

Herald Sun

Cruising aboard Celebrity Century in California



Being sent to the salt caves was once a punishment, but not in Santa Barbara. In this oh-so Californian town of 90,000 neat citizens, where the atmosphere oozes discreet wealth and the litter is too scared to appear on streets, salt is the new sugar.

Framed by the Santa Ynez mountains tumbling down to a harbor rich in fishing folklore, Santa Barbara is about a 90-minute drive — and a lifetime away — from frenetic Los Angeles. It's a walking town, not a car jungle. Low rise buildings, lots of street trees and outdoor cafes make it a naturally friendly place. A town of style and substance.

The main State Street buildings are mostly hacienda style white stucco with red tiled roofs, while the nearby surf beaches inject a bit of board shorts and bikini vibe into proceedings. Lots of cars are convertible. The sun shines year round, in a sort of endless summer that is now a concern for the many vineyards producing excellent wines.

The harbor in a region dubbed the American Riviera houses working fishing fleets and luxury yachts; seals bask on buoys and take in the scene. Stearns Wharf and the area from the shoreline around to the breakwater opposite the wharf are full of shops, restaurants, public art, whale watching vessels, a maritime museum, even a palm reader. Cafes such as On the Alley serve cuisine ranging from crab cakes to burritos.

An Urban Wine Trail winds through the town itself where you can stop for tastings at a dozen or so venues, and if it gets hot Santa Barbara has the nation's largest Moreton Bay fig for some Australian shade.

Near the busy beach strip in an area dubbed the Funk Zone winemakers such as those from Municipal wines have turned their tasting room into a cool hangout area where the clientele is as eclectic as the art coming from nearby studios.

For shopping and dining, the chic La Arcada mall has outdoor cafes such as Cielito, serving regional Mexican dishes and service so exuberantly friendly I was worried our waitress was going to burst. It is near the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, where the wall of donations by patrons is as interesting as their Monets and other masters — gifts of up to \$15 million from private patrons reflect American affluence and philanthropy, and the quality of the collection.

But the salt ...

On the main drag of State Street a doorway leads down stairs to a room of calmness, filled with huge chunks of colourful salt made into lamps and artworks. This is not your white table salt, but 45 tonnes of 250-million-year-old Himalayan salt blocks, imported from Pakistan, with a palette of colours spanning from ginger to mauve to ochre. Chunks as large as bread bins decorate the greeting area. As piped relaxation music plays we are lead into a "cave", treading on crunchy salt granules about 20cm deep on the floor. Reddish salt blocks are in the background, the low ceiling is salt encrusted. You can lie on a towel on the floor and cuddle up to the salt, with its 84 minerals, foetal-style. Somewhat sceptically I choose to sit in a reclined deck chair as others go cocoon-like on the floor. The lights fade and the volume of the music increases. I'm sceptical of yet another California New Age fad, but a second later I'm on my way to nirvana. Thirty minutes later I awake refreshed and calm. My skin is clean and I'm ready to hug a tree — after a large drink of water.

Santa Barbara is one stop on a California Coastal cruise out of LA aboard 1814-capacity Celebrity Century, one of premium cruise line Celebrity Cruises' fleet. Its facilities include a spa, fine French dining at the Murano restaurant, multiple bars, pools and lounges as well as plenty of live entertainment and Broadway-style theatre.

Other port stops include San Francisco, where a well-timed 4pm arrival gives all aboard the adrenalin-charged thrill of sailing into the harbour city under the Golden Gate Bridge. We take a fascinating night tour of infamous former prison island Alcatraz that night, and in the morning stroll directly off the ship to roam the vibrant port area. The nearby Fisherman's Wharf tourist precinct is a daytrip in itself. There are plenty of eateries and lots to look at including the large colony of sea lions that have made one wharf in the precinct their own. The basking, barking pinnipeds attract thousands of visitors each day.

The next port of Monterey proves to be another town of yachts, affluence, shopping and wine tasting, then it was on to Catalina Island which rises dramatically from the sea. The island's small town of Avalon and large circular casino which dominates the waterfront stir up glamorous images of the Rat Pack and the Kennedys from an earlier era.

The cruise also calls at Ensenada in Mexico where tour options include wine tastings in the Calafia Valley.