

## Los Angeles: the South Bay bicycle path

Beaches and 'burbs, surfers and show-offs: you can enjoy them all from a 22-mile cycle route outside Los Angeles. Sophie Campbell reports .

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The general manager of Le Merigot is wearing what you would expect the general manager of a luxury hotel to wear: an immaculate suit and tie. It's hard to imagine him in a teeterboard troupe on Santa Monica beach.



The 22-mile cycle path links the exclusive enclaves of Malibu and Palos Verdes Photo: CORBIS

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"I was the catcher, my brother was the lifter and his wife was the flyer," Paul Hortobagyi says with a grin, speaking in the hotel restaurant, a few hundred yards from the beach. "We came from Budapest in 1969 and worked for Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey. We used to know guys like Russ Saunders."

Russ Saunders was a famous gymnast and stunt double for Gene Kelly. Shots from the Fifties and Sixties, taken at the cluster of rings, vaulting horses and weights then known as Muscle Beach, near Santa Monica pier, show sculpted gods lifting girls in structured swimwear, all posing to perfection in the sun.

For the past 130 years or so, ever since the residents of the desert city of Los Angeles, many hot miles inland, pitched tents on the beach and started a real estate boom, this vast bow of sand stretching from what is now exclusive Malibu right down to exclusive Palos Verdes has been about having a laugh. Linking the two is a 22-mile, super-smooth ribbon of pale grey concrete, completed in the late Seventies, which claims to be "the longest beach path of its type in the world".

Whatever type that is, it is fabulously southern Californian. This is where you can pose, lift weights, buy crystals, join a "circle" – everything from yoga to chanting – tow your surf board, ride your bike or keep fit in your wheelchair. It's not all egalitarian: you can also own a house worth several million dollars or belong to one of the ritzy beach clubs, though the city recently opened the free-access Annenberg Community Beach House on the site of the mansion once owned and partied in by William Randolph Hearst's mistress, Marion Davies. And whoever you are, the people-watching is superb.

I cycle there on a day so hazy that the Malibu bluffs are invisible, sailing down the steep angle of Ocean Drive to beach level. Out of the mist looms a man, all narrowed eyes and cheekbones, riding a trike festooned with eagle feathers and

two American flags. He passes silently, like an outtake from *Mad Max*, leaving me looking at four pigeons that have cosied down in the sand. Nobody would dream of hassling a pigeon on well-mannered Santa Monica beach. The sand is as groomed as a jobbing actor: exfoliated by tractor every morning, studded with blue lifeguard towers – the *Baywatch* original is at the Malibu end – and patrolled by police doing beach duty on foot or bike.

I pedal towards the ghostly loops and spirals of the rides on Santa Monica Pier, which was 100 years old last September. It still has its original carousel, which appeared in *The Sting* (the film's co-star, Robert Redford, valiantly fought its proposed demolition). The Moorish-style pier ballroom, La Monica, which didn't survive, welcomed 50,000 dancers at its opening night and was a favourite for years.

A few hundred yards farther down the beach, Nathaniel "Nat" Trives, now 75 and formerly Santa Monica's first black mayor, is waiting for me by a brass plaque saying "The Ink Well: A Place of Celebration and Pain". This was the 200-square-foot stretch of beach where black citizens could bathe. "Restrictions officially ended in 1927," he says. "But I was still unwelcome at the beach clubs in the early Fifties." Black beachgoers would listen to music floating out of the Club Casa del Mar – which had a chute for gamblers to slide down during Prohibition – and the famous black surfer Nick Gabaldon taught himself to surf here and later drowned at Malibu.

After I meet Nat, things speed up. The path is smooth as silk compared with the lunar surface I commute on at home – you can easily do 12 miles an hour – and the day is cool. I keep pedalling: dismounting under slender palms to trot along the grungy Venice boardwalk with its stalls selling crafts, tattoos and tees, flying over the little humped bridges and pretty mini-canals built inland by the developer Abbot Kinney to rival Santa Monica in 1905 – unsuccessfully, as it turned out. I turn left at the faded, rhubarb-red Doge's Palace and zoom south towards the huge, glittering Marina del Rey.

Joe Poblasco works in Daniel's Bike Rentals in the row of fishermen's houses on the edge of the marina, the main tourist attraction until it got out-glittered. "A friend said let's buy a house by the Venice canals 40 years ago," he says, twirling a tyre lever. "It was a hole back then. Nineteen thousand dollars. Be worth millions now." Cyclists stop to chat: one man, in his sixties, routinely cycles the entire path. They agree that it's worth a diversion to see the millions of dollars' worth of yachts, but the marina is a pain for cyclists: you have to circle it because there's no bridge. Beyond, a thicket of weekend halibut fishermen signals the start of Dockweiler Beach, under the Los Angeles International Airport flight path, where huge-bellied 747s roar out over the Pacific and its fringe of surfers.

As I pedal I can feel a mood change. The ocean-view houses are still flash, but Manhattan and Hermosa Beaches feel summery, villagey. The sun comes out, the beach sprouts volleyball courts, sand crunches under my wheels. A guy wiggles past on a snakeboard, with a terrier wearing a neckerchief and a backpack ("Oh, sure, he's just carrying his water and a snack," he says, as the terrier gazes coolly into the distance).

It's only now that I realise I've cycled about 18 miles and have to go all the way back. I'm too tired for Redondo Beach, though I want to eat seafood and find the bust of George Freeth, the Hawaiian-Irishman considered to have started Californian surf mania (when I do go back, somebody's nicked his head – but I love Redondo with its working boats and food stalls). I collapse at Martha's on Hermosa Beach and wonder what a taxi would cost: their cilantro chicken soup is the only thing that gets me home.

The way back is like rewinding a movie: beach 'burbs fly past in reverse – Hermosa, Manhattan, El Segundo, Marina del Rey, Venice – but this time I stop at Muscle Beach. The famously bodacious arena moved down from Santa Monica after a couple of sordid scandals in the Seventies. On a concrete platform, facing packed metal bleachers and backed by a pair of giant concrete bar bells, a chap staggers under a huge weight. "He can't settle," opines a girl on roller blades. "No lift!" calls the MC. "Take the bar to 710lb. The bar is open. Opening attempt for Lance Carabas from Chicago!"

Everyone leans forward. Will he do it? Won't he? I imagine Paul Hortobagyi and his acrobat friends watching the same thing 40 years ago. It's built for fun, this beach, all 22 dazzling, leg-breaking miles of it. And I ought to know.

## BEACH PATH BASICS

**British Airways** (0844 493 0758; [www.ba.com/california](http://www.ba.com/california) (<http://www.ba.com/california>)) offers a seven-night fly-drive to Los Angeles from £529 per person, departing during April, including return BA flight from Heathrow and fully inclusive Avis car hire.

**Le Merigot** ([www.lemerigothotel.com](http://www.lemerigothotel.com) (<http://www.lemerigothotel.com>); from \$299.95) is laid-back, two minutes from the sand and honest about its "partial beach view"; the revamped art deco **Hotel Shangri-La** ([www.shangri-la-hotel.com](http://www.shangri-la-hotel.com) (<http://www.shangri-la-hotel.com>); from \$335) is that rare thing, a Santa Monica hotel with fine ocean views. The Marina Pacific at Venice has been jauntily revamped into the **Hotel Erwin** ([www.hotelerwin.com](http://www.hotelerwin.com) (<http://www.hotelerwin.com>); from \$189).

**Best Western** has hotels all the way down the beach, for around \$120 ([www.bestwestern.com](http://www.bestwestern.com) (<http://www.bestwestern.com>))

Bikes: Malibu to Marina del Rey – **Perry's** ([www.perryscafe.com](http://www.perryscafe.com) (<http://www.perryscafe.com>)) has eight cycle/skate hire outlets and its entertaining three-hour Legends Beach Bike Tour, \$35, leaves from the pier. For Marina del Rey to Torrance, try **Daniel's** ([www.danielsbikerentals.com](http://www.danielsbikerentals.com) (<http://www.danielsbikerentals.com>)) or **Marina Bike Rentals** at Redondo Beach ([www.marinabikerentals.smugmug.com](http://www.marinabikerentals.smugmug.com) (<http://www.marinabikerentals.smugmug.com>))

**Metro Bus** ([www.bikemetro.com](http://www.bikemetro.com) (<http://www.bikemetro.com>)) publishes a good map of city bike routes, including the beach

path. Racks at the front of the bus take two bikes: tell the driver before you load up.

See [www.visitcalifornia.co.uk](http://www.visitcalifornia.co.uk) (<http://www.visitcalifornia.co.uk>) and [www.discoverlosangeles.com](http://www.discoverlosangeles.com) (<http://www.discoverlosangeles.com>), run by the LACVB, with links to sites such as [www.santamonica.com](http://www.santamonica.com) (<http://www.santamonica.com>)

## OFF THE BEACH PATHS

**Santa Monica Pier** ([www.santamonicapier.org](http://www.santamonicapier.org) (<http://www.santamonicapier.org>)) begins a series of free concerts, the Twilight Dance Series, in July; check website for events.

The **Annenberg Community Beach House**, 415 Pacific Coast Highway ([beachhouse.smgov.net](http://beachhouse.smgov.net) (<http://beachhouse.smgov.net>)), is free to everyone, with pool, sun loungers, café and bookable tennis and volleyball courts.

**The Getty Villa** ([www.getty.edu](http://www.getty.edu) (<http://www.getty.edu>)), just off the Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu, is a marvellous scale replica of a Roman villa, with original artefacts.

**California Heritage Museum** ([www.californiaheritagemuseum.org](http://www.californiaheritagemuseum.org) (<http://www.californiaheritagemuseum.org>)), on Main Street, is a rare example of a 19th-century Santa Monica house.

Santa Monica's **Sunday Farmers' Market** ([www.smgov.net](http://www.smgov.net) (<http://www.smgov.net>)), just outside the museum, is full of exotic produce and has a valet service that parks and services your bike.

Abbot Kinney, at right angles to Venice Beach, is great for shopping and eating: try **Hal's** ([www.halsbarandgrill.com](http://www.halsbarandgrill.com) (<http://www.halsbarandgrill.com>)) for brilliant carnivorous and vegetarian options – delicious house salads from \$6.

**Martha's 22nd Street Grill**, Hermosa Beach (001 310 376 7786), opens for breakfast at 7am: try the blueberry pancakes (\$5.25 for two).

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