



# EXPRESS

Home of  
the Daily and  
Sunday Express

## Hottest ticket in California: New light rail connects downtown to beaches

I'M on California's newest roller coaster ride, the Expo Line, as it dashes past neat houses and leaps over roads and liquor stores.

By **NICK DALTON**

PUBLISHED: 11:13, Sat, Oct 1, 2016 | UPDATED: 11:36, Sat, Oct 1, 2016



The expensive Metro extension, connects the high rise of LA with the beaches of Santa Monica

As we halt at Culver [City](#) I can just make out the Hollywood sign in the distance and, as we pass through museum-packed Exposition Park, a giant dinosaur skeleton in a glass cube at the sprawling Natural History Museum looks down on us.

If the century-old museum is the past, we are the future. The billion-pound light rail extension is the latest addition to the Los Angeles Metro, snaking through this notoriously car-centric city. It's also the most inspiring, heading from high-rise central LA to just up from the beach at Santa Monica. Equally importantly for us, the 15-mile, 45-minute Expo Line connects for a 20-minute ride to Universal Studios theme park.

The sprawl of LA is now a relaxing family destination, rather than a patchwork of gruelling car journeys. From the magic of the beach to the magic of Harry Potter in 90 minutes, on a gleaming, cross between train and tram.



The Santa Monica Pier is as American as apple pie and a great place to visit

We're staying right by the buzz of Santa Monica Pier at the hip Loews Hotel. It's a sophisticated yet family-friendly retreat, six-floor atrium lobby and bar with glass [wall](#) overlooking the sea, where 30-plus fire-pits on the raised deck by the pool light up the evening and the surf-splashed shore.

The pier is slice of Americana, a wild-eyed fun palace. Opened in 1909, within a decade it was the “people’s playground”, complete with amusement park.

By the 1960s it was charmingly run down and the likes of actress Jane Fonda, folk singer Joan Baez and Beat Generation writer Charles Bukowski had makeshift apartments here. By the 1980s it was derelict. Now it throbs with a carnival atmosphere, the resurrected funfair, Pacific Park, celebrating its 20th anniversary with iconic rides such as the West Coaster roller coaster and the neon starburst of the world’s only solar-powered Ferris wheel.

For more than 50 years, until 1953, Los Angelenos used to flock to the pier on the clanking Pacific Electric streetcar. The Expo Line follows in its tracks, halting across the road from Bloomingdale’s, a contemporary take, with industrial urban chic interior, on the classy New York department store.



The moment you enter Universal Studios theme park you enter a whole new world

Bloomingdale’s opens on to Santa Monica Place, a three-storey outdoor mall which itself gives way to the pedestrianised 3rd Street Promenade, where boutiques [mix](#) with busking rockers, farmers markets and open-air film screenings.

Here The Misfit, a bar/restaurant with 1920s club feel, has a quirky menu, ranging from crispy Brussels sprouts to Dixie-fried chicken. The Curious Palate is another curio, a rambling food store where homemade jams mix with casual dining and dishes such as kale and maple-candied pecan salad with avocado, farro, butternut squash, blue cheese and a sherry wine vinaigrette.

We could spend a week in Santa Monica but we need to ride the rails, a network that's anything but a token gesture to car-free transport. The Expo Line runs every 15 minutes from 5am with the last train back from LA at 1am.



The Expo Line runs every 15 minutes, and is a great alternative to car travel

It's \$1.75 (£1.35) to anywhere on the system, from the cool town of Monrovia in the foothills of the San Gabriel [Mountains](#) (a station in the 1926 Santa Fe railroad depot) to Long Beach in the south.

It's clean (no eating or drinking), with comfy seats amid bright posters for markets and museums. It feels safe with cameras, driver announcements and a cargo of parents, children, cyclists, skateboarders and young lovers.

The latter head for Exposition Park Rose Garden, a vision from the train but a dream from within. The seven-acre oasis of 20,000 bushes, opened in 1928, is on the National Register of Historic Places – and it's free.

Exposition Park, a 19th-century agricultural fairground, is lined with [attractions](#), including the California Science Center (everything from an aquarium to spacecraft, including Shuttle Endeavour) and the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County (there are 35 million specimens and the new Dinosaur Hall has 20 complete skeletons, not least three T. Rex).


At Union Station we take the Red Line (a Tube train) to Universal. I've driven to theme parks in both California and Florida, yet never felt this fresh and stress-free on arrival. I'm even ready for the rush to the Wizarding World of Harry Potter. Here among the ginormous reconstruction of Hogwarts and the snow-dappled streets of Hogsmeade is a ride even more longed-for than the Expo Line: Harry Potter and the Forbidden [Journey](#). Certainly longed for by Georgia, 19, and Henry, 16, who have grown up with the movies.

The high-tech thriller involves facing sideways (like riding a broomstick) and bucking and bouncing through a virtual reality world of quidditch, castles and dragons. Quite awesome even if I proclaim (to mild disdain) a preference for The Simpsons Ride, a joke- and thrill-packed semivirtual roller coaster, where Sideshow Bob sabotages Krusty the Clown's nuclear power plant, creating a giant baby Maggie.

Leaving late afternoon, we hop off the Metro at Hollywood and Vine for a stroll along Hollywood Boulevard, spotting names such as Marilyn Monroe, Ozzy Osbourne, even Donald Trump, on the sidewalk Walk of Fame.



The setting sun over California bathes the city in golden glow, that is certainly a sight to behold

At the famed Chinese Theatre cinema there's lots of noise and we land amid the Ghostbusters film premiere. Having its [star](#)  Melissa McCarthy wave at us means more to the teenagers than me trying to explain why singing cowboy Gene Autry merits five pavement stars.

Heading home, the giant globe of the setting sun to our right bathes our world in a golden glow, everything from palm trees to high-level roads, churches to a towering Felix the Cat neon figure above a Chevy dealership.

The moment we step off at Santa Monica we can see the lights of the pier and we're ready for the fun to start again...

#### THE KNOWLEDGE:

Loews (dialling from the UK: 001 310 458 6700/[loewshotels.com](http://loewshotels.com)) offers doubles from £200, room only.

Low cost airline Norwegian (0330 828 0854/ [norwegian.com](http://norwegian.com)) offers year-round five-day a week return flights from Gatwick to Los Angeles from £330 (£800 in Premium Class).

California tourism: visit [california.com](http://california.com)