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Trendy

Santa Monica tops list for 'hip' California vacations

By CARY ORDWAY

If you're looking for cool factor on your next California getaway, it would be hard to beat Santa Monica, a playground for L.A. TV and movie people that is all neatly compressed into 8.3 miles strategically bordered by the Santa Monica Mountains on one side and the Pacific Ocean on the other.

The words "trendy" and "hip" seem to pop up a lot in the descriptions of the some 400 restaurants packed into this little piece of real estate. Throw in a few art galleries, some luxury hotels and - oh yes - celebrities, and you have the makings of an eye-popping diversion from your everyday hometown.



Our recent visit to Santa Monica reminded us of why we moved to California. The weather was one of those clear-as-a-bell L.A. days that do come around more often than you might think, the haze having been efficiently removed by some winds and moisture the day before we arrived. It was reminiscent of a trip years ago we took from the soggy Pacific Northwest to Los Angeles that introduced us to what bright sunshine was all about. We couldn't wait to return and eventually relocated to Southern California to get our regular dose of California sun.

Such weather shows off Santa Monica as it was meant to be. The views from Palisades Park are breathtaking and take in not only the expansive beaches but such distant features as Malibu on the north and even Catalina Island to the southwest. It's no wonder that half of L.A. seems to be down here jogging or walking. Wide, tree-lined and well-landscaped Ocean Avenue stretches along the coastline offering about as pretty a downtown street as you'll see considering this is all modern office buildings and not historic mansions.

The Santa Monica Pier is the dominant feature on the water's edge -- and also over the water -- and is a favorite for families. We lingered with our five-year-old in Kids Cove, the part of the pier's Pacific Park that has kiddie amusement rides and, when all was said and done, our daughter declared her time on the pier "the best day ever!"

But the Santa Monica Pier can also be very adult. During our visit a local anti-war organization had put up thousands of white crosses on the beach to help people visualize the number of casualties from the war in Iraq. While most crosses didn't have names, many of them did and it was obvious that grieving families had brought flowers and photos to create makeshift memorials on the beach.



Just up from the pier are blocks and blocks of shopping in the popular Downtown Third Street Promenade, an area where city fathers have taken a street and turned it into a pedestrian mall. There are fascinating shops and an unusual number of movie theaters along this walkway that seems to attract people from all walks of life - young and old, wealthy on down to the homeless. On weekends there is always an assortment of street musicians and entertainers willing to do just about anything to get a tip and a warm round of applause.

Many of the city's restaurants are located in Third Street

downtown area, although many others are spread about in various parts of the city. Our dinner choice, Thai Dishes, actually is about 20 blocks off the beach in the mid-city area and turned out to be a surprisingly affordable spot to enjoy a wide selection of expertly prepared Thai entrees. It's not formal, but it's good.

If you're looking for trendy - oh, there's that word again - the place in Santa Monica to look is Montana Avenue. There is a 10-block section of this street that has become the center of the universe for celebrity-watchers because this is where we are told the famous like to come out and be semi-real people. The businesses along here are kind of an eclectic collection of specialty stores and quiet little sidewalk cafes and more nail salons per square mile than anyplace west of New York City.

It's impossible to walk up and down Montana without wondering if that young 30-something "dressed down" with jeans and a pullover sweatshirt is really some starlet taking a break in between movie shoots. Writer Irene Ricasio listed several local celebrity haunts in a recent article for the New York Post. "If it takes you more than 24 hours to see a star in Santa Monica" says the article, "you're not looking." The closest we came was seeing an obvious paparazzi stalking Montana with his camera and two-foot-long telephoto lens. No doubt someone had tipped him about a "sighting."

The cool factor also comes from Santa Monica's art world where the rich and famous buy while average working stiff look and wish they could buy. According to the Santa Monica Visitors Bureau, the area is "exploding" with avant-garde galleries, museums and public art. In fact, the city averages more than 10 galleries per square mile and has a total of 38 public works of art.

The words "trendy" and "hip" can also be used to describe many of the lodgings in Santa Monica - especially the small out-of-the-way boutique hotel where we stayed most recently. The newest hotel in Santa Monica, the Ambrose is just 77 rooms and is located about a mile and a half from the beach in a quiet residential area of Santa Monica. The hotel is the brainchild of Deirdre Wallace, a 31-year-old who designed a hotel like she would have wanted during the years she was traveling and working in the film industry. The result is an impeccably decorated, thoroughly updated hotel that pays special attention to detail.

For example, the continental breakfast - included with your room - is catered by Rockenwagner, one of the local celebrity chef eateries. The rooms are done in dark brown and soft gray-green tones and furnished with stylish cabinetry, tables and chairs. The beds have just enough firmness and are decorated with Custom created Matteo Italian bed linens and duvets. Feng shui has been incorporated into each room's design which, in our case, included a spacious lanai with a scenic fourth-floor view of Santa Monica and the ocean.

The Ambrose could just as well be a health retreat. While the honor bar in most hotels is loaded up with candy and chips, the Ambrose offers unique blends of fruits and nuts, vegetable chips and yogurt pretzels. Instead of soda water, it's vitamin water. Another product on hand in your room is the Organic Honey Sugar Glow for your skin, or perhaps you'll want to try the Power Plant Elixer Tonic.

There is also a gym on property that includes a Stairmaster, elliptical machines, pilates mats, balance balls, a ballet bar and a fitness library. If you want to read about something other than fitness, the Ambrose also has a cozy fireplace library with a variety of reading material.

The Ambrose is just the right choice for "trendy" Santa Monica - an experience far and apart from the everyday life most of us lead and a great topic of conversation Monday morning when you're back in the office.

AT A GLANCE



WHERE: Santa Monica is just west of Los Angeles and on the coast south of Malibu. It's easy to reach by taking Interstate 405 or Interstate 5 to Interstate 10 and driving west.

WHAT: Santa Monica's spectacular setting on the ocean has made it one of the most popular beach getaways for people from the Los Angeles area and well beyond. A combination of trendy shops, galleries and restaurants make this a favorite for the famous as well as everyday people. Interestingly, the beach city of Santa Monica actually is close to the mountains as well. The Santa Monica Mountains are just a few-minute drive from the glamour and glitz of the city and offer a wide selection of trails and nature hikes in the 150,000-acre Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area.

WHEN: The weather in Santa Monica is sunny most of the year - about 343 annual days of sunshine to be exact - so there's no bad time to visit.

WHY: The scenery's great, but there's also an electricity that comes with a getaway so close to celebrities and the entertainment business.



HOW: For more information on Santa Monica, phone the Santa Monica Convention & Visitors Bureau at 800-544-5319 or visit www.santamonica.com. For more information on the Ambrose Hotel, phone 877-AMBROSE or visit www.ambrosehotel.com.

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