, people actually walk to get around ...

1... SUPERIOR PIER

NOBODY loves a pier as much as we British, but Santa Monicans come close. The city's pier is a survivor of the halcyon days of California seaside fun. The locals marked its centenary last year with a big bash, then made it the official western end of Route 66, the historic road from Chicago. Walk the pier before breakfast and it will be just you and a few fishermen casting into the glass-calm Pacific. During the day, you can check out the under-the-pier sea life in the Aquarium but go in the evening for full-throttle fun. The carousel on the pier's fairground appeared in the film *The Sting*, while the wondrous Ferris wheel, lit with solar power, gives the best view in town.

2... STROLL ON

IN 1989, a shabby three-block stretch of the city was closed to traffic and cleaned up, creating one of the West Coast's most stylish city strolls. The Third Street Promenade is paved in hexagonal tiles, guarded at each end by topiary dinosaur fountains and filled with trees, flowers and street performers. Hollywood stars visit for the shopping, restaurants and cinemas. The Third Street Historic District boasts 38 fine old houses built between 1875 and 1935.

On Wednesday and Saturday, the city's farmers' market fills several

blocks. Go early and you may spot top chefs buying up the heirloom tomatoes and purple asparagus for the day's menus. They look after their own here – all produce on the market must be California-grown.

3... LEAVE THE CAR

ONCE the car was king in the Los Angeles area. Nobody walked. Ever. But big changes are afoot. The new Santa Monica Mountains Ridgeline Trail is the biggest triumph yet for two feet. It curls through the peaks beyond the city for about 60 miles,

with many splendid views. They cut it up into easily-walked sections – see the excellent online map on the website www.nps.gov/samo.

4... TAKE A SUNDOWNER

IT'S the wonder of the West Coast... the sun dipping into the Pacific in a golden blur. You can see it from Santa Monica, on average, 340 days a year. But the window seats in the bars and restaurants along the beach fill fast. Try booking in any of the following – The Lobster, Penthouse, Ocean Avenue Seafood, Coast and

Veranda Bar – for food and cocktails. The city was named Southern California's best dining venue in 2008 and the new trend is to offer greener menus. The Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch Program advises chefs which fish come from sustainable sources. There are good ratings for the Santa Monica Seafood cafe (www.smseafood.com).

5... GO BEACH CLUBBING

NEWSPAPER tycoon William Randolph Hearst knew how to make a girl happy. He built his mistress,

screen star Marion Davies, a 106-room mansion on Santa Monica's seafront. They threw lavish parties for Chaplin, Garbo and Gable. Time and earthquake took it down but that wasn't the end. The city, and heiress Wallis Annenberg, funded Annenberg Community Beach House, the US's first public seaside club, on the site. It opened last year and is free to all-comers. Whoever you are – tourist or Oscar-winning star from nearby Hollywood – you stand in the same line. It has many gracious touches and a top green rating: the decking is made of recycled plastic and the black-and-white tiled pool is solar-heated.

6... JOIN THE CIRCUS

IF YOUR idea of 'active' means no more than ordering another blueberry thyme cocktail at Fig Restaurant, that's fine. But if you want to join the city's full-on outdoor lifestyle, there is a long list of things to try. The Trapeze School on the pier could inspire a new career as a circus performer (www.losangeles.trapezeschool.com), while Perry's Legends Bike tour will guide you around the local highlights (www.perryscafe.com).

The Pacific Pleasures Running Tour is an easy pre-breakfast guided four-mile jog in the soft sunlight, past fine buildings and upmarket shops – before they open, so no temptation (www.offnrunningtours.com).

Then there's volleyball, wave-riding, yoga classes on the beach, triathlon tuition, skateboarding in Ocean Park – one of its origins – and in-line skating in the Venice district. ● See www.santamonica.com for everything the city has to offer and www.britishairways.com for Santa Monica stays.

THINGS YOU MUST DO IN...

SANTA MONICA



PIER PLEASURE: Visitors enjoy the ocean city's famous 100-year-old pier. Left: A local in-line skater

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