



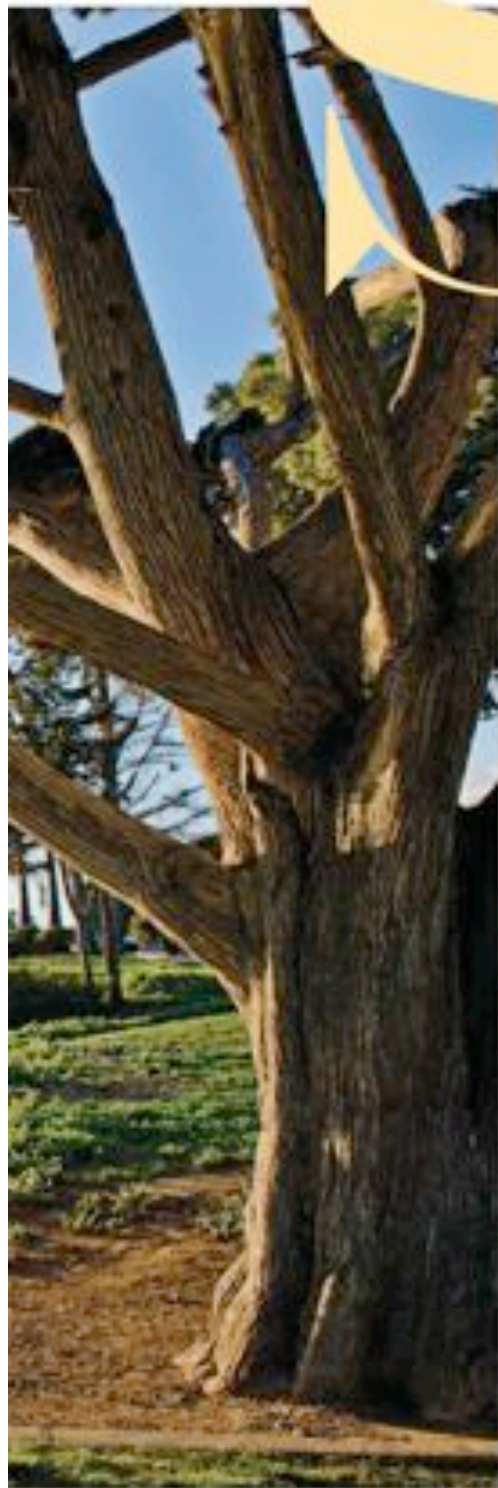
Santa Barbara Beckons

*This coastal California city has
upped the hip factor without
losing any of its charm.*

S

By E.C. Gladstone

he has always been there, it seems, a grand dame amid a ballroom of debutantes, a perfectly polished gem in a crown of coastal jewels. Until recently, this town of old California architecture and old money was something to be enjoyed, but without too much revelry. Now, thanks to an explosion of appreciation for local wineries and farm-to-table cooking, Santa Barbara has rechristened itself the American Riviera, with all the sophistication — and even sensuality — that the name implies. Can charm, culture and cool coexist?



I motored up from Los Angeles to find out. Though Santa Barbara has an airport that serves many major carriers, part of the charm is the 90-mile drive up the coast, passing quaint Ventura, Carpinteria's quintessential coastline and then verdant Montecito, melting away the bustle of metropolitan Southern California.

My destination was the Canary Hotel Santa Barbara, a boutique property in the center of town with the charm

Above, Old Mission Santa Barbara was established in 1786.

Left, A butterfly tree reaches over one of many beaches in and around Santa Barbara.

Photos by Jay Johnston/Courtesy of Santa Barbara Convention and Visitors Bureau and Film Commission

of a small inn and the luxury of five-star service. Sister to Santa Monica's beloved Shutters on the Beach, Canary captures the Spanish/North African spirit of the islands it's named for, full of decorative tile, carved wood and gorgeous tapestries. Built new to look old, the property invites more than its share of wedding celebrations, but individual guests are treated well, too. While the lobby restaurant and bar are comfortably classy, the split-level rooftop pool deck and fire-pit lounge, with nearly 360-degree views of mountains and ocean, are really the hotel's trump card. There are other fine destination resorts in Santa Barbara, but none so well-situated and appointed to take advantage of all the city offers.

My room, with hand-plastered walls, antique brass fixtures and French doors, exuded warmth without sacrificing modern amenities. A Keurig coffee maker, yoga mat and DVD player were hidden in the armoire; the bathroom offered a rainfall shower head, terry-cotton robes and a second flat-screen TV; and bird-watching binoculars sat on the bureau with a walking-tour map. Extra touches were pressed flowers on the walls, a rubber frog for the tub and a four-poster bed so lush it would cure insomnia.



The local bounty produces dishes such as pan-seared scallops on market greens, topped with watermelon radishes.

Photo by Eric Gladstone

Beachcombing with four-legged friends at Arroyo Burro Beach is a good way to spend an afternoon.

Photo courtesy of Santa Barbara Conference and Visitors Bureau and Flickr Commons



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Spanish Mission beauty

Soon after the valet took my car, I realized I wouldn't need it again for the weekend. Santa Barbara has copious bike lanes throughout the center of town, the largest fleet of electric shuttle buses in North America and many walking-tour and hiking options. (I also realized I could've even taken Amtrak directly from L.A.'s historic Union Station. Note for next time.)

Unlike most seaside towns, Santa Barbara is not particularly built up along the shoreline. Except for a simple pier, the beaches are remarkably pristine — left to surfers, paddle-boarders and swimmers. Kayaking and scuba diving can be found around the Channel Islands 25 miles offshore, and while there are some casual eateries and surf shops across Cabrillo Boulevard / Shoreline Drive, the center of town is several blocks inland, on a gentle slope.

Much of Santa Barbara was rebuilt in Spanish Mission style after a devastating earthquake in 1925. Many of these early buildings still exist (as well as a few dating to the colonial era), lending the town a cohesive beauty that feels authentic but remarkably well maintained. A curbed walking tour along Anacapa, State and Santa Barbara streets offers a stream of highlights, from the vintage El Paseo to Paseo Nuevo. The two developments reflect Santa Barbara's diversity of

shopping and world-renowned luxury brands, mixing freely with funky local creations, as do university kids and wealthy Montecito denizens.

Eating en route

Clearly a visit here could be tailored any way you want. One thing is certain: Wherever Santa Barbara takes you, food will be an important companion. The city that Julia Child called home in her final years (endorsing the white-tablecloth Wine Cook and walk-up La Super Rica) — sports

a solid selection of serious chefs, from Greg Murphy at Bouchon (not to be confused with the Thomas Keller restaurants of the same name) to Justin West of Julienne. There is a sister to Hollywood's überhip gastro pub The Hungry Cat and a legion of upstart locavores, including Brian Parks at the Canary's own Coast restaurant. Every Friday, Parks offers a dinner based on local fishermen's fresh catches, and as we enjoyed a remarkably succulent, sweet-spicy lobster tail, he explained that Santa Barbara

offers an embarrassment of produce riches for a cook. Before we knew it, he was arranging to take me and other guests shopping at the farmers market on Santa Barbara Street the next morning, where we would find ingredients to augment a lunch of locally farmed abalone and halibut.

Any meal here would seem incomplete without the area's famed fruit of the vine. Pierre Lafond's Santa Barbara Winery has been making wine since the '60s in a nondescript warehouse at the intersection of Anacapa and Yarnwell. In recent years, a parcel of local wineries set up tasting rooms within a few blocks, making a casual "Urban Wine Trail" that's an undeniable social scene on weekends. I borrowed a beach bike from the hotel and took a leisurely



The rooftop deck at the Canary Hotel Santa Barbara has almost 360-degree views of the ocean and mountains.

Photo courtesy of Canary Hotel Santa Barbara

pilgrimage to Laford's still-popular spot, then Orens and the ferociously anti-establishment Municipal Winemakers, among others worth visiting.

Soon enough, it was time for another meal, this one at locally revered winemaker Doug Margerum's Wine Cask restaurant. The tasting room is also on the Urban Wine Trail, though it's several blocks from most others in a historic former Spanish garrison. Co-owner Mitchell Speven poured some Grassini from Happy Canyon's Three Creek Vineyard and two single-vineyard Margerum syrahs for us to sample (no surprise their wine list is 75 percent locally, below his staff served a wonderful dinner of buffalo carpaccio, wild mushroom *coûtes-croûtes*, duck cassoulet and rack of lamb, all accompanied by more remarkably fresh local produce. Land, yes, more wine!

Sunday, after a morning sweat at the Spectrum Club next door to the Canary (a distinct improvement over the average hotel gym — day passes are complimentary for Canary guests), I enjoyed brunch back at the hotel, highlighted by a spicy-hot sriracha-spiked Bloody Mary (also known as a "Canary Mary").

Culture and fame

I worked off my indulgences and biked to the small but stately Santa Barbara Museum of Art, whose permanent collection features an impressive selection of 19th- and 20th-century canvases (Matisse, Monet, Kandinsky, Dali) and the only remaining intact outdoor mural by David Alfaro Siqueiros.

The city supports a lively cultural scene. The open-air Santa Barbara Bowl regularly books headlining acts such as Bonnie Raitt, David Gray and Lauryn Hill. A seemingly endless schedule of events and civic celebrations is highlighted by January's annual International Film Festival, which in its 26 years has grown into a major event, attracting A-list Hollywood talent like Angelina Jolie and James Franco (the festival is even beginning to be an Oscar bellwether). Small wonder that famous residents range from authors T.C. Boyle and Sue Grafton to pro surfer Kelly Slater and Oprah Winfrey, who has a Montecito home.

Among other intriguing cultural destinations are the free Karpelos Manuscript Library Museum — the world's largest private collection of historical documents, such as the original draft of the Bill of Rights, and Einstein's handwritten theory of relativity — and the Old Mission Santa Barbara, perhaps the best maintained of the original Spanish California missions. With kids, you will also find the smallish but lovely Santa Barbara Zoo a must-see.

Nearby extras

Santa Barbara's charms stretch far beyond the city limits. Though it's not an absolute imperative, any lover of wine or scenery (or both) will want to extend the trip to explore Santa Barbara County's five American Viticultural Area-approved growing regions (Santa Maria Valley, Los Alamos Valley, Santa Ynez Valley, Sta. Rita Hills and Happy Canyon of Santa Barbara) that more than 100 wineries call home. If the Academy Award-winning movie *Silence in the Library* didn't make it clear you can find much, much more than middling merlot here. There is also the Alisal Ranch, a 10,000-acre working cattle ranch that offers every manner of " dude " vacation (with more than 50 miles of horseback/hiking trails). For a more decadent experience, the Bacara destination spa north of the city is world-famous for its pampering.

While there was no way to fit all of that into one weekend, I left Sunday afternoon committed to visiting the grand dame again soon. Clearly, the old lady has plenty of life left in her.

Eric C. Gladstone is a freelance travel and food writer based in California.

THE DETAILS

Getting there American, US Airways and United fly from DFW to Santa Barbara Airport (www.flysba.com), which is scheduled to open a new Spanish Colonial Revival-style two-story terminal with glass atriums this month.

Getting around A downtown waterfront shuttle bus runs every 10 minutes (hours vary seasonally) for 25 cents fare. Bike rentals and bike tours are available from a number of companies.

Alisal Ranch, Solvang, 805-688-6411, www.aisal.com

Bacara Resort & Spa, Santa Barbara, 805-968-0100,

www.bacaraspa.com

Canary Hotel Santa Barbara, 805-864-0300,

www.canarysantabarbara.com

Bouchon, 805-730-1160, www.bouchonsantabarbara.com

Coast Restaurant & Bar, 805-879-9100, www.canarysantabarbara.com

The Hungry Cat, 805-864-4700, www.thehungrycat.com

Julienne, 805-845-6488, www.restaurantjulienne.com

La Super Rica, 805-960-4940

Wine Cask, 805-966-9483, www.winecask.com

Municipal Winemakers, 805-931-6864, www.municipalwinemakers.com

Orens Winery & Marketplace, 805-962-8827, www.orenswinery.com

Santa Barbara Winery, 805-960-3623, www.sbwinery.com

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