

Santa Monica

So Much More Than Beach and Boardwalk

By: Alan W. Petrucci



Santa Monica's historic pier is a place not only to nab a wonderful view, but also some good food, festive shops and loads of family fun.

Santa Monica, always considered a snappy little beach community, has developed into a major tourist attraction, rivaling its big sister, Los Angeles. Becoming one of the main acts in a theater of Southern California destinations, Santa Monica stands firmly on its own as a beacon of history, commerce and entertainment.

Much of this rather new-found glory is due to a major renaissance that the city has undergone in the past several years. Just roam about on any of the 343 annual days of sunshine and you'll come face-to-face with first-class restaurants, premier shopping areas and museums.

The downtown area is Santa Monica's heart and soul, encompassing 30 square blocks of the best the city has to offer. So park the car (reasonably priced lots abound) and set the pedometer!

Shoppers should head to the Third Street Promenade, where more than 100 shops, eateries and theaters line the pedestrian-only cobblestone streets. More shopping can be found on Montana Avenue, a 10-block stretch — Santa Monica's answer to Rodeo Drive. Another important shopping Mecca: Main Street, home to an eclectic mix of vintage clothing shops, nifty restaurants and funky designer studios. If your feet give out, hop on the Tide Shuttle, which loops around the city every 15 minutes. At a quarter a ride, it's one thing that will make the most "cents" to tired travelers!

Santa Monica is also a city with an artistic edge. Outdoor art is everywhere. The city also has more than 90 cutting-edge museums and galleries — for those keeping count, this means more than 10 per square mile.

For a glimpse of local history, the California Heritage Square Museum (2612 Main Street) offers a series of period rooms depicting the Santa Monica way of life from the 1890s to the 1930s. The museum is housed in an exquisitely renovated Victorian structure — the original home of Roy Jones, the son of Santa Monica founder, Nevada Senator John Percival Jones. For more information, call 310-392-8537, or visit www.californiaheritagemuseum.org.

Currently making its West Coast debut in Santa Monica is *Ashes and Snow*, the critically-acclaimed multimedia exhibit that showcases the stunning works of Gregory Colbert, featuring an astounding display of more than 100 large-scale photographs, film and installations. The exhibit runs through May 14 and advance reservations are highly recommended. Call 866-468-7619 for tickets and additional information.

What visit to Santa Monica would be complete without a stroll on the famed Santa Monica pier? Thanks to an overhaul in 1996, the pier no longer looks like the oldest one on the West Coast, but still retains its old-fashioned boardwalk charm. It's also the perfect place to watch one of Santa Monica's dazzling sunsets; take the staircase near the carousel for a prime (and free!) spot.

As the sun sets, you'll likely want to set your sights on a return visit.

How to Get There Take the I-10 west to Santa Monica (near the very end of the freeway), exit 4th Street/5th Street. Keep left at the fork in the ramp; turn right onto 4th Street. Turn left onto Colorado Avenue, which becomes Santa Monica Pier. Allow approximately 2 hours, 10 minutes, for the 133-mile drive. **Visitor Information** Santa Monica Convention and Visitors Bureau There are three drop-by centers where visitors can get free maps, guidebooks and information: 1920 Main Street, the kiosk at 1400 Ocean Avenue, the cart on the Third Street Promenade. Call: 800-544-5319 or 310-393-7593 www.santamonica.com; www.downtownsm.com; www.santamonicapier.org **Where to Stay:** Loews Santa Monica Beach Hotel 1700 Ocean Avenue 310-458-6700 www.loewshotels.com Best Western Ocean View Hotel 1447 Ocean Avenue 310-458-4888