

10 reasons to make for Santa Monica

For a great beach holiday combining a city break with all the fun of the fair, take Route 66 to Santa Monica. Here are some very good reasons to go for it, writes **Sandra O'Connell**

1. The beach is fantastic

The city's playground is its 5.5 km of golden sands. With streets laid out in grid fashion, most of the avenues run down to the sea (in Lycra). As well as the city beach there are 40 km of additional beaches along the Pacific Coast Highway, from Venice to Malibu. Along the way you're never far from a Perry's Beach Cafe. Perfectly Californian these offer a 'Beach Butler' service, a dedicated person to ply you with food, drink and factor 50 while you lie on a lounge wondering how long before someone from the standards office arrests you for freckles.

2. Everybody is gorgeous

It's true. All of them. No doubt the proximity to Hollywood has something to do with it but you'll never see so much tanned skin, blonde hair and chiselled limbs in one place. Every second store is a yoga studio, every third one a juice bar. The rest of the city is made up of shops selling Lycra sportswear, restaurants selling kale dishes and internet start ups with signs in the window saying – in the same way offices here tell couriers to remove their helmets – 'This is not a casting agency'.

3. It's great for cycling

The South Bay Cycle Trail, at 35km, is the world's longest ocean-front bike path. Totally flat and traffic free – except for the runners, power walkers and rollerskaters – it's a terrific way to explore. The only thing you won't find are amblers. For a city that prides itself on its relaxed atmosphere, there's nothing laid back about their approach to exercise. Equally, while it is fa-

mous for its 'anything goes' attitude, the evidence would suggest that anything goes bar flab. Presumably the pudgy move out or just give in and start doing leg stretches and downward dogs while waiting for the lights to turn like everyone else.

4. It has a pier

Built in 1909, Santa Monica's gorgeous wooden pier is a creaking joy to behold. It is also home to Pacific Park, an old fashioned amusement park with a five-storey rollercoaster offering – admittedly fleeting – views out over the city to the Santa Monica mountains beyond. To fully savour the views board the giant Ferris wheel instead, itself visible for miles. There's an aquarium on the pier, lobster shacks and stalls selling funnel cake – a doughy confection surely reserved for tourists. The other thing that makes the pier so special is that it's the official terminus for the old Route 66, which runs all the way from Chicago. Arrivals today are met by a large lady in heart-shaped sunglasses offering free hugs.

5. It's home to muscle beach

There are two Muscle Beaches, the newer of them just down the road in Venice. Santa Monica's is the original, the one credited as the birthplace of our modern obsession with physical fitness. It dates to the 1930s and is still home to hoops, parallel bars, ropes and all sorts of gymnastic paraphernalia. It's a hive of acrobatics with people swinging, hanging and vaulting like a human flea circus. Those not on the bars do floor exercises singly and in groups and at any given moment you'll see a giant human pyramid either forming or falling.

6. The parks are cool

Drought is a big deal here so it's a surprise to find the city has such lovely parks, chief of which is Palisades Park, a sliver of land – a true long acre – on the bluff overlooking the beach. Visit of a morning to find homeless people sleeping under palm trees alongside fellow residents addressing the day with sun salutations. The city's newest park, Tongva, is a landscape architect's dream designed by the people who gave New York its High Line. Filled with native flora that can cope without much water, it has viewing platforms out to sea that totally belie the fact that you're in a city.

7. The touring is great

Half a dozen tour companies send minibuses all over the region from their downtown bases. These are informative and entertaining, with loads of celebrity factoids to keep it current. One of the most fun ones takes in Hollywood and Beverly Hills, just over half an hour's drive from Santa Monica, including the Hollywood sign, the Chinese Theatre and the Hollywood Walk of Fame. There's a Universal Studio park nearby and a Getty Museum, as well as a chance to go window shopping on Rodeo Drive.

8. It's got good food

The farms around here are responsible for two-thirds of America's produce. While the US isn't famous for its fresh food – logistically that's hard to organise in a country this size – Santa Monica is literally surrounded by good things, which gives it a decidedly foodie culture. There are three farmers markets in the city worth spending a morning in. Go early to see local chefs

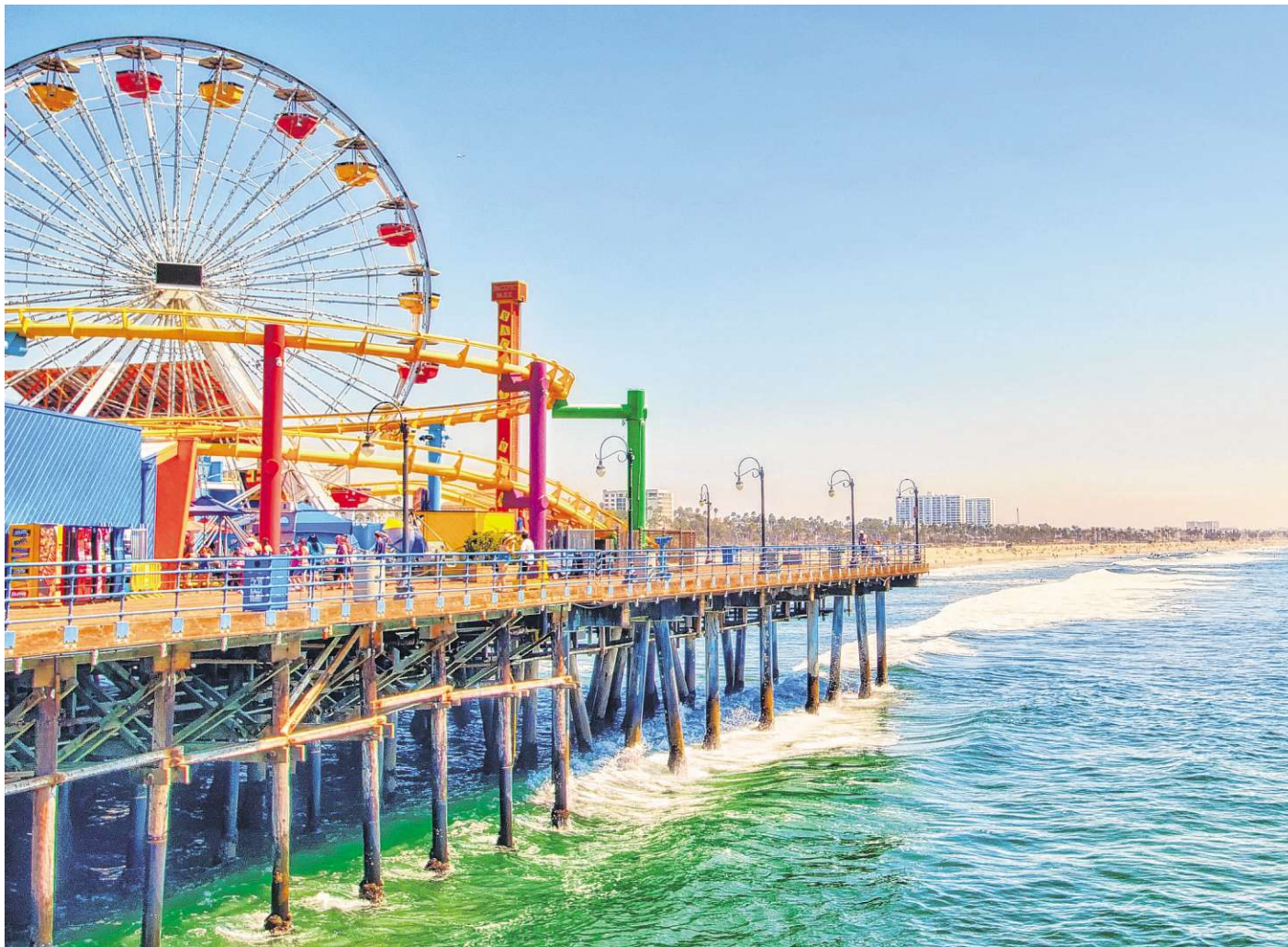
picking up produce for that night's menus. Go late and you'll see celebrities in sunglasses stocking up on their superfoods.

9. It's perfect for walking

We always hear no one walks in LA, that they'd sooner drive to visit neighbours than arrive on foot. That would be a shame because it's a very walkable city. Like its population of 100,000 people, it's small but perfectly formed. It takes no time at all to walk from the main shopping district at Third Street Promenade along Ocean Avenue and up to Montana Avenue, famous for its chi chi boutiques and celebrity residents. Being home to "Silicon Beach" too, the coffee shops here are full of techy types too, all skateboarding around worrying about their stock options.

10. The sunsets are spectacular

Residents of Santa Monica often bitch about "May grey" and "June gloom" but it's difficult to sympathise when all they mean is the sun takes longer to appear in the day. The city's motto, *Populus felix in urbe felici* – fortunate people in a fortunate land – says it all. As if year-round good weather weren't enough, the city has spectacular sunsets too. Like a nightly throat clearing exercise, the first indication a show is about to begin is that the wind picks up. Then the bright blue sky turns yellow, red or orange, with palm trees on the promenade silhouetted like a garish 1970s postcard. When night finally falls, and the lights of the giant Ferris wheel take up the slack, you can still make out the last of the evening's exercisers heading up from the beach. Just another day in paradise.



■ Clockwise from main: View over Pacific Park, on Santa Monica Pier in California; rollercoaster at Universal Studios, California; motorbikes heading west on Route 66. PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY



HOW TO... SANTA MONICA

GETTING THERE

British Airways operates two non-stop daily flights from London Heathrow to Los Angeles International Airport (LAX), with up to eight BA flights a day from Dublin to Heathrow. Sample return tickets from €587 in March. ba.com

STAYING THERE

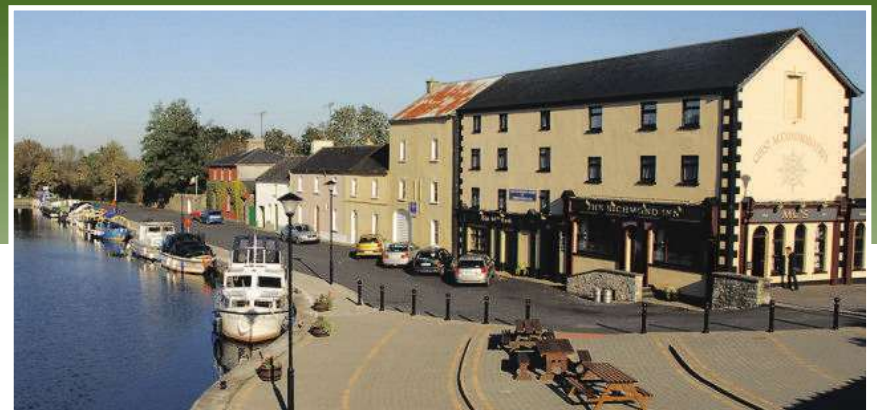
Shutters on the Beach: Five-star property

right on the sand. Doubles from €600 (shuttersonthebeach.com).

Le Meridian Delfina: Smart four-star half a mile inland with views over the city. Rooms from €500 via booking engines (starwoodhotels.com).

Fairmont Miramar: Ocean view four-star with city's coolest cocktail bar and Lambos around the block at weekends. Doubles from €425 from hotel site (Fairmont.com).

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