

The City That Tourists Should Add to Their Must-See List



I KNEW this was going to be a fun trip as soon as we landed off our QF bird at Los Angeles airport when the longest stretch disco Hummer I'd ever seen was our next mode of transport.

It was that kind of OTT, rock-star, kooky kind of stuff you always look at other people doing, but hey, who was complaining? The Hummer was about to take us to one of the more understated, yet simply gorgeous American if not small cities I'd ever seen.

I had never really heard that much about [Santa Barbara](#) (with a population of around 220,000) except that there'd once been a 80s/90s TV soap based on the Californian coastal town all about goings-on of the lives of the wealthy Capwell and Lockridge families. (Fun fact: Santa Barbara aired in over 40 countries and became the longest-running television series in Russia.)

Anyway, back to why I'm here. Santa Barbara is referred to as the [Americian Riviera](#) and faces south on the longest section of the West Coast of the US and has a climate referred to as Mediterranean. Although, it was pretty chilly when we were there in May (Note to self: pack another sweater next time).

Santa Barbara is popular for its tourism, bay, and its resorts, but it's not often a place peeps add to their must-see list.

So, here are some of the reasons you should do exactly that:

As soon as we hit Santa Barbara — a two-hour drive north of Los Angeles — it was bags down and straight to the (downtown) [Salt Caves](#). Yup. Santa Barbara is renowned for Salt Caves which are designed to provide “a unique natural environment to relax, recharge, and rejuvenate the body and mind, especially after a long flight”. So, we sat in the cave rooms for half an hour and soaked in the atmosphere of Himalayan salt rock and its health-enhancing qualities. And yes, it felt good.

The [Urban Wine Trail](#) had us tasting some of the finest wines produced in Santa Barbara County, all within blocks of downtown and the beach. The Santa Barbara Urban Wine Trail gave novices (like some of our gang) and aficionados (like others in our gang) the opportunity to learn about and taste wines Santa Barbara County’s best vineyards. Informative, not up themselves and just great fun.

We also had a “pedicab” — a man-wheeling bike that basically took us for a spin around the town as the driver pointed out some of the best zones in SB.

Speaking of zones, you do so need to visit [The Funk Zone?](#) OK, OK, it’s a shocking name, but it’s a tourist and hot neighbourhood precinct where the best muncheries, restaurants and wine-tasting rooms can be found, surrounded by industrial and manufacturing plants and even crisscross train and car routes.

Visitors and celebs alike hit the F Zone to check out galleries and real SB life. It has become so cool-school, some businesses well outside will even say are Funk Zone-adjacent, just so they can use the spoils of popularity of the zone.

You can’t help but take in the exquisite Spanish architecture of Santa Barbara and its plethora of deco-style theatres dotted throughout the town. A Monterey-style adobe in California was built on State Street (the main drag of Santa Barbara) by merchant Alpheus Thompson while the dominant architectural themes — Spanish Colonial Revival and the related Mission Revival style are still encouraged through guidelines created after a 1925 earthquake destroyed the downtown district.

You need to do a [Sunset Cruise](#) or the [Santa Barbara Sailing Center](#). Basically, you sit back and enjoy a twirl around a small but dynamic little harbour admiring, either on a kayak — with the chance of spotting a whale to two — or on a boat with views back to shore and out to the Channel Islands. But don't forget your wind jacket!

And what about the digs? Wow. yes, wow. We tested out [Belmond El Encanto](#) and it is a seriously god-smackingly beautiful hotel. The view was great and the villa/bungalow suites were absolute perfection. As for the service? after arriving home from dinner one night, I had left my key in my room and the staff went totally out of their way to get me back in as soon as possible. That may sound trivial, but it wasn't a chore or a pain - it seemed just like normal quality service for the staff to be actually wanting to do something for a guest at midnight!