

DESTINATION ♦ US



SECRET SANTA MONICA

Great art, architecture and food awaits off the tourist trail in an LA beachside city

COLIN VICKERY

Like most Aussies, I'm guilty of going to Santa Monica multiple times and only visiting two major attractions – the Third Street Promenade and the Santa Monica Pier. Turns out that is the experience of about 99 per cent of visitors to this California beachside city. They'll hit it for a day, two at the most, and always on a Saturday or Sunday.

On weekends, the Pier and the Promenade are bursting with thousands of tourists soaking up the sun, watching quirky street performers (a family who performed Michael Jackson's *Thriller* is my favourite), shopping or enjoying a ride along the beach path or on the iconic ferris wheel.

But this visit I'm determined to discover secret Santa Monica – the hidden treasures away from the crowds. I'm not disappointed. Spend a bit more time in Santa Monica and you are rewarded with fantastic art, architecture, food and much more. Here are my top picks.

PALISADES PARK

Want the best views of the Santa Monica beach and pier? Then you need to walk or cycle along the spectacular cliff-top Palisades Park along Ocean Ave. The park runs 2.4km north to Adelaide Drive and features more than 30 varieties of plants and plenty of spectacular lookouts. A great place for a picnic.

GEHRY RESIDENCE

Frank Gehry is an architectural icon – famous for mind-blowing buildings including Los Angeles' Disney Concert Hall and the Guggenheim Bilbao in Spain. But it all started with Gehry's home at 1002 22nd St. In 1977, Gehry remodelled a 1920 Dutch Colonial style house – wrapping it with chain-link fence, glass and corrugated steel. The neighbours freaked but you will be fascinated. No tours, unfortunately, but worth a look from the outside.

SWEET TREATS

Santa Monica is home to a lot of artisan sweet shops and the best way for a taste test is to do the Santa Monica Bike Centre's Sweet Spots tour. During the two-hour tour, you get to try tempting treats from Sidecar Donuts on Wilshire Blvd (famous for its Huckleberry but I loved the Butter and Salt, with its brown butter glaze), gourmet fudge with sea salt from John Kelly Chocolates, and exotic flavours such as Rose Geranium with Raspberry Ripple at the Sweet Rose Ice Creamery, inside the Brentwood Country Mart.

THE QUIET

Montana Ave is a must, with 150 boutiques and retailers along a 10-block stretch (including John Kelly Chocolates) but it is the residential streets northwest of Montana, bordering Brentwood, that captivate. Filled with some of

California's finest homes and gardens – we're talking in the millions of dollars – this is an oasis of calm for an afternoon stroll or cycle. It's the perfect place to escape the crowds.

CHEF LARRY MONACO AT THE VICEROY

The Viceroy on Ocean Ave is my Santa Monica hotel of choice because it has one of the loveliest outdoor pool cabana and dining areas of any US hotel. Now there is another reason to visit. Chef Larry Monaco has just taken over the hotel's Cast restaurant and he is knocking it out of the ballpark. Monaco's Stone Fruit and Steak Salad is one of the best dishes I've eaten anywhere in the world. An entree of Kusshi oysters with watermelon sorbet and Fresno Chili is another stunner.

BERGAMOT STATION

If you don't think of art when you think of Santa Monica then Bergamot Station, on Michigan Ave, will change your mind. More than 40 galleries display a dizzying array of works – from masters such as Picasso and Renoir at the Andrew Weiss Gallery to cutting-edge photography at bG Gallery and installations at Sloan Projects.

AUSSIE INVASION

The Aussies are invading Santa Monica. Bondi Harvest, in what looks like a converted surf shack, has a brekkie "rad bowl" with cauliflower rice, kale, quinoa, fermented veg, poached egg, grilled halloumi and dukkah. Or hit up a fried egg sandwich. The Fork-In Aussie Pie Kitchen on Main St has everything from a classic Aussie ground beef pie to Surfer's Paradise (with green curry chicken thighs) and the amusingly named Hemsworth Roll.

FARMERS' MARKET

This is Aussie chef Curtis Stone's favourite haunt and, after having a good look around, it is easy to see why. The Santa Monica Farmers' Market – on Arizona between Ocean and 5th St – takes place twice a week and features more than 200 growers and food purveyors. My pick is the one on Wednesday morning. That is when the cream of Los Angeles restaurateurs will be out in force to stock up on supplies. A great place for celebrity spotting too.

FOOD TRUCKS

Food trucks are all the rage in Los Angeles and some of the best are at Santa Monica. At Food Truck Alley on Pennsylvania Ave, you can indulge in everything from pork belly buns to chicken burritos and brisket sandwiches from the fun Holy Aioli, Wawa, and Carb & Nation. Keep a lookout around Ocean Ave for other trucks such as Shake Ramen, Tocky's Pita and Bowled & Beautiful. Seriously good tucker.

THE WRITER WAS A GUEST OF SANTA MONICA TRAVEL AND TOURISM, SANTAMONICA.COM

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