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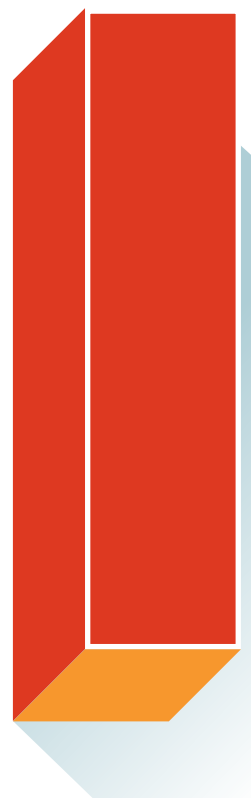
WELCOME

TO THE FITTEST TOWN ON EARTH

We spent a week in the Californian enclave where health's more than just a lifestyle choice – it's practically a religion

by Anna Hart & Ashleigh Austen





It's 8am on a Monday morning when I slap my yoga mat onto the hot studio floor, feeling a pre-emptive sense of virtuous wellbeing as the first beads of sweat gather on my brow. But any premature smugness is swiftly eviscerated when I overhear a few hissed words from my neighbour to her friend. "Are you double-classing today too? The killer combo is hot barre then hot power yoga, back to back." Welcome to Santa Monica, California, where 'double-classing' is a verb.

For decades, this beachside enclave has

attracted the most health-trend obsessed inhabitants of a health-obsessed city (Los Angeles) in a health-obsessed state (California). As the coastal district closest to Hollywood, it was destined to become the palm-fringed playground of choice for sporty starlets, bodybuilders, dancers and performers. During the '70s, Jane Fonda opened her aerobics studio here, future Olympian Carl Lewis trained at the Santa Monica Track Club and Arnold Schwarzenegger pumped iron at the weightlifting mecca, Gold's Gym. Today it's where fitness trends and health fads are cooked up, sampled by a hungry but ruthlessly discerning public, and then either spat out or savoured and given the coveted Santa Monica seal of approval.

The Fondalike '70s aerobics queens are still here but, a few decades and husbands later, they've swapped calisthenics for Cardio Barre and the grapefruit diet for paleo. The changing room demographic is a mix of taut-faced, oddly airbrushed-looking women who could be 49 or 69, semi-recognisable celebrities and fitness-obsessed twentysomethings working at tech companies on Santa Monica's Silicon Beach. Mine are the only pale thighs in the room. I'm also the only one with mismatched gym socks.

Thing is, I'm no stranger to gyms. Back home, I do yoga at home most mornings, run 8km three times a week and ClassPass my way around pilates, barre and BodyPump. I've had my fair share of flings with faddier offerings, and would rate myself a solid seven on the slob-to-sporty scale. Yet, in Santa Monica, I suspect that number drops to a frumpy four.

I leave Hot 8 Yoga and console myself with a \$14 Date Shake at Moon Juice, the most raved-about cold-pressed



juice bar and 'lunar apothecary' of the moment. I'm eavesdropping gleefully as the post-workout, pre-work crowd hotly discuss their favourite brand of whey protein and enzyme supplement, which Pop Physique (an LA-born barre workout) instructor has the best playlist, and their new obsession with Shape House, an 'urban sweat lodge' where you're swaddled in an infrared blanket and left to sweat for 50 minutes like a dumpling.

Walking down 2nd Street, every other person is carting a yoga mat; most are wearing neon New Balances. Because what Rodeo Drive is to designer boutiques, Santa Monica's 2nd Street is to designer workouts. On the same strip, I pass Equinox (swanky gym), Orangetheory (high-tech quantified cardio) and Exhale (boutique fitness studio) all interspersed with

SANTA MONICA GRAMMING

Fitness editor Ashleigh snapped her way around the hottest places in SoCal

"With bike paths and numbered streets, Santa Monica is one of the most two-wheel friendly areas in Los Angeles"

"Head to health ground zero Montana Avenue for 10 blocks of boutiques to spend those dollar bills."

"The coconut jerky burger with cashew mayo at Rawvolution. Vegan, organic and 15 types of delicious."

"Sweating it out wrapped in a padded infrared foil blanket all in the name of toning up and ditching toxins."

"Rehydrating at Pressed Juicery, where chlorophyll comes standard."

"The first rule of SoulCycle: respect the rider on your left and your right."

"Held each Wednesday and Sunday, the farmer's markets are the best spot to pick up some local Cali produce."

"You'll need at least an hour to peruse the aisles of Wholefoods."

"Brunch goals: huevos rancheros overlooking the beach on the deck at Loews Hotel."

YOUR SM MVPS

STAY Loews Santa Monica

Overlooking the pier, this luxe hotel offers up a full gym (with daily classes from core conditioning to spin), farm-to-table dining and eco-friendly spa treatments.

TRAVEL Lyft

Similar to Uber, the rideshare app matches you with local drivers at the tap of a button. Handy for jumping from class to cafe without the seven-block slog.

EAT Sweetfin Poke

Sweetfin serves up the perfect post-workout fuel: traditional Hawaiian seafood dishes (similar to sashimi rice bowls). Extra avocado optional.

SWEAT ClassPass

Save a few bucks and sign up for the monthly membership for access to Santa Monica's top studios. Our picks? Circuit Works and Pop Physique.

► paleo-friendly pit stops with names like 'True Food Kitchen' or 'Kreation'. All the gyms are open 24 hours. This city never sleeps – not because it's up all night partying, but because it's up at 4:30am for kundalini yoga. "There's a lot going on here between 5am and 6am," says Adam Gillman, co-owner of Cycle House. "In West Hollywood, you don't see that. Santa Monica is definitely a super-fit and active part of LA."

FOOD TRIBES

It doesn't take long for Santa Monica – a city of superlatives, where self-improvement is the meaning of life – to work its spell on me; before I know it I'm celebrating my final Cardio Barre class of the week with a kaletini (yes, that's a gin cocktail with cold-pressed kale) at the glossy bar in Elovate, the vegan restaurant run by Roberto Martin, former personal vegan chef to Ellen DeGeneres and Portia de Rossi. It's Friday night, my fellow drinkers and I are clad in workout gear, accessorised with a post-SoulCycle glow. Admittedly, it's not any old workout gear; we're talking Onzie's brightly patterned harem style pants, Lululemon tops and swathes of Kit and Ace's technical cashmere. "I have two wardrobes: work clothes and workout clothes," says Jackie Alvarez, the 27-year-old PR manager for the Santa Monica tourism board – and my date for the night. "I can think of very few occasions in Santa Monica where it would be inappropriate to show up in your exercise gear."

Alvarez catches the barman's eye and orders us two beet-based Red Rain cocktails. "We'll sweat out all this organic gin in the first few minutes of hot yoga tomorrow," she assures me. Santa Monica isn't about deprivation; it's about guilt-free gluttony and hangover hacks. Much like my kaletini, this city is a careful balance of health and hedonism. It's as though every facet has been given a health twist. So when someone talks about "the best burger in town", they mean Rawvolution's raw vegan 'burger' with sprouted onion chia bread topped with coconut jerky strips. That Lycra-clad girl licking an ice-cream? She's indulging in a Kippy's vegan goji berry and coconut milk concoction. And at hipster bars such as The Misfit, locally brewed kombucha is on tap alongside craft beers.

In Santa Monica, you can have your cake and eat it – just as long as it's made with agave and raw cacao. You can have a stressful job in tech and stay serene – if you make it to 6am yoga every morning. And you can party hard and still look young, if you know the name of the best beautician in town. Which I do: Jamie Sherrill. From the street, Beauty Park Medical Spa looks like any other beauty salon, but her most

IN SANTA MONICA, YOU CAN HAVE YOUR CAKE AND EAT IT – JUST AS LONG AS IT'S MADE WITH AGAVE AND RAW CACAO

famous clients (she's worked with Kirsten Dunst and Jennifer Love Hewitt) slip in the back entrance. "At least, the male celebrities do," she says. "Most female celebrities don't care if everyone knows they get botox. These days in LA, botox is no big deal." To call Sherrill a beautician is a borderline insult; she's a registered nurse turned bio-aesthetician specialising in no-nonsense, non-invasive laser treatments. After 10 minutes of being zapped with her ultrasonic Acellerator Ultra (now sold on Net-A-Porter), I swear I look like I've just been on a week-long yoga retreat. Sherrill's ultrasonic power-facials, which use different types of current to boost radiance, enhance lymphatic drainage, kill acne bacteria, wipe out dark circles and even spark cellular repair, are completely different from anything I've experienced at home, where it can feel like you've just paid someone \$140 to wash and moisturise your face



PHOTOGRAPHY: ASHLEIGH AUSTEN; JOHN RINTOUL; ILLUSTRATIONS: RUI RICARDO

really slowly. With a sinking feeling I realise that Sherrill – and Santa Monica – has turned a lifelong spa skeptic into someone who'd consider spending \$390 on a facial. "Nobody in LA has time for a lame facial," scoffs Sherrill. "We take looking good seriously. And when you look good, you feel good. When you feel good, you live good, and when you live good, you get paid good. So don't try telling a woman that looking good isn't important."

Here, women aren't ashamed for showing a little self-obsession. I'd always assumed SoCal women were born with it. But a week in Santa Monica has taught me that California girls don't have an unfair advantage, they have an attitude of serious self-investment. They'll fill their wardrobe with bum-flattering \$100 leggings and drink double-digit juices, but they'll also spend \$200 on botox or on eyelash extensions. Their glowing skin isn't just from hot yoga and wheatgrass shots, it's from high-tech electronic facials. Contrary to what we might think, health isn't a birthright in California. It's a passion. **WH**

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YOGA AND GO
Strap your mat on and get thee to class. Adidas by Stella McCartney Yoga Bag, \$140, adidas.com.au



LUG IT ALL
Work out after work? This holds everything – and more. Nike Training Duffel Bag, \$75, nikestore.com.au



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