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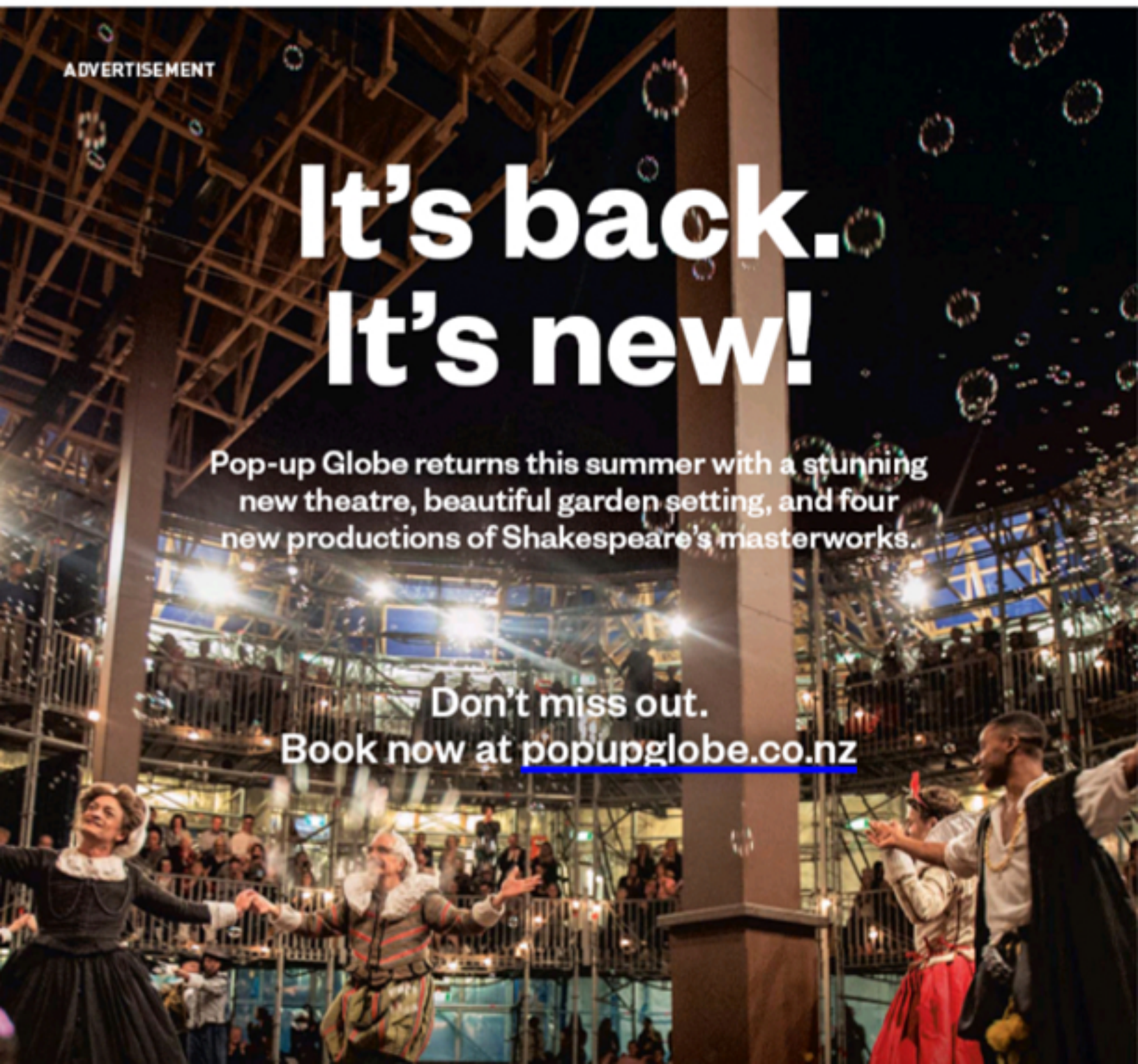


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TRAVEL INSIDER: TODD MITSUHATA SANTA MONICA, CALIFORNIA

Why is Santa Monica a good place to stay when visiting LA?

Its incredibly convenient location – it's just 15 minutes from LAX and close to Beverly Hills, Hollywood and Venice. Its small size makes it easy to get the most of local attractions, restaurants and shops by foot or on bike, without ever having to get into a car. Overall, it's a great base to explore the rest of Los Angeles – especially with the new Metro Expo Line, which connects Santa Monica to Downtown Los Angeles in just 45 minutes.

Which neighbourhood should we base ourselves in?

Santa Monica has eight different neighbourhoods, each with its own personality and vibe. Downtown Santa Monica is perfect for first-time visitors, as it is closest to some popular attractions, like the Santa Monica Pier and Third St Promenade. People who want a truly luxurious experience should check out the gems located on Santa Monica Beach. Visitors who want to experience more of a hippie vibe should look into one of the budget-friendly options on Santa Monica's Main St.

What are the must-sees?

A trip to Santa Monica wouldn't be complete without taking a ride on the Pacific Wheel ferris wheel to take in the spectacular views of the coastline – but I also recommend getting away from the obvious spots. Sign up for a spin class on Montana Avenue, wander into the little independent shops on Main St, peruse the farmers' market on Pico ... try to get away from the norm a bit and experience Santa Monica like the locals do.

Where can you get a good coffee?

Philz Coffee is where the Silicon Beach tech crowd hangs out. If you look around while sipping your delicious iced coffee (with fresh mint leaves!) you get the distinct feeling that there are five different start-ups launching at that moment from that very room. Another local favourite is Dogtown Coffee on Main St – it's named

after the original Lords of Dogtown, the crew of Santa Monica locals responsible for the surfing and skateboarding renaissance during the 1970s.

Are there any good farmers markets?

Absolutely. The most popular one is the Downtown Santa Monica Farmers Market, which takes place on Wednesdays and Saturdays from 8am-1pm. If you get there early enough, you may get lucky and see some of Los Angeles' most famous chefs

hand-picking the ingredients they will base that week's menu on.

Where's the best place for brunch?

You will find a huge number of the local population enjoying a weekend brunch in the early afternoons on Saturdays and Sundays – many of which will include several Bloody Marys and/or mimosas, thanks to the plethora of restaurants around town that offer "bottomless brunch". My favourite is Flower Child, in Downtown Santa Monica. My go-to is the Late Riser, which consists of scrambled eggs, quinoa, avocado, roasted chile, corn and queso blanco.

How about for a casual dinner?

Ashland Hill on Main St. They have a nice outdoor beer garden, delicious burgers and California craft beers on tap.

And where should we go for fine dining?

I always recommend Via Veneto. It's an incredibly romantic (think chandeliers, dark stone floors, and artwork that depicts the inside of St Peter's Basilica) Italian restaurant on Main St that features classic Italian dishes, predominately from Rome and Tuscany. Order one of the house-made ravioli dishes, and thank me later.

What are some of the best clubs or bars?

The Misfit near Third St Promenade has a great happy hour and is a fun place to start. The Bungalow at The Fairmont Miramar Hotel & Bungalows is popular spot with the young professional crowd. The ONYX Rooftop Bar at the Hotel

Shangri-La at the Ocean offers delicious cocktails, outdoor fire pits and great views.

What's the shopping like?

We have everything from luxury to boutique. Santa Monica Place and Third St Promenade have a wide selection of luxury stores. It's also fun to stroll Montana Ave, where you'll find great boutique stores.

Are there any festivals with which we should time our visit?

The annual Twilight Concert Series is a free event that features a different band each Thursday night for 10 weeks during the summer. The best part is that the concert takes place on the Pier, and concert-goers watch from the sand – so you get to enjoy awesome music while enjoying a picnic and watching the sun set over the Pacific.



What are the best museums or galleries?

Bergamot Station is a former railroad station that's now home to the largest arts gallery complex and cultural centre in Southern California, with more than 30 individual art galleries.

If we only had 24 hours to see the best of Santa Monica, what would you recommend?

Start by renting a bike and cycling along the South Bay Bike Trail. It's the world's longest beachfront bike path (35km) from Santa Monica to Torrance. When you return, have lunch at The Lobster, which overlooks the Pier and beach. Go shopping on Montana Ave or Third St Promenade and stop at one of the local cafes or juice bars to re-energise. In the evening, go to Mercado for tasty Mexican tacos and margaritas, and then finish with drinks at Copo d'Oro.

Todd Mitsuata is Manager, Asia Pacific & Latin America for Santa Monica Travel & Tourism.



The entrance to Santa Monica Pier, known as the Pier 1000