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Santa Monica: Coney Island Meets Rodeo Drive

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When my sister suggested a week in Los Angeles I hesitated. I wasn't a fan of mega cities - the crowds, the noise, and the traffic - and I'd done LA's popular attractions - Disneyland, Hollywood and Universal Studios - a few times. But when she described what she had in mind, "easy to get to, a quiet beach, and walk everywhere," I was in.

A 2 1/2-hour flight from Vancouver, a 20-minute taxi ride, and we were ensconced in a cozy, whitewashed six-unit "cottage" on Santa Monica State Beach (a VRBO at less than \$100 per night each.) And I mean right on the beach, as in open the gate and step onto a 6-km stretch of white sand. The evening show - a glorious citrus-hued sunset - was just beginning. We kicked off our shoes, and headed towards the surf for front-row seats. To our right were the dusky Santa Monica Mountains, and to the left, a giant twinkling pinwheel, the Ferris wheel on the Santa Monica Pier.

Ranked by National Geographic as one of the top ten beach cities in the world, Santa Monica is adjacent to, but a separate city from, LA. It's a blend of Coney Island and Rodeo Drive, with vintage attractions, contemporary architecture, and home to the homeless and celebrities.

The Pier, built in 1909, is the official end of historic Route 66, and where Forrest Gump ran to on his cross-country run "clear to the ocean." In addition to the Ferris wheel, the Pier has a roller coaster, amusement games, restaurants, shops, an aquarium, a trapeze school, and an operating vintage 1924 carousel that Marilyn Monroe is said to have frequented. We eschewed all those for simpler pleasures: the free walking tour, a display of old photos, and watching people fish.

Our evening entertainment, after the sunsets, was the pedestrian-friendly Third Street Promenade. The shops stayed open late, lively restaurants spilled out onto the sidewalk, musicians, clowns, and salsa lessons filled the centre, and the two movie theatres were playing the latest releases.

At the south end of the Promenade is Santa Monica Place, an open-air, three-story mall designed by the renowned Canadian-born architect Frank Gehry. The mall is home to upscale stores, restaurants, and, on the rooftop deck, the food fair's outdoor dining area with ocean views, canopies, and cushioned seating to rival many a finer establishment.

A short walk south of Santa Monica is Venice Beach, the noisier, wanton sister. On Ocean Front Walk were a hundred or more hucksters peddling their wares: fortunetellers, snake handlers, posing dogs, artists, T-shirts vendors, and medical marijuana evaluations. At the Venice Beach Freak-show, the inspiration for a reality TV series, there was a lineup to see the attractions that included, wolf-man, little people, the bearded lady, and a two-headed turtle.

Venice Beach is also a giant outdoor sports facility with basketball courts, beach volleyball, a skateboard park, and the Muscle Beach gym, where Arnold Schwarzenegger was once a regular. On Sundays, closer to the Pier, Cirque de Soleil performers often put on impromptu shows on outdoor tightropes.

Although everything was within walking distance, we rented bikes to explore the 35-km South Bay Bicycle Trail, the "world's longest oceanfront bike path." With the exception of the Venice stretch, the beaches were quiet, a few surfers carving waves and us. Palisades Park, right in Santa Monica, is another pleasant stroll with bluff-top ocean views, shade, and a soothing Eucalyptus-scented breeze.

The number of homeless people in Santa Monica was surprising, although it shouldn't have been - warmth and sunshine draw us all. The atmosphere was peaceful- a man snoozing on a park bench with a sock-monkey as a pillow - and the panhandling wasn't aggressive.

Our late November visit meant we'd missed the summer crowds, yet at 27 Celsius it was still beach weather. When a Canadian friend who lives there lamented, "It hasn't rained in a year -- I'm sick of it! I want to wear socks!" we could only shake our heads.

Where to eat

Loteria Grill - 1251 Third Street Promenade

The California experience isn't complete without Mexican food. The Loteria Grill offers tasty twists on regional Mexican specialties including the Napolito burrito with cactus paddle, black beans, salsa, tomatillos, and queso fresca. The tamales of pineapple, zucchini and roasted corn must have been delicious since, sadly, they were sold out both times we visited.

R+D Kitchen - 1323 Montana Avenue

The R+D Kitchen is a popular gastropub with a small menu featuring inventive American fare. The ground Ahi tuna burger on a sweet brioche bun was, hands down, the best burger I've ever had. The Brussels sprouts with anchovies, crunchy-fried beet leaves and kale, tastes as good as it is for you.

Tender Greens - 201 Arizona Avenue

This popular salad place with lunchtime lineups showcases California's bountiful produce. Salads prepared before your eyes included grilled octopus, with wild arugula, fingerling potatoes, shaved fennel, marinated chickpeas and olives. The "Salad in the Raw" features the best of the farmer's market that takes place outside Tender Greens' front door on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

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