

# The Sydney Morning Herald

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## Twenty Reasons to visit Santa Barbara



### 1 HIT THE HIGHWAY

An easy two-hour drive north of Los Angeles - if traffic is in your favour - Santa Barbara is a seaside haven epitomising the Californian dream: palm-lined beaches, an affluent lifestyle, gourmet delicacies, fabulous wine and a vibrant arts scene. Take Highway 101 via Santa Monica and Malibu for the scenic route; there is also a regional airport and four Amtrak stops.

### 2 AMERICAN RIVIERA

Cradled between the Santa Ynez mountain range and the Pacific Ocean on an east-west axis, Santa Barbara boasts a perfect Mediterranean climate, with temperate summers, a mild winter and 300 days of sunshine a year. A European aesthetic also pervades, with lush gardens and distinctive white-washed, terracotta-tiled Spanish Revival architecture. Add to that grand gated estates, a mind-boggling marina and a glitzy film festival, and there's little wonder the town has earned the moniker of the American Riviera.

### 3 MARINE ADVENTURES

The surf may be fickle at Santa Barbara's south-facing beaches, but when the waves are pumping, they attract the likes of Kelly Slater and Tom Curren (both local residents). Stand-up paddleboarding and harbour kayaking are also popular water-based activities, while the Channel Islands National Park and Marine Sanctuary, 40 kilometres offshore, is one of California's best kept wilderness secrets that can be explored on a Santa Barbara Adventure Company tour.

#### **4 CELEBRITY SPOTTING**

A flick through a local real estate magazine highlights Santa Barbara's "lifestyle of the rich and famous", with \$US20 million price tags in the suburb of Montecito nothing out of the ordinary. But with its laidback vibe, celebs can dress down here; if you're lucky, you might spot Oprah jogging or Drew Barrymore pushing a pram. Ronald Reagan found serenity in the "Western White House" in nearby Solvang, while Michael Jackson's Neverland Ranch near Los Olivos still attracts curious passers-by.

#### **5 MISSION POSSIBLE**

One of 21 missions established by the Spanish in California, Mission Santa Barbara is known as Queen of the Missions, due to its grand proportions and commanding location overlooking the town. Dating from 1786 (but repaired several times due to earthquake damage), this working Franciscan monastery features two bell towers and a fascinating museum of early Spanish colonisation and the attempted Christian conversion of the Chumash Indians. The gardens themselves are a real treat, while the exterior plaza hosts a well regarded colourful Italian street painting festival in May.

#### **6 FUNKY WINE TRAIL**

With more than 175 vineyards dotted throughout the region, Santa Barbara's Wine Country is one of the world's superior cool climate wine regions, well worth exploring if you have the time. If not, set off on foot on the Urban Wine Trail, boasting 22 tasting rooms between Downtown and the beach. Sip to your heart's content in the newly created Funk Zone, which is a former industrial precinct that now features art galleries, hip restaurants and a rather convenient cluster of tasting rooms (average \$US10 for tastings).

#### **7 SLIP SIDEWAYS**

This year marks the 10th anniversary of *Sideways*, the Oscar-winning movie that brought the Santa Barbara Wine Country to prominence, boosted sales of pinot noir and effectively killed merlot. Fans can follow a self-guided trail to vineyards featured in the film, including the Firestone Winery (where the four main characters shared a romantic walk through the barrel room) and the Fess Parker Winery where Miles (Paul Giamatti) infamously guzzled the communal spit bucket.

## **8 STROLL THE WATERFRONT**

Do as the locals do and walk, jog or bike along the harbourside promenade from Leadbetter Beach to the sprawling Fess Parker Resort opposite East Beach. Stop for a seafood meal or glass of wine (yes, there is a tasting room!) at historic Stearns Wharf, California's oldest working wharf and the survivor of several fires. Keep an eye out for sea lions swimming or bobbing around on buoys.

## **9 FARM-TO-TABLE**

Santa Barbara is a culinary paradise, with a trove of restaurants showcasing locally grown organic produce. Try one of Julia Child's favourites, Olio e Limone and its new raw-food sibling, Olio Crudo Bar (the halibut served with sea urchin and caviar - taste sensation!); or Finch & Fork, in the lovely Canary Hotel.

## **10 VIEWS FOREVER**

Built in 1926 following the earthquake that destroyed the original courthouse, the iconic Santa Barbara County Courthouse sports the best views in town from its clock tower, with 360-degree vistas across red roofs from the mountains to the sea. Admire the tile-lined staircase and Mural Room, as you make your way up the four flights of stairs.

## **11 SWEET STRAWBERRIES**

I have never tasted strawberries as sweet or perfect as those sold at Santa Barbara's Farmers Market, held six days a week (with downtown locations every Tuesday and Saturday). Local growers of fruit, vegies, nuts, oils and flowers showcase their wares at these excellent markets, a sensory overload of colour, aroma and flavour.

## **12 QUIRKY GARDEN**

When in-the-know locals name an exotic garden as their top must-see attraction, take heed. Lotusland is a 15-hectare wonderland designed by eccentric opera singer Madame Ganna Walska and featuring a wealth of botanical rarities from around the world. Due to local restrictions, visitor numbers are limited and all tours are guided by passionate volunteer docents who lead groups through several themed sections, including succulents, bromeliads, cycads, a Japanese garden and of course, waterlily ponds. A true gem.

### **13 HORSE COUNTRY**

The regional town of Solvang is home to Flag is Up Farms, a ranch owned by famous horse whisperer and trainer Monty Roberts and his sculptor wife, Pat. Horsemanship clinics are held on a regular basis, while the public is welcome to wander the grounds and admire the horses, including equine superstar Shy Boy, the little mustang who featured in Roberts' bestselling book and video, *Shy Boy: The Horse That Came in From the Wild*.

### **14 WAKE-UP CALL**

Let's face it, America is The Land That Coffee Forgot. But hallelujah, that's all about to change, thanks to Goodland Organics, mainland US's first coffee plantation. Capitalising on the microclimate of Santa Barbara's foothills, tropical fruit farmer Jay Ruskey has had amazing success with his organically grown beans. His passion for creating a superior brew is revealed as he leads educational tours through his farm, discussing his growing techniques and the challenges of sparking a caffeine-fuelled revolution.

### **15 AL FRESCO DESIGNS**

Australians love shopping in the US but our guilty obsession is even more enjoyable on the brick-lined streets of Santa Barbara. Charming open air plazas such as Paseo Nuevo on State Street make finding a bargain all the more enticing. There are more than 50 stores selling everything from high-end designer clothing to quirky vintage fashion, flanking courtyards with bubbling fountains and climbing bougainvillea.

### **16 SALT THERAPY**

Beneath the main drag of State Street lies an underground cave made of 40,000 kilograms of Himalayan salt, said to contain vital minerals for healing, detoxifying and relaxation. Take off your shoes, lie back in a zero-gravity lounge chair and breathe in the salt-charged air during a purifying 45-minute session that runs every hour on the hour; or you may wish to indulge in a therapeutic salt-scrub or massage in a separate treatment room. This is a slightly surreal escape from reality, which will certainly leave you feeling strangely invigorated.

## **17 ARTS HUB**

Santa Barbara is the richest cultural hub between Los Angeles and San Francisco, with an arts scene heavily subsidised by wealthy local patrons. Art galleries abound, while the city boasts its own symphony orchestra and venues attracting top names in the performing arts. On the first Thursday of each month, participating galleries and venues offer free access to featured events, such as live music, lectures, wine tastings and art openings. And if you want to explore your own inner Picasso, head to Painted Cabernet, a wine bar-come-art studio where a fine Californian drop will help release artistic inhibitions.

## **18 GREEN CITY**

Santa Barbara prides itself on its environmental consciousness, actively encouraging visitors to explore the city on foot or bicycle via the community-led Santa Barbara Car Free Project. Designated walking trails such as the Red Tile Historic Tour (visiting the city's architectural landmarks) and the Harbour/Shoreline Walking Tour add another dimension to a city stroll; while an electric shuttle will transport you along State Street and the waterfront for just 50¢.

## **19 LOCAL DELICACIES**

The newly opened Public Market on West Victoria Street is a one-stop showcase for sustainably made local culinary treats: wine, organic produce, artisanal ice-cream, handmade chocolates and even decadent, wine-infused cupcakes. This LEED-certified (energy efficient) market is open from 7am till late, and also features a commissary kitchen offering cooking classes, winemaker dinners and local chef demonstrations.

## **20 LOS OLIVOS**

In the heart of the Santa Ynez Valley, Los Olivos is a quintessential historic Californian village, transformed into a wine-tasting hub. These days, the village, with its quaint Victorian houses, now boasts epicurean restaurants, antique shops, galleries and more than a dozen tasting rooms.