

A weekend in Santa Barbara, dream city

Beaches and palm trees, yes, but also some idiosyncrasies

By Bill Fink | May 30, 2013



Photo: Matt Dayka, Santa Barbara CVB & Film Comm.



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A pedicab is a great way to wheel around town, including at Stearns Wharf in Santa Barbara.

Visiting Santa Barbara can be a surreal experience, and the giraffe looking me in the eye says nothing to contradict this.

Nearby, a giant ape is opening birthday gifts. I check my watch (not melting) and realize I must skip the miniature train to make dinner at Miró. And this is only the beginning of a surreal weekend.

Whether at the beach, in town or even at the zoo, a visit to Santa Barbara can seem like a dream - the city is the embodiment of the California ideal of palm trees and sunny beaches. But at the same time, it has a dose of unexpected weirdness that makes a visit more memorable than a simple sun-and-sand retreat.

I begin my weekend at the downtown Canary Hotel, where both leopard-print robes and pet fish are provided to guests who want to embrace their inner Dali while relaxing in the room. Riley, a boxer in a bow tie, greets guests in his role of director of pet relations, which may involve him sniffing his fellow four-legged friends who roam the lobby like they own the place.

From the hotel's rooftop deck, I survey the city, which from the sixth floor appears to be a homogenous collection of Spanish Mission-style buildings, palm trees and parks. I don't even need to imbibe at the hotel's wine tastings or "Sangria Sunset" event to soon discover hidden layers of meaning in this view.

Descending to State Street, I walk through the standard tourist-town conglomeration of overpriced

boutiques and chain stores. But tucked away amid the name-brand monotony of Paseo Nuevo Mall lurks the mind-bending experience of the Contemporary Arts Forum. Given its surroundings, the gallery's current exhibit - "Things That Turn Your Brain to Mush" - is at once appropriate and subversive.

Seeking to expand my vision, I drive the rolling hills around Santa Barbara and find myself traveling through all the jarring contrasts of a Dali painting. Looking one way, I see delicate gardens and colorful orchards. Turn my head, and I'm confronted by the riveted, rusty hulk of a black giraffe furiously pecking the ground - one of dozens of oil drilling rigs that roost in the area like scattered members of a nightmare herd.

In the gaps between the huge mansions funded by oil riches and Hollywood productions, I pass tracts of dilapidated trailer homes and rusted cars in yards. Along the beach the view alternates between tourist- brochure-ready scenes of picnicking families, and an apocalyptic lineup of dozens of RVs silently facing the sea as if waiting for a sign. From the vehicles' roofs, flags flap in the strong offshore breeze, with alternating visions of happy yellow smiley faces and ominous skulls and crossbones.

I prepare for a surreal experience as I cruise Santa Barbara's postindustrial Funk Zone in a borrowed \$200,000 Bentley convertible, trying to fit the role of a visiting Gatsby.

I hope to ask some gawking pedestrian, "Won't you take me to ... Funky Town?" But as I pass by the mix of surf shops, wine-tasting venues and art spaces between Highway 101 and the ocean, nobody bats an eye at my ride, as such luxury amid quirky attractions is typical in town.

A voice in the back of my head shouts, "No top! No top!" perhaps a subliminal reminder of the unlimited upside of the area's riches - but it turns out just to be the toddler in the backseat alerting me to the car's missing roof.

On foot, it's easy to get into the dreamlike state of the surrealists with a meandering tour of Santa Barbara's Urban Wine Trail, which winds through eight tasting rooms in the Funk Zone and 10 more around town.

North of downtown, I conclude my surreal day, appropriately enough, at the Miró restaurant at the Bacara Resort. Among murals inspired by the Spanish surrealist, I dine on a cannibalistic-sounding selection of Filet of John Dory and Hobb's Pork Belly, with a tangerine dream array of Orange Blossom Beignets for dessert.

From my table I watch the sun set over the Pacific, a serene natural setting accented with a festively lit oil pipeline and steel-tower pelican perches.

But for the ultimate in surreal Santa Barbara, visit during its upcoming Summer Solstice festival June 21 to 23. The annual event is a painter's and sculptor's vision come to life: 100,000 people are expected to gather in a whole-city performance art project. Prepare for a sensory overload of costumes, music and marches all wrapped around this year's theme: "Creatures." One can only hope for a few burning giraffes.

If you go

GETTING THERE

Santa Barbara is 325 miles south of San Francisco, about five hours by car (Highway 101), or you can take a 90-minute flight on United starting at about \$300 round trip.

WHERE TO STAY

Canary Hotel: 31 W. Carrillo St. (805) 884-0300. www.canarysantabarbara.com. Hotel with personality in great downtown location. New restaurant, nice rooftop deck, free daily wine tastings. Rates start at about \$250.

Bacara Resort: 8301 Hollister Ave. (855) 968-0100. www.bacaresort.com. Expansive beachside resort north of town with highly rated spa, pool complex, and tasty eats at Miró. Rates start at \$300.

WHERE TO EAT

The Shop Café: 730 N. Milpitas St. (805) 845-1696. www.shopcafesb.com. Former tire shop converted to breakfast and lunch diner. Their Mac on Crack with gorgonzola, pecans, apple and bacon is a must-have. Entrees: \$10 and under.

Cadiz Restaurant: 509 State St. (805) 770-2760. www.cadizsb.com Locally sourced seafood and award-winning tapas menu in an atmospheric setting. Tapas plates about \$10, entrees \$15-25.

WHAT TO DO

Festivals: The summer solstice festival runs June 21-23, www.solsticeparade.com.

The Contemporary Arts Forum: 653 Paseo Nuevo (top floor of mall). (805) 966-5373. www.sbcaf.org. Free admission.

Santa Barbara Zoo: 500 Niños Drive. (805) 962-5339. www.sbzoo.org. Good layout with eye-to-eye views of giraffes, leaping monkeys, and screeching birds. \$14, kids \$10.

Urban Wine Trail: www.urbanwinetrailsb.com. Over a dozen downtown tasting rooms offer samples of the best of Santa Barbara regional wineries. Hire a pedicab to haul you and your loot around town - SB Pedi-Cab (805) 910-7234 www.sbpedicab.com.

MORE INFORMATION

Santa Barbara CVB: www.santabarbaraca.com.

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