

Santa Monica by Foot
By Suzanne Wright

When I arrived in Los Angeles, Avis gave me a lemon yellow car to drive—perfect for finding in a crowded parking lot. I couldn't wait to park it. Yes, Southern California—pedestrian-friendly, progressive Santa Monica to be exact, can be seen on foot (or public transportation). “June gloom” notwithstanding—the local term for the fog and smog that descend over the region during June and early July—I spent three days *not* behind the wheel.

I alternated my time between two sister hotels: Shutters on the Beach and Casa del Mar, located, conveniently, next door to each other on the splendid Pacific Ocean. Both are Leading Hotels of the World members, and, like siblings, sport similarities: great service and posh rooms. Cape Cod-style Shutters is favored by celebrities and is cheekier; the door tag has an option, “Sssh...I am becoming one with my minibar,” and upon check-in my casually elegant room sported a witty reference to the sandy beach steps away: fresh strawberries set on brown sugar on a silver plate. There was also a rubber whale perched on the bathtub. As I leafed through the catalog of Shutters “beachstyle living” items, I savored tangy lemon ricotta pancakes. I also noticed the room had procedures for dealing with earthquakes and provisions for plane travel: food on the fly to take with you. A fire burned in the lobby fireplace each night.

Casa del Mar is more European in feeling owing to its 1926 Mediterranean architecture and its more continental clientele. The grand entry staircase leads to a sweeping lobby that morphs into a splendid bar and dining room (named, appropriately, Oceanfront) that was very popular during the forth of July festivities. My high-floor room had a similarly spectacular view of the expanse of wide beach below and the same layout as Shutters—which is to say, large and exceedingly comfortable. Casa del Mar may be a bit more proper, but it is not without its own clever touches: the mini bar in the bathroom featured Zen cards and Murad face products (also used in the spa, where Gigi gave me a fantastic deep-tissue massage).

A five minute walk will take you to the Pier, which dates back to 1912. Once rundown, it has been lovingly restored into wholesome, beachfront arcade with a quarter mile jetty extending 1,600 feet into the ocean, that includes an aquarium, lavish carousel, skeeball, a five-story roller coaster and a solar-powered ferris wheel, which gives you a bird's eye view of the surrounding area, including the brave beachcombers who are shivering in the waning late afternoon sun, as the gusts kick up.

Another five minutes or so brings you to the Third Street Promenade, a collection of shops (mostly of the chain variety), theaters (I counted three) and restaurants restricted to cars. I enjoyed the street performers (musicians mostly) and the vendor who blew bubbles as tourists walked by (was that exceedingly slim, tall, blond woman a movie star?) I am sure I got a whiff of marijuana on one corner.

I hopped the Tides Shuttle to head over to historic Main Street for a mere twenty five cents. It runs as far as Venice Beach (funkier, a mile away) and between attractions in Santa Monica. On Main Street, I shop with mostly locals, buy a cute pair of red Brazilian surf sandals and eat at Urth Caffè, which makes a fine prosciutto panini and a memorable sour cherry pie. The (same) effusive driver says “welcome back” when I board to return to Casa del Mar.

Prior to my trip, I consulted John Mariani, restaurant critic for Esquire, about where to dine in Los Angeles. He recommended Valentino, which he (and many others in the know) deems the best Italian restaurant in the country. My friend Dominic joins me (it’s a five minute drive away) and we are impressed: it’s old school in the best sense: great food, fine service (they decant your bottle of wine), not at all stuffy.

Thanks to the four weekly farmers markets that the city boasts, many restaurants use wonderful seasonal ingredients. Like Border Grill, where the women patrons are poured into their jeans, spilling out of their tops and teetering on their stilettos. (How do these hard bodies stay so hard with donut shops on seemingly every corner in Southern California?) The colorful pop art-like interiors are echoed on the plate and in the glass. I start with a shaker margarita, made with fresh lime juice and served martini-style. It yields two glasses and gets my salivary glands going. The tuna ceviche is a tumble of fresh textures and flavors including chilies, ginger, lime and onions. The green corn tamales are agreeably sweet, the plantain empanadas are smoky, the chicken panuchos unfold on my tongue in a succession of deeply layered contrasts. The silky flan and sinful banana pie are worth a swipe, but the flourless chocolate cake with sour cream topping is the best. I stroll down the street—it’s after 10 p.m., but the place is humming with activity. Although I am sated, I wander into Leonidas chocolates and endure a 15-minute wait for the pineapple creams, which are frothy and well worth your patience.

Although the Fourth of July fireworks are not being held this year on the Pier, I celebrate by eating the most American of meals: a burger with fries (actually the “fifty-fifty,” half fries, half potato strings) at The Counter, which *Los Angeles* magazine has dubbed one of Los Angeles’ best cheap restaurants. The place is mobbed, but I snag a counter seat and proceed to build my own burger (you could have dried cranberries—really, but I opt for cheese, tomatoes and in a nod to my setting, guacamole) and sip a creamy strawberry shake.

If You Go

While most of the Los Angeles area requires a vehicle, concentrated, seaside Santa Monica, doesn’t. Start by logging onto www.santamonica.com or calling 800-544-5319 for a vacation planner.