

The Venice Beach Boardwalk oozes attitude.



California coasting

24 hours at Venice Beach: Urban art, creative people and zero pretension

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LOS Angeles — glitzy Hollywood glamour, flashy convertibles and sun-kissed Californian hunks. But is life in the fast lane all it's made out to be?

In search of a genuine side of LA, I head out to the city's west end to spend a day mingling with surfers, skateboarders and hip-hop artistes who call California home.

Venice Beach, a surprisingly down-to-earth enclave along the Santa Monica bay, is a stark contrast with ritzy

downtown LA. Here, life's really a beach — a mix of powerful surfs, golden sand and al fresco cafes — and it's easy to slow down and indulge.

But the ocean and surfs don't take centre stage here. It's the ever-bohemian Ocean Front Walk that bustles with artists, surfers, street performers, musicians and palm-readers. Slither through tacos stands and tattoo parlours to get under the skin of southern Californians.

9am: A fruity start to the day

Start your day with a hearty American breakfast at 26 Beach Cafe. Bask in the Californian sunshine on its patio and treat yourself to enormous portions of appetising

» Continued on L27

TRAVELLER

A hotdog stand along the boardwalk (below) and quirky, modern architecture along Santa Monica.



Photos Nellie Huang

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» Continued from L28

platters. Choose from 13 different types of French toast or go for the standard eggs-and-bacon set.

Top it off with a rich organic smoothie at Fruit Gallery, a perfect people-watching spot along Venice Beach Boardwalk.

10.30am: Bike ride

Californians, with their bronzed hair and golden tan, look good for a reason. Cycling, surfing and rollerblading are a way of life. For less than US\$20 (\$28) a day, you can rent a mountain bike or a pair of blades from Venice Bike & Skates at Marina del Rey. Starting from this point, the smooth and car-free Venice Bike Path stretches all the way to Will Rogers State Beach. Take in the vibrant scene and admire beachfront architecture lining the trail — an interesting juxtaposition of colours and style.

Noon: Surf's up

By this time, the sun is at its strongest. Plunge into the cool waters for some respite and perhaps take up a surfing lesson. Learn to ride the waves in a private two-hour surf session (US\$109 per person) with professional instructor Katie. Buddy classes are cheaper (US\$198 for two), with boards and wet suits provided.

For powerful swells, head out to Muscle Beach, a hallmarked stretch of outdoor

gyms where Arnold Schwarzenegger used to be a regular. Another acclaimed surf spot is the Venice Breakwater, north of the Venice Pier. With gentle waves, the spot is ideal for beginners and amateurs.

1.30pm: Beach-style lunch

Dig into modern American comfort food at James' Beach, a neighbourhood restaurant stocked with pleasant surprises and eclectic vibes. Los Angelinos from all over the city flood its patios in search of its famous fish tacos. Carnivorous foodies would adore the Angus NY steak and calves' liver with pancetta bacon and onion rings. Warm chocolate soufflé is made daily — a must-try for the sweet-toothed.

Cheap eats can be found along the boardwalk. The sausage revolution that hit the world started here — by the original Jody Maroni's Sausage Kingdom on Venice Beach. There are over 24 gourmet sausages to choose from, all made the old-fashioned way but enhanced with contemporary flavours. Taco stands serve up sizzling burritos and fajitas for just US\$2.



Rent a bike to cycle along the Ocean Front Walk.

3pm: Walk the walk

A two-hour Venice Beach walking tour makes for an ideal après-lunch activity. Uncover the stories and salty past of the thriving artists' community. Venetian Jeffrey Solomon divulges hideouts, unexplored alleys and film locations that make Venice what it is today. The tour takes you to artists' workshops, Sponto Galley (Venice's political watering hole) and a secluded underwater ecosystem where dolphins go to feed.

5pm: Old canals

As its name implies, Venice Beach was originally modelled after the Italian city: Think canals, bridges and Renaissance-style housing. Although not many of these canals remain, you can still walk along them on South Venice Boulevard and Pacific Avenue. The upscale area is littered with remodelled homes and colourful vegetation.

6.30pm: Vintage shopping

Abbot Kinney Boulevard, a few blocks from the waterfront, is touted as the hippest strip in town. A plethora of vintage boutiques, antique stores and classy bistros keep the urban crowd coming. Ramble through bohemian apparel and funky collectibles before sitting out to watch the sun set along the open-air lounge bars.

8pm: Art deco dining

Chaya Venice is a playground for Venice's beautiful crowd. Artists, musicians and movie directors are drawn to its chic decor, fresh-from-the-sea sushi and lobster enchiladas. Prepare to suit up for an extravagant culinary experience.

Tips!

GETTING THERE: Numerous airlines fly from Singapore to LA with one stopover. Singapore Airlines flies direct. A return ticket on economy class costs about \$1,400.

WHEN TO GO: LA has a Mediterranean climate. The best time to visit Venice Beach is in summer, from June to September. In winter, the weather is cool but not overly chilly.

WHERE TO GO:

26 Beach Club: 3100 Washington Blvd, Venice
Fruit Gallery: 1 Westminster Rd, Venice Beach Boardwalk (www.fruitgalleryofvenice.com)
Venice Bike & Skates: 21 Washington Blvd
Surf Lessons with Katie: 530 Pacific Coast Hwy, Tower 4, Parking Lot 9, Santa Monica (www.surfflessoswithkatie.com)
James' Beach: 60 North Venice Blvd (www.jamesbeach.com)
Jody Maroni's Sausage Kingdom: 2011 Ocean Front Walk (www.jodymaroni.com)
Venice Beach Walking Tours: 5 Rose Ave (www.venicebeachwalkingtours.com)
Chaya Venice: 110 Navy St, Venice (www.thechaya.com)
High Rooftop Lounge: 1697 Pacific Ave (www.jdvhotels.com)
The Other Room: 1201 Abbot Kinney Blvd (www.theotherroom.com)



High Rooftop Lounge

Christian Horan

10pm: Drink to a view

Afterwards, head to High Rooftop Lounge in Hotel Erwin for a 360 degree panorama of the city — from Muscle Beach to the Hollywood sign and Downtown LA. Chill out on its cosy couches in an inviting ambience, amid the golden night lights with some beer and light snacks.

Those ready to mingle might enjoy the talk of the town — the Other Room. A microbrewery with over 60 beers on tap is just the perfect spot to end the night.

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