

Santa Barbara: welcome to California cool



Take it easy in Santa Barbara, where mission-revival architecture meets wine tasting and funky restaurants.

LOW WAY TO GO

Known as the American Riviera, Santa Barbara, 148km north of Los Angeles, is home to 90,000 lucky residents and countless red-tiled, Spanish-style buildings. Santa Barbara is the patron saint of electricians, which can be hard to believe as you wander downtown along picturesque State Street, where not a neon sign is visible. Aesthetics rule in this pretty seaside town, where strict planning requirements mean that nothing, apart from the grand Santa Barbara Courthouse, rises above three storeys. That makes State Street, which extends back from the waterfront, an attractive area to explore. Independent boutiques mix with well-known brands and outdoor restaurants for block after block, plus there's plenty to gaze at, from old mission revival-style cinemas to open-air plazas (or paseos), and a farmers market on Tuesday afternoons. More: www.downtownsb.org.

REVIVAL STRATEGY

Most flights from Australia land in Los Angeles in the morning, and even after the two-hour coastal drive, you will probably still arrive in Santa Barbara before lunch. So arrival day can be torturously long. For some unlikely relaxation — and to help you sleep better — head to Salt, the biggest Himalayan salt cave in the US. A 45-minute session will land you a spot on a comfy lounge chair in what looks like a rock cave with a floor of coarse sand, but is, in fact, a manufactured space made of 45 tonnes of rock salt. Sit back, relax and breathe in that salt-infused air. Welcome to California. More: www.saltcavesb.com.

THE LOTUS-EATERS

I meet my docent, young architect Karl Kras, at 10am sharp at the gates of Lotusland. “Madame had zero horticultural experience but a great eye ... and the means,” he begins, as we commence our leisurely tour of this wonderfully whimsical garden. “Madame” was the much-married opera singer Ganna Walska who, in the mid-20th century, brought a spirited sense of theatre to garden design as she scoured the globe for rare plants, in some instances acquiring seeds from Tibetan monks. Across 15ha, you’ll find a romantic lake crammed with lotus, cascading fountains of giant clam shells, an eerie forest of dragon trees and a stunning blue garden shaded by Atlas cedars. In the late 1970s Madame offloaded a cool million in jewels to amass a world-beating cycad collection. Tip: ask to use the loo so you can pop into her Italianate house, stage set for an astonishing forest of barrel cactus and otherworldly weeping euphorbia. Bookings mandatory.

More: www.lotusland.org.

TASTE AND TOTTER

Santa Barbara is home to plenty of celebrities, most famous of all being Oprah Winfrey. But the surrounding area is also grape-growing country and there are five wine trails in the region and more than 170 wineries. For those who wish to enjoy the fruits of the surrounding 8900ha of vineyards without driving, there’s an alternative, the Urban Wine Trail, which is a self-guided tour of 26 wineries located downtown, many in historic buildings, allowing you to taste and wander at leisure. And if you can’t quite manage the walk, Uber has just launched a local car service that will ferry you between tasting rooms and beyond.

More: www.urbanwinetrailsb.com.

RETRO RARITIES

Funk Zone used to be a manufacturing hub. Now its warehouses and old shops have been turned into an eclectic collection of art galleries, restaurants and wineries. It’s a compact area, just off State Street, and one highlight is a visit to Seth Kunin’s The Valley Project wine-tasting room, with its massive chalk map of the local industry. Don’t be surprised if you spot a pampered pooch accompanying visitors as they imbibe. A short walk away, The Blue Door offers three floors of quality vintage and repurposed clothes, furniture and homewares, from Danish platters and furniture to an old Asian food cart and even a Herb Ritts-designed Lucite salad bowl and servers. Best of all, there are plenty of options small enough to fit into hand luggage.

More: www.thevalleyprojectwines.com; www.thebluedoorsb.com.

DREAMY DINING

Santa Barbara has an abundance of outdoor restaurants and attractive buildings and these are combined at Cielito, a Latin American-inspired diner and tequila bar. Set in the middle of La Arcada Plaza, an old outdoor arcade lined with decorative tiles, you can dine inside or out, but best take a table in the sun beside the ornamental fountain, with its resident family of turtles, and fill up on tapas-sized serves of guacamole, ceviche and flan. More: www.cielitorestaurant.com.

MISSION STATEMENT

There are 21 missions in California, centuries-old relics from the Spanish expansion into North America. But only Santa Barbara's is revered as the Queen of the Missions. Founded in 1786, it still reeks of old-world Spain, with its terracotta-tiled floors and cactus-strewn courtyard. Continuously run by the Franciscans who founded it almost 230 years ago, the mission, with its adjoining rose garden, is the focal point of a variety of secular events year-round, from an Italian street painting festival to flamenco dancing. DIY and docent-led tours available. More: www.santabarbaramission.org.

SUNSET SAIL

The best views of Santa Barbara are often looking out to sea. But there's an equally impressive vista to be had from the water. On a private sunset cruise, the choice is yours — look out towards the tiny Channel Islands that sit just beyond Santa Barbara harbour, or set your sights on the palm tree-lined shore and back towards the dramatic Santa Ynez mountains. Whichever way you look at it, the view is gorgeous. Trips can be organised through the Santa Barbara Sailing Centre. More: www.sbsail.com.

THE TOP TABLE

Open almost two years, this heaving restaurant in Funk Zone remains one of the hottest tickets in town, serving shared plates of local produce prepared by executive chef Jason Paluska and his talented team. Consider the likes of crispy Brussels sprouts with dates, sesame and lime; local asparagus topped with wild rocket and crispy Serrano ham; or Dungeness crab with gnocchi and jalapeno. Having taken over the city's historic fish market building, The Lark is a master class in up-cycled chic; old bathtubs spill with flowers and a convivial crowd tucks into "craft" cocktails around a large table stacked on vintage radiators. Start with the addictive popcorn tossed through with orange zest, fresh herbs and Calabrian chilli oil, and perfectly partnered with a glass of Happy Canyon rose. Bookings recommended.

STAR OF THE SHOW

There is something almost old-world Hollywood about waking up in an oversized bungalow in Santa Barbara, and breakfasting on a spacious terrace high above the town, looking out towards the sea. The fact that the view at Belmond El Encanto is filtered by giant eucalyptus trees, which were first planted in the region more than a century ago, is a daily reminder of home to Shaun O'Bryan, a former rugby league player from Sydney who now manages this luxury resort. Built in 1918, El Encanto is a stylish mix of Californian Craftsman and Mission-style bungalows set in 3ha of gardens in the hills. The luxe theme extends from a contemporary infinity pool to supremely comfortable beds and underfloor heating in spacious bathrooms. Some of the 92 hardwood-floored guestrooms are more like oversized cottages, with open fireplaces, front porches and rear courtyards. For those rare guests without a car, the hotel provides complimentary transfers around Santa Barbara.

More: www.belmond.com/el-encanto-santa-barbara/.