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CALIFORNIA

By Martin Breen

YOU just can't escape the movie and television industry and the celebrity culture here — it's everywhere. Santa Monica, which has been in literally hundreds of film and TV shows, is such a family-friendly city though and one of the most relaxing breaks you could have.

Flying into Los Angeles with British Airways, you can be there within half an hour of leaving the surprisingly easy to negotiate LAX airport.

The Californian beach city is home to countless celebrities who are often photographed out and about doing their shopping or enjoying the sights and sounds of Santa Monica's famous pier, as Chris Martin and Gwyneth Paltrow did recently.

When I was there, staying at the luxurious Fairmont Hotel, we spotted the lead singer of AC/DC, Brian Johnson, driving along in one of his famous sports cars. But for the most part you are unlikely to notice anyone as they all seem to blend in with the locals.

BEACHFRONT

A lot of local folk may be familiar with Santa Monica thanks to BBC presenter Stephen Nolan who has regaled us all with how he loves the place when he escapes there several times a year.

If you heed my advice and head to Santa Monica the one thing you **MUST** do is hire a bike and cycle along the beachfront, passing the power joggers or the athletic and suntanned volleyball players as well as the lifeguards in their Baywatch



LANDMARK: Entrance to the harbour

kits (Yes Pamela Anderson and David Hasselhoff were filmed running along the sands of Santa Monica beach).

The South Bay Bicycle Trail extends for some 22 miles but I only cycled about a tenth of that and the scenery along the beach was amazing. If you have time and the energy to do all of the longest oceanfront path in the world you will be able to take in the Santa Monica, Venice, Hermosa, Redondo and Torrance

Life is a beach



FAMILY FRIENDLY: Santa Monica

County beaches.

After you have dropped off your bikes on the famous 100-year-old pier make sure to explore this Aladdin's cave of amusements which is home to the Pacific Park fairground. It has all the usual rides including a rollercoaster and a ferris wheel — the world's only solar-powered version — which is a Santa Monica institution and gives great views of the coast.

However don't be expecting Universal Studios theme park type rides on the pier as it is not that kind of place. If you want that the Disneyland Resort and Universal theme parks in LA are only 30 minutes away.

Underneath the pier you will find an aquarium which is informative and fun for children.

You'll recognise the pier as



BEAUTIFUL: (clockwise from top) Santa Monica pier, The Marvin Braude bicycle trail, Tongva Park and Santa Monica beach

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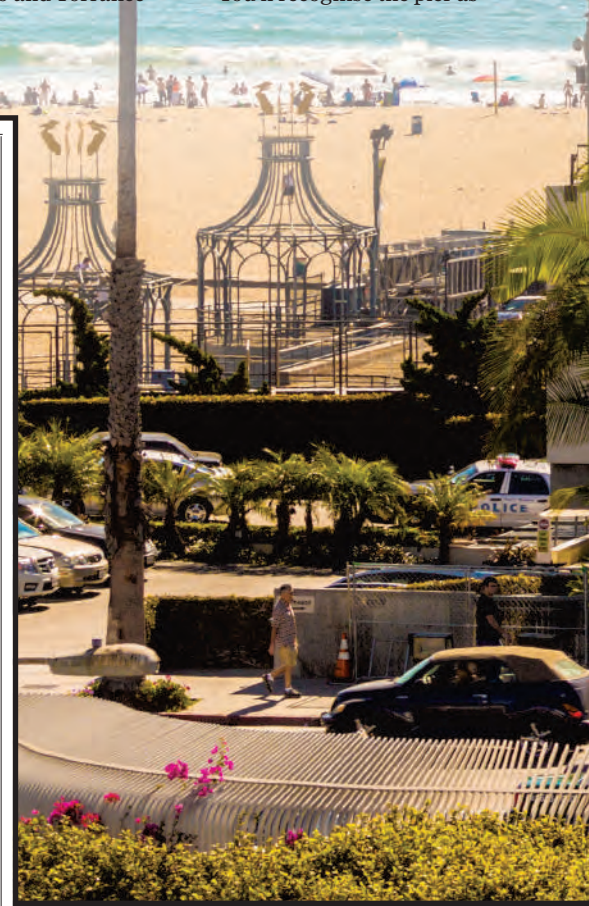
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DREAMIN'

in Santa Monica, the city made famous in the movies

soon as you see it as has been in dozens of films including (to name but a few), Iron Man, Bean, Titanic, The Lost Boys, Forrest Gump (there is a Bubba Gump Shrimp Company Restaurant on the pier, owned by the company that produced the film), Not Another Teen Movie, 2012 and Ruthless People (the pier is the site of the movie's climactic final scene).

If you have time to grab a bite of eat try The Lobster on the pier which offers some fantastic seafood.

HEALTHY

As we all know the whole LA area is a haven of healthy living and good intentions so expect to see lots of juice bars and 'hot yoga' studios, so you can eat as healthily or as gluttonously as you wish.

The beaches — especially the original Muscle Beach and nearby Venice beach — tend to be where the beautiful people hang out and you'll see some very toned bodies on your travels!

Unlike Portrush on a sunny day you won't have to find a free space on the sand as there is a 3.5 mile stretch of ridiculously wide beach in Santa Monica encompassing 245 acres of sand.

We availed of the Perry's Cafe



FUN IN THE SUN: Santa Monica's beaches are a hive of activity, with surfing and volleyball being the popular choices

Beach Butler service where you will get served food and drink as you enjoy the sun on your deckchair.

The Beach Butler is as luxurious as it sounds — he'll set up your space on the beach with chair, table, umbrella and windblock and then wait on you hand and foot while you spend the day sunning on the beach!

The quality of bars and restaurants in Santa Monica is something else, as it has to be, given the spending power of the locals.

There are no boarded up shops to be seen, it seems as if the credit crunch passed this city by.

While we were there we decided to try something different so headed for one of the city's many culinary schools. We found ourselves at the Gourmandise School of Sweets and

Savories in the Santa Monica Place main shopping centre making pasta, pesto and ricotta cheese. Using locally sourced ingredients we created delicious plates of food which were very quickly cleared.

It goes without saying that shopping in Santa Monica has all the big names and designer stores you would expect.

You will inevitably find your wandering up and down Third Street Promenade

which is also great for people watching. This is a hive of activity with buskers and stalls lined up along the street.

For nights out there is no shortage of pubs and clubs to choose from. For something special try The Bungalow in the

grounds of the Fairmont Hotel for drinks. Hundreds of people queue up here nightly to get into the trendy beachfront nightclub.

If you fancy doing the Hollywood thing for a morning it is less than a half hour away from Santa Monica. We jumped on a tour bus and were soon seeing the sights and sounds including the homes of stars such as Jennifer Aniston and Justin Bieber, the Hollywood walk of fame and the famous sign for that Beverly Hills boutique made famous in the Julia Roberts film Pretty Woman.

However, I never actually saw any celebs on the LA tour but as I said at the start of this article the celebrity culture is everywhere and that was clear on the flight home from LA where we catch glimpses of David Beckham, Kasabian and Muse all on the same plane. Goodbye for now LA-LA land!

Travel FACTFILE

HOW TO GET THERE:

★ We flew on one of BA's new A380 aircrafts. The 469 seater A380 is now flying between London and Los Angeles, Hong Kong, Johannesburg, Singapore, Washington and San Francisco. It will also start services to Miami in October 2015.

★ British Airways operates two non-stop daily flights from London Heathrow to Los Angeles International Airport (LAX).

★ British Airways provides excellent connectivity into London Heathrow for Northern Ireland customers operating up to six flights a day from Belfast City Airport to London Heathrow.

★ All flights from Belfast City Airport now arrive into Terminal 5, the airline's flagship Heathrow home so there is no need to change terminals when connecting onto long-haul destinations including Los Angeles, allowing for smoother connections as a result.

This move is estimated to cut minimum connection times for local customers travelling to onward British Airways flights from Terminal 5 by 30 minutes, to just one hour — significantly reducing journey times.

★ Daily departure times from London Heathrow to LAX are 09:45 and 16:20 and daily flight times from LAX into London Heathrow are 15:35 and 21:40.

★ Journey time from London Heathrow to LAX is approximately 11hrs 10 minutes and journey time from LAX to London Heathrow is approximately 10hrs 30 minutes.

★ British Airways operates a choice of four cabins including World Traveller, World Traveller Plus, Club World and First.

★ World Traveller fares from Belfast City Airport to LAX start from £575.41 including taxes, charges and fees.

★ For more information or to make a booking, log on to www.ba.com or contact your local travel agent.

WHERE TO STAY:

Fairmont Miramar Hotel & Bungalows, 101 Wilshire Boulevard Santa Monica, CA 90401 www.fairmont.com/santamonica Room rates from \$489 USD.

WHAT TO DO:

★ Gourmandise School of Sweets and Savories: www.thegourmandiseschool.com
★ Perry's Cafe Beach Butler Service: www.perryscafe.com
For full information on what to see and do check out www.santamonica.com



GREAT FUN: The Pacific Park fairground area in Santa Monica