

Blue-sky Thinking

A far cry from the sprawling metropolis that is LA, the independent city of Santa Monica is home to laid-back beaches, burgeoning start-ups and a wellness culture all of its own

Words by KATE WILLS

Seedy. Smoggy. Sprawling. Superficial. There are many reasons not to like LA. As a non-driver, my last memory of trying to get to Santa Monica from Los Angeles a few years ago involved asking my Hollywood hotel concierge how to take the bus there, only to be met with a facial expression of such genuine concern, disapproval and pity that I might as well have asked him where to score crystal meth. As I approached the second hour of being stuck on a bus on a traffic-choked highway, I realised why.

Thankfully, getting from Hollywood to downtown Santa Monica during my latest trip was as easy as piling on to a new Expo Line train for an air-conditioned 30 minutes. This game-changing – and long overdue – extension to the LA Metro, which opened in 2016, has made the slice of paradise that is Santa Monica suddenly accessible to traffic-fearing Angelenos and visitors alike.

Santa Monica is a city in its own right – part of the county, but not the city of LA – and as cities go, it seems to have it all. Yes there are other neighbourhoods that are as upscale and manicured, Brentwood and Malibu spring to mind, but Santa Monica has a character all of its own. It's so left-wing that locals refer to it as “the people's republic of Santa Monica”. Plastic bags are banned,

and it's now illegal to build a home here that is not carbon-neutral. It has miles of public beaches, hikeable mountains to the north, super-cool So-Cal architecture (its many celebrity residents include the architect Frank Gehry), top-rated schools, parks and public services as well as a famous pier. No wonder it also has the most expensive rent in the county. For this trip, instead of speeding around LA sightseeing (the Hollywood sign is overrated), I decided to stay in Santa Monica to try to experience what it's like to call this place home.

When the painter David Hockney moved to LA in 1964 he set up his studio in Santa Monica, and the clean lines, wide streets and aquamarine swimming pools inspired a whole new phase in his work. He described the place as his “promised land”, and on my first morning – wandering around the blocks nearest the beach (yes, people actually walk) – I quickly come to understand how the light and space here can open the eye to new ways of seeing. Baby-blue, Baywatch-style lifeguard huts hover over the seemingly endless stretch of vanilla beach populated by surfers in half stripped-down wetsuits. Longboarders and cyclists cruise down the bike paths alongside power-walkers in bikinis and small dogs on skateboards. Only in California... ▶▶





If neighbouring Venice is the naughty little sister (you'll smell the legal marijuana and spot the street art as soon as you walk south down the boardwalk), then Santa Monica would be the 40-something former surfer who has swapped his bong for green smoothies and beach yoga. Speaking of the latter, my hotel – called Casa Del Mar – offers sunrise classes. And even if I'm only awake because of jet lag, I still feel smug unfurling my mat on the sand the next morning, clocking the famous Santa Monica ferris wheel under my armpit during the downward dog.

Perched right on the sand, Casa Del Mar might just be the best-located hotel in town. Built in 1926 as a beach club for Hollywood A-listers, the design is California meets the Mediterranean, with mosaics on the ceiling, plates on the walls and plants everywhere. The rooms' minibars have sachets of vitamins as well as bath bombs that help to combat jet lag.

Next door is Casa's sibling hotel, Shutters on the Beach (the properties are owned by a pair of brothers). Here the nicest rooms have balconies so close to the shore that you can practically lean over and build a sandcastle. They all come with a copy of *The Old Man and The Sea*, and are filled with the kind of tchotchkes that you'd expect Gwyneth Paltrow to have in her beach house – conch shells, bottles filled with sand and storm lanterns.

A local chef and restaurateur called Raffaele Lunetta loves Shutters so much that he got married there. I meet him for brunch at his light and airy diner, Lunetta All Day, where the floor-to-ceiling windows have been designed to screen out the traffic and reveal a view of the palm trees – a metaphor for life in Santa Monica if ever there was one. Raffaele is tanned, with a salt-and-pepper goatee and the kind of insouciant vibe that you'd expect from a former pro surfer. When I say he loves this town so much that he grew up here and got the T-shirt, I mean that he is literally wearing a long-sleeve navy T-shirt with a Santa Monica logo on it.

Over a savoury grain bowl of stir-fried wheat berries, freekah, farro, marinated greens, blistered red onions and a perfectly poached egg, Raffaele tells me what makes Santa Monica so special. "There's such a strong little community of residents here, and we're very protective of our city. No one wants to see a tour bus parked in front of Palisades Park," he says, referring to the pristine patch of green filled with roses, palm trees and chess boards that runs parallel to the sea. "At the end of the day we're a close-knit beach town. Everybody is into cycling, surfing, yoga and paddleboarding. Where else can you play tennis on the beach? I tell all my employees that they need to jump into the ocean at least once a day."

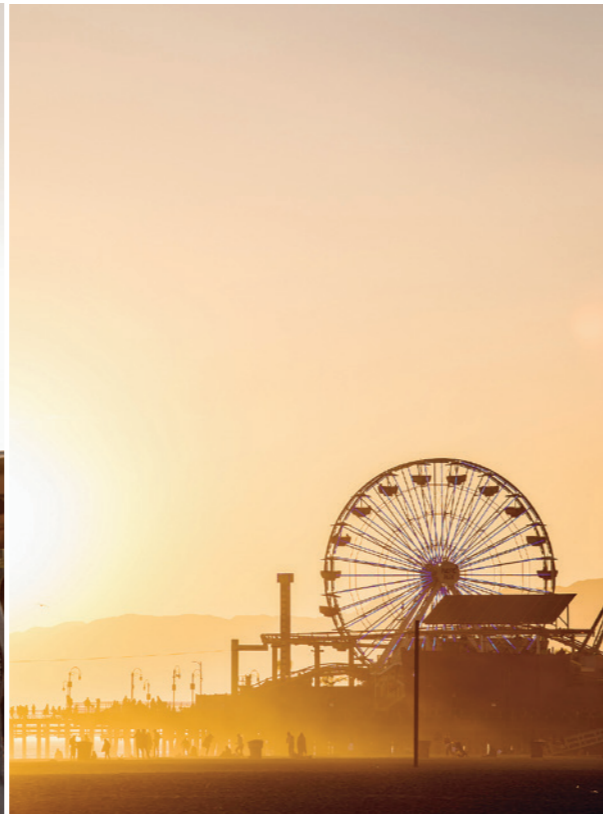


LA is known for being health-conscious and fitness-obsessed, but Santa Monica takes it to the next level. In the 1930s this is where Muscle Beach was based, before Arnie and the bodybuilders moved it to Gold's Gym in Venice. If you stroll up the sand from Shutters towards the pier then you'll spot the plaque marking the original site, along with some modest gym bars now used on Saturdays by a troop of acroyoga enthusiasts. During the 1970s Jane Fonda opened her first aerobics studio in Santa Monica. In the decades since, all manner of pilates-barre-boxing-core-TRX trends have taken root here. At health-food cafés like Kreation, pipettes of chlorophyll are dispensed into water as standard, and at bars like Misfit they serve kombucha on tap alongside craft beers. On Second Street alone I walk past a SoulCycle studio, an Equinox gym, and four boutique yoga studios, all interspersed with paleo cafes and juiceries.

In the changing rooms after a reformer class at Mighty Pilates on Montana Avenue, I get chatting to Lindsey Simcik. In true LA fashion she's an actress, singer, model, podcast host and SoulCycle instructor, and has the kind of abs that would make it criminal to wear anything other than a crop-top. We head a few doors down to Beaming Organic, where I order a "bootie-burn smoothie" (whole grapefruit and pineapple, coconut nectar, bee pollen and chilli flakes). "I can't think of many places in Santa

Monica where you couldn't wear workout clothes," says Lindsey, when I compliment her on her LuluLemons. Lindsey and her podcast co-host Krista tell me that I have to check out YogaHop (yoga set to hip-hop music), Shape House (an urban sweat lodge frequented by the Kardashians), and the Santa Monica Stairs (the gruelling coastal steps that are loved by Hugh Jackman). Conversation soon turns to dating in the city and an app called Raya, which is loved by LA's celebrities and influencers. "People are calling it 'Tinder for illuminatis'," jokes Lindsey.

It's particularly apt that we're talking about apps, because Santa Monica – or "Silicon Beach" as it has recently been dubbed – is becoming the next tech hub. Tinder, Snapchat, Yahoo, Google and YouTube all have offices here, and you're now as likely to encounter start-ups as you are surf shops. While having dinner at Cassius – a busy French-Asian spot with grilled pig's tail and jellyfish salad on the menu – I wind up talking to Patrick Coyne. Patrick moved here in 2013 to launch Black Tuxedo, an online suit rental company (although he's dressed in the official start-up uniform of skinny jeans, a black T-shirt and Converse). He tells me that it's not uncommon for tech companies here to give employees beach cruisers instead of parking spots, and his own office in downtown Santa Monica has a taco truck as well as a doggy daycare.



“Unlike Silicon Valley, the culture here is that you get your work done, then you go to the beach,” he says. “The brightest talent in the industry all want to move here now – it’s a better lifestyle.” Patrick tells me that the tech-set tend to congregate at Bungalow on a weeknight – an actual wooden bungalow set up in the grounds of the Fairmont Hotel. When we cycle there for a nightcap (on one of his office beach cruisers) it feels more like a packed-out living room than a bar. There are wicker lamps, Mexican blankets on the wall and comfy sofas. Hendrix is playing over the speakers. We order a jug of their “bitchin’ sangria”, made with pisco and berries from the local farmer’s market, and watch the Silicon Beach-sters shoot pool.

Waking up to another morning of Hockney skies makes it easy to shake off the pisco haze. I walk from Shutters to a Box Union class, where I upper-cut my punchbag to the soundtrack of Missy Elliot and TLC. Endorphins rocketing, I meet up with my film-producer friend Guy, who’s over from London to surf, and to scope out a job in the movies. We share the signature “munchies” breakfast burrito and the sea-salted caramel iced lattes at Dogtown Coffee. This used to be the site of the Zephyr Surf Shop, made famous by the legendary Seventies skater crew the Z-Boys. Barefoot bros trailing boards still come here for their cold-brews today.

Unlike car-dependent LA, Santa Monica’s bike-share scheme, as well as the prevalence of Ubers, means that it’s possible to base yourself here and not ever need four wheels. However, Guy has hired a silver convertible for the week, and as we glide around listening to The Cure we quickly realise that only tourists have cars like this (the locals are all in blacked-out Audis). When we turn on to the freeway we drive past a man holding up a sign saying “Anything Green Helps”. It’s not clear if he means wheatgrass shots, bud, or “greenback” dollar bills. In Santa Monica there’s a good chance of it being all three.

THE LOWDOWN

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