



The First-Timer's Guide to Santa Monica

If a slow-motion jog down Santa Monica beach à la Baywatch is not your thing, rest assured there's plenty more to do in the seaside city. By Samantha O'Brien.



Promenade on the pier

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The storied pier is a Santa Monica institution. The century-old construction is home to Pacific Park amusement park and its famous Ferris wheel, which gives expansive views over the coast. There's an authentic carnival atmosphere that keeps tourists and locals coming back, plus stalls, bars, restaurants and an aquarium. During the summer months the pier plays host to free concerts and movie screenings, and the west end of the pier is where local fisherman angle for mackerel, bonito and sea bass.



People-watch at Primo Passo Coffee Co.

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Located on the corner of Montana Avenue and 7th Street, this minimalist gem is the closest thing to good Australian coffee you'll find this side of Venice Beach. Primo Passo serves up an ever-changing roster of microbrews, smooth cold-brew iced coffee and baked goods from nearby Farmshop. Don't let the stark interior fool you – it's a warm and welcoming space and the people-watching is topnotch.





Flex your core

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There's nothing more Santa Monica than an on-trend workout. Don your best athleisure wear (the kind that'll take you straight from SoulCycle to Nobu) and head down to Mighty Pilates. The instructors will guide novices through a variety of classes using specialised equipment such as the Reformer and TRX Suspension Trainers.



Browse for blocks

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Montana Avenue is a charming tree-lined shopping strip that runs for 10 blocks from the edge of the Pacific Ocean to Brentwood. By day, it's busy with stylish locals shopping at high-end boutiques and beauty stores and lunching at cool cafés. By night, Montana Avenue is a destination for dining (try Locanda Portofino for great Italian or R+D Kitchen for drinks and snacks) and entertainment – check out Aero Theatre for interesting screenings.





Dine at FIG Restaurant

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A relaxed restaurant across the road from the beach at the beautiful Fairmont Miramar Hotel & Bungalows, FIG's style is Mediterranean meets Middle Eastern. This means the margherita pizza is expertly crafted ~ but so is the lamb merguez pizza with pickled onion, yoghurt and mint. Try the Bread Balloon: a puffed-up sphere of freshly baked flatbread with a choice of toppings to dip it into, including marinated lentils, labneh and roasted capsicum with green onion pesto.



Tune into the music scene

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Take a picnic and some friends to Santa Monica Pier for a Thursday-night Twilight Concert. The free gigs take place during the summer months and the roster is an eclectic mix, from the soul stylings of Mayer Hawthorne to the '90s cult alt-rockers Save Ferris. Locals turn up to claim their turf hours ahead of showtime so arrive early and enjoy the sunset.





Take to the surf

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If you're one of the rare Australians who has never taken to the water atop a long fibreglass board, why not give it a go in Santa Monica? After all, this is where the father of modern surfing, Duke Kahanamoku, caused a stir with his surfing demonstration back in 1912. The instructors at Learn to Surf LA can teach novices on how to catch a wave; the surf school runs group or one-on-one sessions about 150 metres from Santa Monica Pier.



Stock up at the department stores

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Santa Monica Place is where you can find the big stores. Bloomingdale's, Nordstrom and Barneys New York are all here, along with designer boutiques such as Louis Vuitton and Coach. The large open-air shopping centre at the end of 3rd Street Promenade is just around the corner from Santa Monica Pier, meaning you get ocean views with your mall spree.





Cycle along the coast

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The South Bay Bicycle Trail starts at the beautiful northernmost part of Santa Monica – Will Rogers State Beach – and heads south past Santa Monica, through Venice and its boardwalk and all the way down to Torrance County Beach. Pick up a bike from Perry's beach rentals, located on Santa Monica's boardwalk. For a glimpse into the local skating subculture, make a stop along the way to check out the world-famous Venice Skate Park. If you're lucky, some pro skaters or very talented up-and-comers may drop into the bowl.



Grab a bite at Ashland Hill

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This place is what a beach bum might call "chill". There's a definite Australian-beer-garden vibe here, as well as a seasonal selection of local tap beers and artisanal draughts from some of the world's best breweries. The Ashland Hill Burger is the pick of the menu – the tender beef patty comes topped with red onion bacon jam, paprika aioli and watercress, plus herb Parmesan fries.

