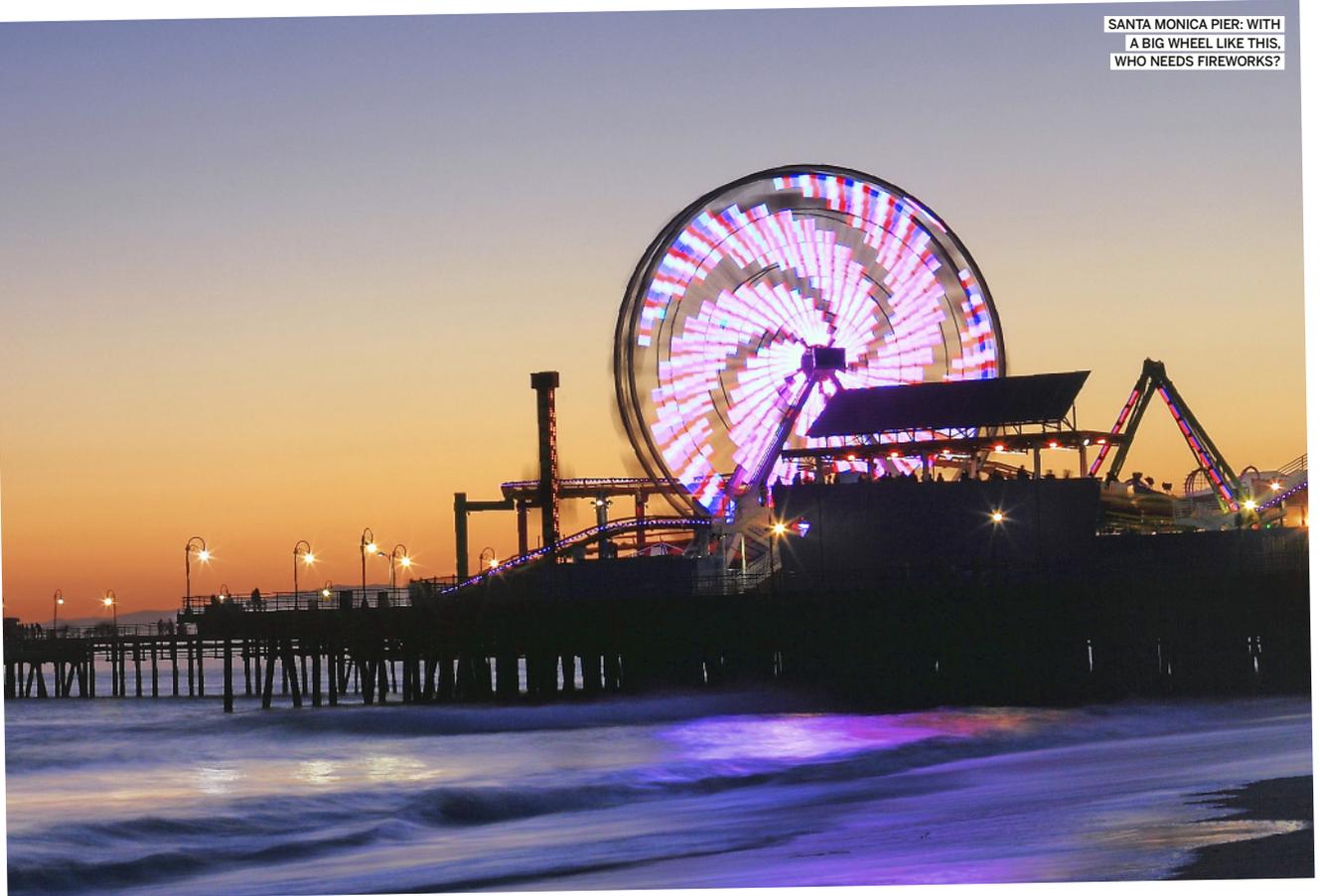


TRAVEL

# ESCAPE ROUTES

START COLLECTING  
PASSPORT STAMPS

SANTA MONICA PIER: WITH  
A BIG WHEEL LIKE THIS,  
WHO NEEDS FIREWORKS?



## UNWIND ON CALIFORNIA'S ICONIC COASTLINE



**Stylist's features writer Lizzie Pook takes a trip to Santa Monica and finds that yes, it's just like it is in the movies**

I was first introduced to Santa Monica thanks to its brief-but-memorable cameo in the '94 Tom Hanks weepie, *Forrest Gump*. A heavily bearded Forrest is part way through his three-year coast-to-coast marathon when we catch him winding his way along the iconic Santa Monica

pier. He reaches the end of the jetty, pauses for a moment, performs a 180-degree turn and sets off running back in the direction he came from.

True to form, this Californian beachfront city immediately feels like a chance to pause, breathe and rethink things. A city where many people *do* breeze around in yoga-ready Lycra and where dogs in sunglasses bask gleefully in the front baskets of electrically powered bikes, but also one that offers the rare chance to recharge and escape from the

frenzied rumpus of bustling cities – such as neighbouring LA.

That's not to say it's a 'sleepy' seaside retreat. It's anything but. Tourists and day-trippers flock here during the summer months when temperatures rise to the high 20s (summer, coincidentally, is pretty much permanent in Santa Monica, with 340 days of sunshine a year). The legendary beach is an expansive swathe of golden sand stretching 3.5 miles and studded with palm trees, infuriatingly tanned couples playing Frisbee

and rows of lifeguard-lookout huts (yes, the actual *Baywatch* huts that housed The Hoff's red trunks and Pamela Anderson's pneumatic cleavage). But as tempting as it is to laze on the sand all day dodging miss-hit beach volleyball shots, I decide to take an amble along Santa Monica's crowning glory: its pier.

After battling my way through kitsch fairground attractions, fast-food stands and souvenir sellers, I'm greeted by a stunning panoramic view of the Pacific. The air is seasoned





with the smell of fried seafood and melting suntan lotion, pelicans swoop overhead and sluggish sea lions bark rambunctiously from their basking spots. I spend far too much time scanning the horizon for whales – a tad optimistic, seeing as I've visited outside of migration season, which takes place in late December through to March – but I'm told you can occasionally spot finback whales and even giant blue whales off the vast coastline. I'm just as enthralled by the locals fishing the waters surrounding the pier for smaller fare, though, filling murky buckets with floundering unidentifiable sea creatures.

Fish (and food in general) is a big deal in Santa Monica, as I discover on a whistle-stop culinary tour of the city that afternoon. Our peppy and very well-informed guide, Annie, takes us to some of the best under-the-radar restaurants in town, including the fantastic Border Grill, which serves modern Mexican cuisine from chipotle shrimp tacos to Peruvian ceviche, and the intriguing M.A.K.E: a raw food restaurant where the carbonara is made entirely from dehydrated vegetables and kelp noodles – surprisingly delicious.

I'm staying at the Loews Santa Monica Beach Hotel on Ocean Avenue, a grand seafront property with a vast marble lobby and comfortably traditional

rooms. Seafood is a highlight; I cannot get enough of the crab cake benedict in the hotel's Ocean and Vine restaurant; a breakfast accompanied by a view of dolphins playing in the surf nearby.

Fans of alfresco dining will also find plenty of options along the pier (where the famously kitsch Bubba Gump Shrimp Company resides) and the pedestrianised Third Street

**“I CAN'T GET ENOUGH OF CRAB CAKE BENEDICT AT BREAKFAST ACCOMPANIED BY A VIEW OF DOLPHINS PLAYING IN THE SURF”**

Promenade, a bustling hub of restaurants, cafes and shops in the centre of town.

Unlike LA, Santa Monica can be explored easily by foot. Culture junkies can soak up the city's vibrant arts scene with a visit to the Santa Monica Museum of Art and the various independent galleries that line the streets; or take in a spot of music at the summer Jazz On The Lawn series at City Hall. Santa Monica also hosts GLOW, a tri-annual interactive arts festival that takes



place along the beach (the next Glow will be in 2016; [glowsantamonica.org](http://glowsantamonica.org)), and regular outdoor film screenings on the pier.

With so many outdoor pursuits on offer, it's no wonder Santa Monicans are fanatical about fitness. Stroll the two miles along the boulevard to nearby Venice Beach (a circus-like meeting spot for eccentric street performers, tattoo artists, fortune tellers and skateboarders) and en route you'll spot acrobatic types dangling from monkey bars and exhibitionists peacocking at the infamous Muscle Beach.

I take the easy route and hop on an electronic bike that makes me sit up straighter than Jack Nicholson in *Easy Rider* but I still enjoy breezing along the boulevard, past A-list beach properties, including the eye-catching pink house owned by Barbie creator Ruth Handler.

I'm blown away when we're guided through the winding series of canals that make up Venice itself (designed in 1905 as an homage to the Italian city).

Extensively redeveloped out of its bohemian past – Jim Morrison owned a canal-side hut in the Sixties – to push standards today, many of the properties now carry a six-figure price tag.

Later, I return to the hotel to find a civil partnership taking place around the pool. I watch in awe from my balcony as pugs in suits carry rings up the makeshift aisle, strewn with rose petals. It's brilliantly representative of this irresistibly quirky and warmly welcoming city, where life is generally rosy and everyone walks around with a smile (or a yoga mat). I think I could get used to it, really.

**A seven-night stay in Santa Monica with Virgin Holidays ([virginholidays.co.uk](http://virginholidays.co.uk)), including flights with Virgin Atlantic from London Heathrow to Los Angeles, accommodation at the five-star Loews Santa Monica Beach Hotel on a room-only basis, and car hire starts from £1,311**

**SANTA MONICA: WHAT'S FOR LUNCH?**

*Sun and sand aside, the city is a foodie haven. Here are the hotspots...*



**THE LOBSTER**

This iconic riverside mainstay serves everything from caviar to whole Maine lobsters. Nab a window seat at sunset and enjoy 180 degree views of the Pacific (look out for the 'green flash', a visual phenomenon that occurs at sunset). 1602 Ocean Ave; [thelobster.com](http://thelobster.com)

**FATHER'S OFFICE**

This acclaimed gastropub is a favourite with locals. Chef Sang Yoon's much-touted Office Burgers have even been dubbed 'crack burgers' as punters 'just can't get enough'. Drinks-wise the focus is on craft beer with 36 brews on tap. 1018 Montana Ave; [fathersoffice.com](http://fathersoffice.com)

**JOE'S PIZZA**

There's nothing flash about this traditional pizza parlour, where slices are served on paper plates. But Joe's simple, delicious, thin-crust pizzas are adored by hungry locals and *LA Times* critics alike. Don't leave without trying a slice of the Caprese. 111 Broadway; [joespizza.com](http://joespizza.com)