

# TRAVEL



Big wheel  
keep on  
turning: Santa  
Monica's  
iconic ferris  
wheel

*The greatest show on  
earth... circus tricks in  
Southern California*

## Fly through the air on Santa Monica trapeze

**L**OOKING down over the historic Santa Monica pier, I can see the iconic ferris wheel to my left, with the pristine beach stretching to Malibu in front of me and Venice behind me. The sun is shining, the sky is blue, the setting couldn't be more perfect.

**BY LINDA MAHER**

But rather than soaking up my picturesque surroundings, I'm completely terrified.

I'm standing on a tiny ledge about 30 feet from the ground, with one arm holding on to a skinny railing, the other holding on to a trapeze. Behind me is a tiny – yet surprisingly strong – woman who is holding on to my safety belt. She's the only thing stopping

me from plunging to the net below. And trust me, even though there's a net, it offers little reassurance as she encourages me to lean out away from her. This is the hardest game of 'Trust' I've ever played.

I'm about five minutes into my first flying trapeze lesson. When I signed up, I pictured a gentle introduction, maybe some floor work and a little trampolining. Apparently that's not quite how it works. After a very short explanation on the ground, we're sent up the ladder and expected to listen to – and

obey – instructions screamed at us from below to jump off the platform, swing out, tuck our legs up between our arms, hang our knees over the bar, hang back for a swing or two, grab back on to the bar, release our legs and then drop to the net below. Simple.

Or not, as I soon discover. While I have quite a lot of upper body strength from regular weight training, it seems my flexibility is not quite as honed. I could swing all day, but putting my legs between my arms is

**TURN TO NEXT PAGE, TRAVEL**

**INSIDE: A FUNNY OLD WORLD – TRAVEL AROUND THE GLOBE**



# Celeb-spotting, then a burger picnic in a bikini on the beach

## FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

proving a little more difficult. But I refuse to let it beat me and by my third try I manage to do a back flip dismount and by my fifth try, I manage to get my legs up and complete the manoeuvre. I am beyond elated. Ok, so some of the others in the class have by this stage managed to attempt – and succeed – a release and catch with the impossibly tiny yet flexible tutor Lucas, swinging on the opposite trapeze, but this minor victory won't be taken from me.

I have always been a bit of a thrillseeker, but I will admit that flying trapeze is one of the scariest things I've ever done. You know you've got a safety strap on, you know if you do fall there's a net to catch you, but none of that matters. However, it was also one of the most satisfying moments of my life. The feeling I got while hanging upside down, gazing out over the pier, is almost indescribable. It almost made me want to run off and join the circus.

Instead, with my feet back firmly on the ground, I joined the throngs of other people making their way to the ferris wheel – the world's only solar-powered version – at Santa Monica's Pacific Park. After the morning I've just had, the gentle spin with stunning panoramic views is just what I need. In fact, even a subsequent run on the roller coaster feels like a tame afternoon pursuit.

Having lived in Sacramento in northern California for five years at the start of the Noughties, I've had a long-held preconception of southern Californians as relentlessly happy, polite, super-fit and big-spending. And Santa Monica natives do little to dispel those beliefs – in the nicest possible way. From morning to night, the beach is full of people walking, running and cycling. The original Muscle Beach – and its little brother nearby in Venice – are constantly surrounded by onlookers as gymnasts, bodybuilders and perhaps even the odd trapeze artist show off their skills.

**S**ANTA Monica is a very easy city in which to stay fit. The South Bay Bicycle Trail runs to 22 miles – the longest oceanfront path in the world – taking in Santa Monica, Venice, and Hermosa, Redondo and Torrance County beaches. It sounds like quite a hike but the going is flat and amazingly smooth so you can do it as quickly or as slowly as you like, those going at a faster speed will just politely overtake you. Cycling is one of the best ways to get around the city, especially as even the busiest of streets have cycle lanes as Santa Monica does its bit to join the green revolution. Bike hire shops are as ubiquitous as the juice bars that seem to be on every corner.

With fitness of course goes healthy eating, and to this end, Santa Monica is certainly better positioned than many areas of the US. The city's four weekly farmers' markets are packed to the brim not only with average customers but also the city's top chefs, who get the place to themselves for the first hour to stock up on local produce.

There are also a number of culinary schools, which is how I found myself at the Gourmandise School of Sweets and Savories making pasta, pesto and ricotta cheese – which is surprisingly easy to make – all from scratch. Whether it was the fresh ingredients, the absence of preservatives, my culinary skills, or a combination of all three, it was one of the most delicious dishes I've ever tasted.

The school is on the top floor of Santa Monica Place, the city's main shopping centre and, let's face it, few countries do shopping quite like the Americans. Although trying to shop just after eating a pasta-filled lunch is probably not the best idea. Thankfully, there's a Spanx store – yes,



**Great Outdoors:** Southern Californians live their lives outdoors – the 22-mile South Bay Bicycle Trail, Muscle Beach and Surfing USA on Santa Monica beach

wholly dedicated to the control underwear – for those who have overindulged. The centre is anchored by heavy hitters Nordstrom and Bloomingdales, but also features luxury labels Tiffany & Co, Louis Vuitton, Burberry, Michael Kors and Emporio Armani, for those with a little more disposable income.

Nearby Montana Avenue is also aimed at those with fat wallets, albeit with more of an upmarket boutique feel to it. Unfortunately, with the demise of the euro against the dollar, shopping in America ain't quite what it used to be, but there are still some good deals to be found.

Outside the centre, the pedestrian-only Third Street Promenade is the centrepiece of downtown, filled with buskers, stalls and cafes set up perfectly for people-watching, one of my favourite pastimes. My best exercise in it in Santa Monica came over drinks at The Bungalow on a Friday

night, when hundreds of people queue for up to two hours to get in to one of the area's newest nightspots. It's in the grounds of our temporary home, the Fairmont Hotel, a stunning beachfront property bought in 2005 for \$200million by tech giant Michael Dell, who has an office on the next block. Nightlife in Santa Monica is predominantly made up of the young tech executives who have relocated from the likes of Silicon Valley in search of a better quality of life. And boy is there money in this place.

On the way into the bar, we pass Range Rovers, Porsches, Jaguars and Lexuses in the car park, but when a matte black Lamborghini roars past us, the excitement is palpable as we wait to see who will get out – this is one of the best places in the city for celeb-spotting, after all. Unfortunately the doors open and two skinny teenage boys get out and hand the keys to the valet. A perfect

case of nothing to see here. Inside the atmosphere is a typical weekend buzz, the after-work crowd mingling with those out for a big night out. Cocktails are the order of the day for most of the ladies, beer the preserve of most of the men.

**T**HE Sierra Nevada comes in cans in a bucket and there's an average 20-minute wait to get into a toilet, but that certainly doesn't deter the throngs of people waiting to get in.

We move on to the Hotel Shangri-La, one of the many oceanfront hotels with a rooftop dining area to take advantage of the amazing views of a Californian sunset.

Seafood is obviously high on the menu of most eateries in the area,

but suffering from an allergy to fish, I settle for the next best thing, a good old New York steak, which tastes just as amazing in California.

The following day, we hit the beach – but not for us the hassle of finding a bed and umbrella, buying warm beverages and eating sand-filled sandwiches.

No, we've signed up for the Perry's Cafe Beach Butler service, which is just as indulgent as it sounds. Our immensely friendly 'butler' Sheldon has our sun chairs, umbrellas and windbreakers all set up, with bottled water in a cooler box and a notepad ready to take our lunch orders.

We almost all opt for burgers and when he returns with them we tuck into the best beach picnic ever. No, I didn't ever think I'd find myself eating a burger while sitting in a bikini, but hey, I reckon I've more than done enough exercise to earn it.

As we relax after lunch, I take out

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Cocktail hour:  
On the  
decadent  
Third Street  
Promenade

my phone to check the MailOnline app to see if any celebs have been spotted on the beach near us that day.

As much as I love people-watching, I love celeb-spotting even more, and this stretch of sand is one of the most popular for stars trying to unwind – Santa Monica is, after all, a popular playground for those seeking to escape the chaos of nearby Los Angeles.

We managed to spot William in LAX airport on our way out and were told Lady Gaga had been on our flight but we hadn't seen her. Unfortunately, my research doesn't lead us to any A-listers catching rays, but we do catch a glimpse of David Beckham, Kasabian and Muse on our flight home, which more than makes up for it – and rather eases the pain of leaving the sun, sea and sand behind.

Now, to find a circus seeking an eager newcomer...

## TRAVEL FACTS

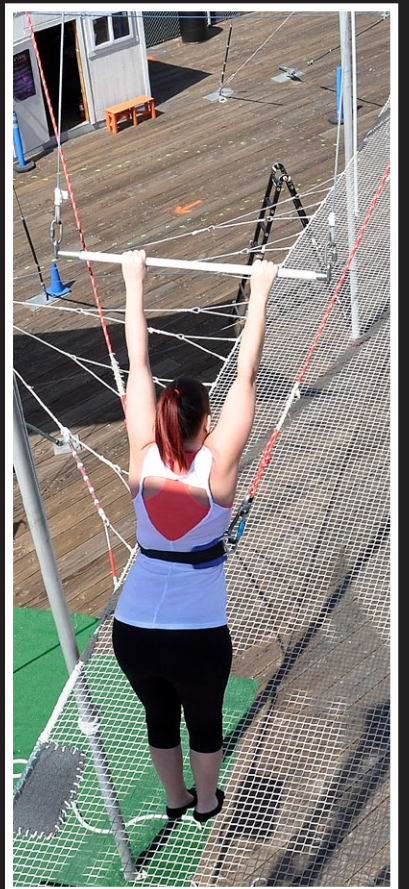
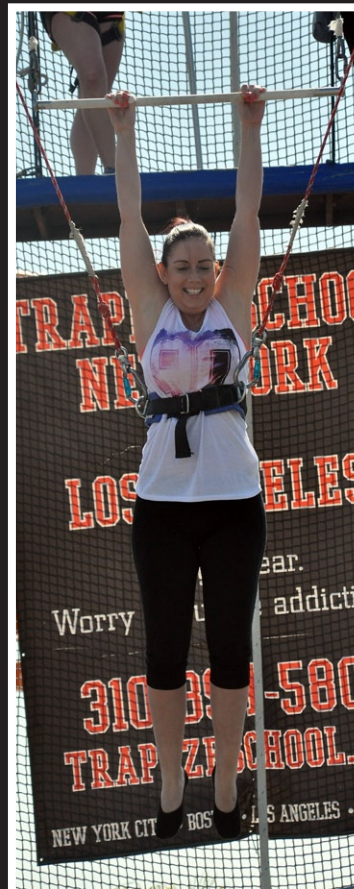
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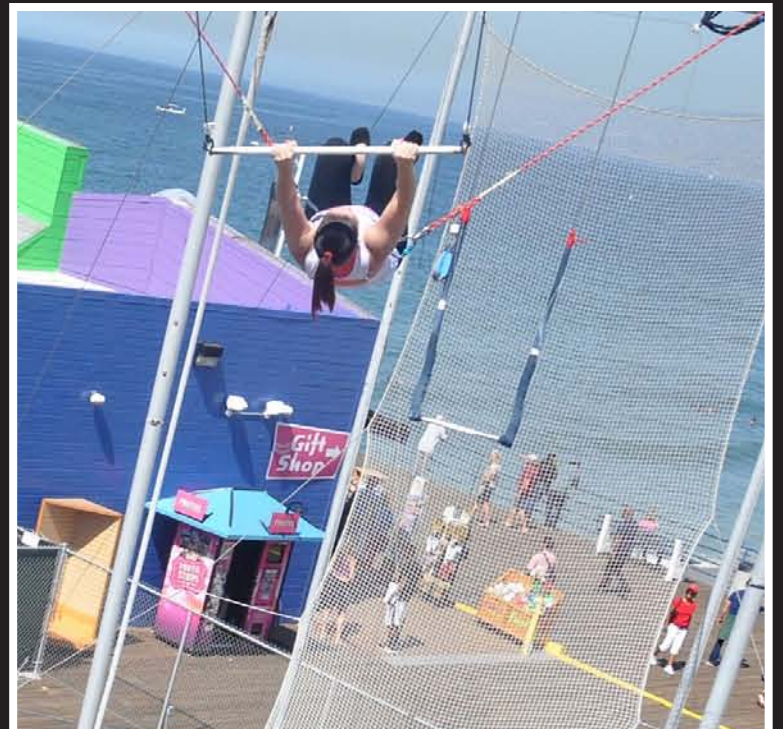
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**HANG ON... SWING ARMS OUT, TUCK MY LEGS UP AND THEN... WHOAAAH!**



Watch those nails: Linda swings into action on the trapeze



Up, up and away: Linda gets the hang of it as she turns on the bar