5-DAY ROAD TRIP ITINERARY

LOS ANGELES TO SAN FRANCISCO

Staying at
Santa Monica, Santa Barbara, Big Sur,
Santa Cruz, San Francisco

With extra bonus content on
Santa Monica, Malibu, Santa Barbara, San Francisco

© Megan Singleton www.bloggeratlarge.com

This eBook sets out a 5-day itinerary driving betwen Los Angeles and San Francisco. With extra content on Santa Monica, Malibu, Santa Barbara and San Francisco to assist with your planning if you want to spend more time in these cities.

If I had more time I would take 8-10 days and stay a couple of nights at each stop, as well as three at each end to have more time to explore, sight-see, wine-taste, eat out, swim, shop – you know, have a couple of days with no driving!

The Pacific Coast Highway actually runs the entire length of the west coast of the United States and some people drive the whole thing from San Diego to Seattle, or vice versa. But this e-book covers the most popular section between Los Angeles and San Francisco.

You could actually drive this section in under six hours, but why would you when there are so many gorgeous towns to stop at and things to do along the way?!

This road trip starts in Santa Monica and includes overnight stays in Santa Barbara, Big Sur, Santa Cruz and San Francisco. Plus visits along the way in Malibu, Hearst Castle, Carmel-by-the-Sea and Pebble Beach.

LET'S GO!

Firstly, if you are reading this from outside the US, let's allay all fears of driving in the Unites States. It's a doddle!

But secondly, make sure you have a GPS or data roaming plan to use maps on your phone if you actually want to drive along the coastal road, because the default is to take you the quickest route up the I-5 inland road without the amazing views.

Tip: Put coastal stops into your maps one at a time to ensure the GPS keeps you on the coastal PCH.

Tip: If you drive it north to south (the reverse way that I have done it here) you will have the ocean on your right for great views!

We started our epic road trip in LA's stunning beach town of **Santa Monica** with two days of R&R after our flight from New Zealand – this is still my favourite part of LA.

See the separate Santa Monica Guide

I have stayed in Santa Monica at least a dozen times and have written a post on my 7 favourite hotels in Santa Monica (you can read that on the blog), we shopped till we dropped on the pedestrianised Third Street Promenade and enjoyed cocktails at sunset (I've included my info about 7 great bars for cocktails with a view in the separate guide).

DAY 1 SANTA MONICA TO SANTA BARBARA

From Santa Monica, the coastal Highway 1 starts at beach level where views of the half-kilometre wide sandy beach stretch out to the ocean – perfect for sunset wine watching from some great bars.

1ST STOP: Just 40 minutes north of Santa Monica are the **Camarillo Shopping Outlets**. Three clusters of shops and eating places with brands like Gap, Banana Republic, Forever 21, North Face, Nine West, Calvin Klein, all at ridiculously cheap prices, although all end of summer stock when we went.

Driving distance: 120km (75 miles) along the 101 BUT that will take you on inland roads for at least half the drive, so allow a bit more time to wind around the coast. (Allow 2.5 hours)

Where to stay: Brisas del Mar

Don't miss: Camarillo Shopping Outlets

Tip: put Malibu into your GPS if you are unsure of how to get to the coastal road. We just went back on a separate visit to LA and stayed a night in Malibu (about 25 minutes drive north of Santa Monica) and loved it. The dining scene is small but lovely, there is a super cute former 1950s motel, now boutique hotel to stay at and of course - the surf.
See the separate Malibu Guide

Santa Barbara is about an hour and a half north of Malibu and I maintain, is the prettiest city in the United States so we stayed two nights.

Thanks to strict building codes brought in after the devastating 1925 earthquake, buildings here are Spanish adobe style reflecting the roots of the town and are no more than two stories high (in some cases you'll see an office block at six floors, but certainly no high-rises).

Santa Barbara

See the separate Santa Barbara Guide

It's just so cute here! Brightly coloured bougainvillea climb up walls and the tree-lined main street is edged with shops, behind which are piazzas with more shops, fountains and lovely open spaces. Oh and check out the cycle lanes - easy peasy. Parking is cheap here - free everywhere for first 75 mins then $1.50 per hour.

The weather is gorgeous pretty much year round due to the city being hugged by the Santa Ynez mountains which keep much of the hot desert wind at bay while the ocean breezes are largely quelled by the Channel Islands, just off the coast. Again, like Santa Monica, the west coast sand stretches for what seems like miles.

Brisas del Mar is a large hotel/motel located about three blocks from the ocean. It's a 3-star hotel but perfectly fine (Tripadvisor reviews are very positive), but has a free wine and cheese hour at 5pm followed by hot cookies around 7pm!

DAY 2 SANTA BARBARA

Today you should definitely visit the **Old Mission**, Santa Barbara which stands majestically overlooking the city.

Founded in 1786, this is still home to the Franciscan friars. For $12 you can take a tour through the ancient hallows, the photogenic gardens and old cemeteries, visit the chapel, gaze at the art and architecture and just generally take your time to marvel.

The last time I visited they were running a chalk art competition in front of the buildings. This whale one is clever!

Another must-do in Santa Barbara is climb the steps (actually only two flights as there is a lift) to the rooftop of the courthouse and look down over the 'American Riviera'. The courthouse itself is so beautiful you'd think it was a tourist attraction, except for the clip-clop of legal secretaries stilletos carrying piles of paperwork and signs above doors saying 'In Session'.

Have dinner in the **Funk Zone**, a new area of former fishing warehouses now home to restaurants, bars and wine tasting rooms. We had fabulous sharing plates for dinner at The Lark.

There are lots of restaurants and wine bars plus wine tasting rooms if you can't get to the surrounding vineyards.
See the separate Santa Barbara Guide

Wander down to the beach and out on the pier to check out the innovative beggars urging you to throw a coin into their lair. Clever.

Funk Zone

DAY 3 SANTA BARBARA TO BIG SUR

This is the longest driving day, but whatever you do, don't miss Hearst Castle!

We started with our essential morning coffee in Santa Barbara (I'm not a Starbucks fan and am pleased to report that plenty of local cafes make a decent flat white are springing up over here) and headed towards **San Luis Obispo** for our lunch stop.

Other places worthy of visiting for lunch are **Solvang** (just minutes from Santa Barbara, the Danish capital of the US for boutique shopping and Danish pastries) and more shopping outlets at **Pismo Beach**.

Next time I do this road trip I would stop at Solvang for an hour (leaving at least 2 hours to visit Hearst Castle!)

Hearst Castle in **San Simeon** is a must-see even if you have hours of driving ahead of you! William Randolph Hearst was a wealthy businessman who became a publishing magnate in 1887 and inherited this 970 sq km land from his father.

He is grand-daddy to Patty Hearst (nudge, nudge. Google her!). This house (oops, castle!) took nearly 30 years to build and was (and still is) ostentatious and utterly priceless with 130 rooms - some brought in their entirety from mansions in Europe and shipped over.

This pool on the right has sweeping views out to the ocean, then there's the astonishing pool in the basement!

Driving distance: 215 miles (345 km) Allow 4.5 hours.

Where to stay: Ventana Inn

Don't miss: Hearst Castle. Allow a couple of hours here. You'll thank me later! Tour costs $25 per adult ($12 per child)

Solvang

Hearst Castle pool

There are stories of parties with the Hollywood and political gliteratti of the 1920s and 30s. There are elegant guest houses for friends, exotic animals roamed the grounds and he also bred Arabian horses here.

Ohhh if these walls could talk…

Tear yourself away though because you have about an hour and half to drive to your accommodation tonight.

We stayed at **Ventana Inn**, a beautiful lodge in Big Sur, which is on a stunning part of the coast.

Set in 243 acres of trees high above the ocean it's a sanctuary/retreat and you'll find people roaming around in their fluffy white bathrobes heading to the spa, or just sitting outside in the sun.

It has romantic open fire places in your rooms and a clothing optional pool (which took me by surprise as I was exploring the property next morning). There are also Japanese hot baths and a sauna, but I was a bit nervous to venture further around lest I see more portly middle-aged bottoms.

The restaurant served bison steak for me with a big red wine and hand-picked scallops from Maine for my travelling companion, cousin Kate (or we could have had Amish-raised pork) before we crashed in our room and threw an innovative sack filled with kindling and wood on the fire and all we needed to do was light the paper tag and voila - a camp fire in our room.

Hearst Castle

Ventana Inn

DAY 4 BIG SUR TO SANTA CRUZ

Setting off up the rugged **Big Sur coastline**, our final destination for the day was only two hours away, so we had time to make a photo stop at famous Bixby Bridge and watch the board and kite surfers on the waves below.

Then we tootled just a little way along to **Carmel-by-the-Sea** to see if we could find Clint Eastwood – mayor in the 1980s. Sadly no.

Driving distance: 70 miles (112km). Allow 2 hours.

Where to stay: Dream Inn

Don't miss: 17-Mile Drive from Pebble Beach

Carmel-by-the-Sea is a cute higgledy-piggledy town sloping down to the sea, studded with towering pine trees and shops and houses with wooden-tiled roofs covered in growing lichen. The only thing we could afford here was a cupcake – although there was a sale on at Anthropologie (some of you will notice your hearts just skip a beat).

You could even stay here for a couple of nights, but **Santa Cruz** was already booked so we just stopped for a little snack and a browse of the cute shops.

Two hours in Carmel was plenty on this blustery day and parking was a nightmare, so the next stop was **Monterey via the famous Pebble Beach** golf course where more spectators than players are found in the souvenir shops and dining at one of the three bars/ restaurants. Stop for lunch or a snack.

Then take the private road '**17-Mile Drive**' which weaves around the coast from the golf club north towards **Monterey** and fantasize at the $20 million dollar houses hidden among the trees or with rocky gardens rolling down to the sea. There is a toll to pay to drive on this private road, but it's worth it to stare at the houses!

There are other golf courses here too, just not as famous and therefore not as crowded. (Peter Hay Golf Course, Spyglass Hill Golf Course, Poppy Hills Golf Course – but unless you've teed off from Pebble Beach, why bother, right?)

We arrived in the surf town of **Santa Cruz** (although Huntington Beach officially now holds the name of surf capital after years of battling it out) in time for sun set.

Dream Inn is beautifully decorated and is literally right on the beach. Its 165 rooms all have ocean views with private balconies and being lulled off to sleep by the crashing ocean is just magic.

It's also at the foot of the pier that stretches out into Monterey Bay lined with souvenir shops and seafood and 'burgers and fries' kinda restaurants that proved ideal with a beer to watch the swell of the waves roll under us to the beach.

Bixby Bridge

Sweet shop in Carmel

The famous tree on 17 Mile Drive

The **Santa Cruz Boardwalk** was built over 100 years ago as a bath house and now has all the old fashioned rides and side shows, plus a few more whizzy ones, to keep the kids in a daze for days.

This is a surf beach and the weekend we were here there a competition was underway by the time we pulled back the curtains. The pedestrianised town has boutique shops, art galleries, spas and cafes.

Santa Cruz beach (Dream Inn on the left)

DAY 5 SANTA CRUZ TO SAN FRANCISCO

The last easy stretch to **San Francisco** is only about an hour from Santa Cruz so we headed off late morning and put **Sausalito** into the GPS to take us over the famous **Golden Gate Bridge** (which is 3km long so a full walk might not be that enticing) while we still had the car.

This cute seaside town is more of a village with waterfront pubs, antiques, art and other boutiques. It's also perfect for photographing the views, including "the rock" of **Alcatraz**.

After an hour here we had a bit of time to kill before returning the car so found out that the famous row of painted villas with the city in the background is called the **Painted Ladies** and is located on the edge of **Alamo Square**.

These houses were in the opening credits of Full House and also starred in So I Married an Axe Murderer, so off we went for a photo.

As luck would have it, the car was to be dropped off at Hertz, literally one block from our accommodation at the **Handlery Hotel** on Union Square. Owner, Jon Handlery is likely to be wandering around greeting guests at this family run hotel.

The Handlery Hotel is supremely located and there are two wings of accommodation. One is accessed by the main lift in the lobby and the other past the pool.

They also have a restaurant and sports bar attached and I was particularly honoured to receive a Jon Handlery bobble-head doll. Thanks Jon!

Driving distance: 75 miles (120km) via San Jose. Allow 2 hours if you take the coastal road.

Where to stay: Handlery Hotel

Don't Miss: a walk/cycle across the Golden Gate Bridge (or just half of it - it's quite long!)

Sausalito

The Painted Ladies

24 HOURS IN MALIBU

Just north of **Santa Monica**, about 25 minutes' drive (18 miles) is the tiny coastal town of Malibu.

You'll probably whiz right past it, but when we went to LA last year, we decided to stay out here instead of Santa Monica, only because I've stayed in Santa Monica more than a dozen times and had heard about Malibu - due to its famous residents.

To be honest, Santa Monica remains my favourite part of LA, but this makes a nice change if you too are looking for somewhere new.

Malibu Beach

WHERE TO STAY IN MALIBU

We stayed at the **Surfrider Malibu**, a former 1950s motel called the Malibu Shores, where surfers and hippies would come and stay to ride the break literally across the road, but over the years it lost its vibe and sat kinda unloved for a long time.

But in 2017 it found new owners and was stripped back to its bare bones, against the cliff behind it and with the Pacific Coast Highway in front, so that all that remained was the footprint.

Then like a phoenix it rose into a new California beach house-designed boutique hotel with 20 rooms and a rooftop bar and restaurant with the best views in town. We were lucky to get the last room available for our stay.

Surfrider Malibu, opposite the pier

WHERE TO EAT IN MALIBU

We wanted to walk from the Surfrider to dinner rather than drive as the road in front is literally the busy PCH, so while not exactly flush with dining choices, it's more quality over quantity – although there is a Jack in the Box next door!

In fact, if it wasn't so windy, we could have sat on the Surfrider rooftop on one of the couches or a small table, or even at the bar for dinner, but tonight wasn't

the night for that so we wandered across the road. Don't worry, there are pedestrian traffic lights to stop the two lanes each way from hurtling into you!

The hotel sits opposite the pier so that was our first look. It was a glorious afternoon and I was still mesmerised by the surfers, some with kids on the front of their boards and dogs too (although not all on the same family board!)

We walked to the end, chatting to people with fishing rods slung over the side hoping to catch their dinner, past a caravan selling handmade wooden gifts and to the end where there is a cafe.

We checked out the restaurant at the beginning of the pier, **Malibu Farm Cafe**, and liked the menu. But it was only 5.30pm so we were about to make a booking, but decided to see what else was on offer.

Along the road we came to **CBC, Carbon Beach Club** restaurant inside the **Malibu Beach Inn**.

This was us! Even though **Nobu** was just a little further along for incredible Japanese food, it was the CBC location that had me.

We made our booking and came back at 7pm and were shown to quite possibly the best table in the restaurant; out on the patio with the waves lapping underneath and facing the sunset.

Let me take you through what we ate… for the starter we chose tuna tartare, served raw (for that is what tartare is) with avocado and a few thin crackers. I washed that down with a glass of local sauvignon blanc, I always try and go local when I travel!

I chose the Storm from the nearby Santa Ynez Valley (where we'd been wine tasting outside Santa Barbara the day before). It wasn't sold by the glass but the delightful sommelier said he'd open the bottle for me. He explained that if he has more than two bottles, he's happy to open one for a diner.

Hubby had lobster ravioli for his main while I felt like the grass fed beef burger with frites. He also got a whiskey with smoked bacon in it, while I made another dent in that bottle of sauv.

Malibu Pier

CBC restaurant at Malibu Beach Inn with the pier behind

But the next morning we may have even topped that meal with breakfast on the rooftop back at Surfrider. The sun was up, the wind was gone, the surfers were waiting on waves and smashed avocado with a poached egg with a flat white coffee was on my table as I drank in the whole scene.

Surfrider rooftop for breakfast

WHERE TO SHOP IN MALIBU

For a little town, you'd be surprised at the shopping options.

Within a five minute walk from the Surfrider we poked around at the **Malibu Country Mart**. This is an eclectic mix of designer fashion stores like Fred Segal alongside handmade jewellery and gift stores with an outdoor kids play park (where you should keep your eyes peeled for celebrities pushing their little princesses on a swing), plus restaurants and cafes.

Across the road is **Malibu Village**, which is a U-shaped strip mall edged around a car park. Here you'll find high street stores like Sephora next to a dry cleaner, with an old fashioned country grocery store selling cheeses and meats by the weight and where you will most likely see Lady Gaga shop, and a few cafes. Plus Grom, a gelato store that called us in…

Shopping in Malibu

A QUIRKY LUNCH STOP!

Neptune's Net is a local diner (11 miles up the coast) serving chowder and fresh fish burgers and sandwiches with motorbikes all parked out front.

It's famous for appearing in Fast and Furious 2001, Point Break 1991, Gossip Girl, 1999 and Iron Man 3 in 2013.

Neptune's Net

36 HOURS IN SAN FRANCISCO

Spending just a day and a half in San Francisco is almost cruel! But if that's all the time you have, this guide gives you my picks for the best things to do to get the most out of your quick visit.

There are so many things to do in San Francisco, but if you're like me, you hate to rush from pillar to post seeing as much as possible and pulverising your feet into stumps.

So don't rush off and try and tick all these suggestions all off. Sometimes just sitting with a clam chowder at **Fisherman's Wharf** and people watching for a couple of hours is the perfect thing to do!

I have been several times to San Francisco and last time my husband and I brought our friends for just one night on our way to Chicago. They had never been here before, so it was all about **seeing the San Francisco heroes** for us!

We arrived about midday and as there were four of us we decided to split a cab from the airport, mainly for ease of departure direct to our door (it was about $50), but there is an excellent train connection to the city. Look for the BART signs and if you're staying in or around Union Square, it's very simple. Or Uber. Next time I'd Uber.

A WHIRL THROUGH SAN FRANCISCO

DAY ONE

2pm
We checked into the Handlery Hotel right on Union Square (rooms are quite reasonable per night for this fab location) and owner Jon Handlery, always dressed in a three-piece suit, came out to greet us personally.

This is a great value hotel for the location and I've stayed here at least three times now. Our room was nice and roomy with a little lounge area and bedroom in an L shape. No view, but hey, we're on Union Square, there was no time to spend in our room!

3pm
With our trainers on we decided some fresh air was in order so headed out for a walk through **Chinatown** all the way to **Fisherman's Wharf**.

It was longer than I thought, but a great way to blow the cobwebs away after our long flight as we wandered past the really great shops of authentic Chinese food and furniture – and yes, a few tat stores. The streets roll up and down over the hills made famous by Steve McQueen and his car scene. Great photo ops along the way!

5pm
After wandering through the hubbub of shops and eateries at Pier 39 on Fisherman's Wharf and taking photos of the seals that live in the marina, we decided to find somewhere to watch the sun set for an early dinner (afterall it was tomorrow in NZ!)

We settled on Swiss Louis a seafood and Italian restaurant (not sure where the "Swiss" comes from) with windows facing the Golden Gate Bridge across the marina and watched the sun slip away over crab cakes, oysters and pasta dishes.

8pm
We intended to ride the trolly bus back to Union Square but we'd just missed one and as it was dark and the next one was taking ages, we cabbed it (under $10). Got back in time for a night cap at Handlery's bar in the front of their adjoining restaurant, The Daily Grill and sports bar.

Chinatown

DAY TWO

8.30am
The **Ferry Building Marketplace** on the **Embarcadero** (about 2km along the wharf from Pier 39 towards the Bay Bridge) is a great breakfast or lunch spot, so on the trolly we went from Market Street (around the block from our hotel), getting off right out front.

They serve a real proper flat white coffee here at **Blue Bottle Coffee**! There are also several stalls selling fresh bread, cheeses, gelato, even an empanada shop and cafes for sitting down, or you can head outside and sit along the waterfront.

Ferry Building at Embarcadero

10.30am
We had booked tickets online overnight for our **Alcatraz tour,** so jumped on the bus again and headed along to Pier 33 to wait in line for our turn.

Tours of Alcatraz depart by boat from here every half hour. Once you get there, you get an audio headset and they're self guided so you can take your time.

"The Rock" is crawling with tourists, but it's done really well with everyone going at their own pace. You'll hear stories from former prison guards and prisoners of what it was like. You'll see cells in the condition they were when the prison stopped running in 1963 (it ran for 28 years).

This was the prison for prisoners expelled from elsewhere for bad behaviour. You'll hear tales of riots and escapes and there is still the mystery of whether three prisoners who escaped and were never seen again are over 100 years old and living in South America!

Famous prisoners who were incarcerated at Alcatraz include Al Capone, Robert "Birdman" Stroud, James "Whitey" Bulger and George "Machine Gun" Kelly.

Allow about 2-3 hours for the round trip including sailing across and back and to take the tour. But stay as long as you like.

1pm
We returned from Alcatraz and walked along to Pier 39 again, this time for lunch at **Wipe Out Bar and Grill** which is a cool surfy style restaurant. The sourdough bread bowl is made across the road at Boudin and was filled with a delicious seafood chowder!

2pm
We spent the afternoon on the **Hop On Hop Off Bus**. There are three companies and we chose Big Bus Tours because they were offering the day for $35 (instead of $45) and also drove over the Golden Gate Bridge for a 10-minute photo stop.

The whole circuit they drive takes about two hours but of course you can get off and on whenever you like and take all day – in fact if you buy the two-day pass it's your way around tomorrow to go back to the places you want to spend more time at.

Note: you MUST book online, especially in summer even weeks in advance, as they fill up fast!

At Alcatraz looking back to the city

The famous escape route

Boudin sour dough chowder bowl

4.30pm
We hopped off at the Union Square stop and had a couple of hours to dash into **Macy's** and some of the surrounding stores, plus put our feet up for a few minutes! With an extra day I would totally have hit up the **Westfield Mall** two blocks away and all the shops in between!

6.30pm
Tonight we felt like Mexican so I took our little party to **Colibri Mexican Bistro**. It's just one block up Geary from the Handlery Hotel and is a buzzing, styly Mexican restaurant and bar. It's busy so if you're here Friday or Saturday I would book. The guacamole is delicious and they have some creative spins on chicken dishes with chocolate, chilies and nuts blended into a sauce (Mole Poblano) plus a duck breast that was highly acclaimed as well as the filet mignon that our table liked.

9pm
Back at the sports bar, but there are plenty of cocktail bars in San Francisco too!

Taking the cable car around

With more time in San Francisco I would…

- **Hire bicycles to ride over the Golden Gate Bridge** and have brunch/lunch and a shop in Sausilito then take the bikes on the ferry back to Fisherman's Wharf.

- Get off the Hop On and Off bus (get the 2-day pass!) at the **California Academy of Science** in Golden Gate Park (the largest natural history museum in the world with a huge aquarium too) and across the square the fine arts **de Young Museum**.

- Wander though the hippy neighbourhood of **Haight-Ashbury** for vintage clothes, books, records, tattoos and piercings!

- **Shop!** Not only at the Westfield Mall on Market Street, but all along Market and Powell Streets, which run from Union Square.

- Go to a **Giant baseball game** right on the waterfront at Oracle Park

Oracle Park, home stadium of the Giants

7 GREAT BARS IN SANTA MONICA

If you like a cocktail with a view and want to know some very cool spots for a drink in Santa Monica, here are my faves.

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1. The Bungalow at the Fairmont Hotel

This cute beachside bungalow was a boring (albeit not boring for those sitting in there) meeting space when its location and charm were finally recognised.

Now you'll find an eclectic mix of decor inside including a fireplace and leather suites, to a pool room and little nooks for a quiet te ta te. But it's outside with Pacific Ocean views you want to sit under trees dotted with lanterns with a cocktail in your hand.

101 Wilshire Blvd, Santa Monica

The Bungalow

2. Viceroy

This ugly former office block-now-hotel hides a jaw-dropping chic lobby (with a bar) and an even cooler pool area surrounded by cabanas and high wing-backed chairs. Designed by my girl-crush Kelly Wearstler, I just love what she's done with a very plain canvas.

The cabanas can be booked for private groups, but when I was there they were available so we plonked

Viceroy

ourselves in one and chose the charcuterie platter with cocktails.

This is a great hotel to come for dinner outdoors (or at the restaurant inside) or just start (or end) your evening here in the great bar ambience. No view, but the decor makes up for it!

1819 Ocean Ave, Santa Monica

3. Loews

This is the best place to come for an outdoor beachside bar with sunset views. You'll walk through the hotel lobby and wind your way down here in front of the pool, to where the fire pits are.

They have a tantalising cocktail list and a delicious bar snack menu to while away a few hours with incredible breach front views of the Santa Monica Pier as the sun sizzles into the Pacific Ocean.

1700 Ocean Ave, Santa Monica

Loews

4. Hotel Shangri La

On the roof of this styly art deco hotel is 700 Suite; a stunning rooftop bar with views of the Pacific Ocean right across the road, and the famous Santa Monica Pier for sunset views. It's a popular event venue for private events too.

But if the rooftop bar is a bit breezy, or closed for an event, go back down to the ground floor pool bar and hang out in a cabana to watch the beautiful people watching each other.

1301 Ocean Ave, Santa Monica

Hotel Shangri La

5. Penthouse at Huntley Hotel

Don't you just love a bar with a Mixologist on the payroll? Say hi to Ryan and get him to whip you up his specialty drink while you enjoy your 18-storey 360 degree views from the Pacific Ocean to the Malibu Beach Cliffs and over to Hollywood.

Intimate cabanas and fireside hangouts for those chilly LA nights. This is what you call an Ultra Lounge – a signature LA experience. It's also where you want to come to meet a rich suit, so I'm told.

1111 2nd St, Santa Monica

The Huntley

6. The Lobster on Santa Monica Pier

This delicious seafood restaurant, established in 1923, is one of our favourite places to dine in Santa Monica and we bring our friends here for amazing lobster, crab legs and everything in between. It brazenly lauds itself as being a great location for film shoots with its iconic view of the Pier.

It's famous for its truffle fries (I was reliably told they are best on earth – even described as crack!) The patio overlooks the 100-year old Santa Monica pier with its gigantic ferris wheel and this place is cool with the local celebs for whole Maine lobsters.

1602 Ocean Ave, Santa Monica

Best table at The Lobster

7. High at Hotel Erwin

Technically the Erwin is not in Santa Monica, but a short stroll (about 2mi) or a taxi ride along the beach to Venice Beach.

This is a fun place to come by day too. It's where medical marijuana is sold from the "doctors clinics" and street musician and artists entertain.

The open-air rooftop of Hotel Erwin is aptly called High and is located about 200m from the sand and it has been voted in the Top 20 rooftop bars in America.

If you walk along, the views of Muscle Beach make this a great spot for perving, not to mention the cool vibe and the arty techies from Pixar and the like who will be on the rooftop. (Yes geeks can be groovy!) Sit in front of the flaming gas heater and watch the sun set. Sublime.

1697 Pacific Ave, Venice

High at the Erwin

2 DAYS IN SANTA BARBARA

If you're looking for things to do in Santa Barbara and you only have a couple of days, this quick guide is for you!

I love Santa Barbara, which also fondly known as the **American Riviera**, but on my last visit I only had two days, so I had to be ruthless about what I was going to focus my time on, and that meant not much time for shopping but plenty of time for tasting at local wineries and some great dining!

Santa Barbara is actually south facing and with the Channel Islands breaking up onshore breezes and the mountains behind, the weather in Santa Barbara is pretty much sunshine every day – well 300 days a year on average!

It doesn't get too hot here either in the summer. Temperatures range from the mid 60s in winter to mid 70s in summer (18–24˚C)

Santa Barbara in the distance

Here a some fab things to do in a couple of days…

Visit surrounding Wineries

Hugged by the Santa Ynez mountains, Santa Barbara is surrounded by row upon hundreds of rows of vines with over 200 wineries growing more than 50 grape varieties, most of it in chardonnay and pinot noir.

Clearly these could occupy you over several lunches and cellar door tastings for a few days!

It's pretty much impossible to decide which ones to visit, and of course, you don't want to drive anyway, so we organised a full day winery tour with **Stage Coach Tours**.

They pick up from hotels and visit three or four wineries, including a picnic lunch (which the driver whisked away to collect while we were quaffing the local drop), then we sat under the trees and ate our sandwiches with another glass of wine.

The day started with a 10am pick up at our hotel and driver Tom drove us into the countryside and through the cute Danish town of **Solvang** – which I was kinda hoping we'd stop at for a bit of a shop (no!)

Note to self: come back here for at least a few hours next time to eat the pastries in the windows and shop at the little enticing boutiques.

The 4 wineries we visited:

Buttonwood Farm

Our first winery had a lovely garden to take your taste out into. They offer five wines to taste, and a couple more depending on how busy they are, for $15 (if you were just dropping in because it's included in the tour) and they're a generous pour too!

Their largest varietal is Cabernet Franc and they do a tiny range of Grenache and have been fooling around with yeast and making a white wine with beer notes to impress your brew loving friends over a barbecue!

Brick Barn Wine Estate

Our second winery also offered five tastes (for $20) and have a lovely outdoor seating area that we had our picnic in, provided by driver Tom.

The owner also has a couple of Ferraris parked in the former stables (with a sign saying 'don't touch the ponies' :D), which is now the winery so it ticks a few boxes for wine and car lovers!

By now we were quite chatty with our small group, a young couple from Switzerland and a couple with their grown up son from east LA. Group sizes are not more than 10 on these tours, and our driver Tom chatted up a storm.

Pence Vineyards and Winery

We arrived at Pence and had a little drive through the vineyard first and instead of going to the cellar door at the entrance, we went to a cute garden with a pop up bar beside a little lake. In fact they have five locations for tasting here.
This is a small winery with a big reputation, organically producing Pinot Noir, Syrah, Gamay and Chardonnay and only open for private bookings and tours.

But it is owner, Blair Pence's, passion for sparing no expense to let the terroir speak in your glass influenced by many years of visiting and working with wine growers and makers in Burgundy with the aim to produce the best Burgundian wines in the new world.

Bella Cavalli Farms & Vineyard

Then our final winery was Bella Cavalli Farms & Vineyard which is all about wine and horses. In fact it might just be the horses that has the edge with owner Jeff Lockwood, who is in his 60s and still works the horses and breaks them in. "I was thrown just a couple of weeks ago," he told us with a laugh.

But outside in the sun, he brought out five bottles for us to taste: his Bianco Rossa from the Cabernet Sauvignon vine, Albarino – a northern Spanish style of wine, Cortese – first mentioned in texts from 1659

and a light wine that is good paired with seafood, a Chardonnay – the bottling is so small that it is sold to members only, and a beautifully light Grenache Rosé.

Then it was time for Tom to drive us the hour back to our various hotels and pull ourselves together enough to go to dinner!

WHERE TO HAVE DINNER

Head to the Funk Zone!

The Funk Zone neighbourhood is located in a three block radius between the highway (101) and the beach in downtown Santa Barbara which has been transformed from the "funky" smelling fish warehouses into an area decorated with murals and filled with wine tasting rooms and restaurants… award-winning restaurants.

We were actually lucky we got into **The Lark** without a booking and enjoyed their famous shared plates and copied what our neighbours were eating – and recommended – as their plates looked delicious!

Think crispy fried brussel sprouts with medjool dates, chilli and lime. We also had a fish dish that our new friends had eaten and loved with lobster roe, fingerling potatoes and asparagus. Amazing!

And "from the ranch" we had the pork rillettes which was a smoked pork belly and ham hock terrine style of dip in a jar served with crispy focaccia bread.

The Lark was recognised a week later with a **Plate award in the Michelin Guide**.

The next night we felt like Mexican and sat at an outide table at **Santo Mezcal**, back in the Funk Zone, but this time on the newly transformed ocean end of State Street. A booking here would also be wise.

The newest hotel makeover in town, the **Hotel Californian** (I'd love to stay here next time!) is opposite a new wine tasting room, **Margerum** where one of the brothers who owns it told us of his plan to get permission to paint a monstrous two-story mural on the warehouse across the road. I hope to see that soon.

Visit the Santa Barbara Mission

A drive to the Santa Barbara Mission is well worth it and on Day 3, the day we were heading south to Malibu we checked out of our hotel and headed here for an hour.

Founded in 1786 on the celebration of the Feast of St Barbara, it was the 10th mission of 21 California missions to be established by the Spanish Franciscans.

It sits high over the city and the building is open to the public (for a small fee) to tour through, but even just sitting outside on the sprawling front lawn for free with views over the city, it's a lovely place to come and take a moment.

Where we stayed in Santa Barbara

On my previous two visits I have stayed quite close to the main street which is great for walking everywhere, but the last time we were hosted by the **Goodland Hotel**, a Kimpton property. I'm a bit of a Kimpton fan as they are hip hotels with a local vibe. No two are the same and I appreciate that.

The Goodland is located in Goleta about nine miles (14.5km) from Santa Barbara and about 15 minutes drive into the CBD. It was a motel that has been trendified (if that's a word) into a laid back hotel with a surf vibe, a bar and a restaurant. There is a turn table in each room with vinyl you can borrow from the little record booth in the main lobby.

In 2017 Conde Nast voted it the #3 hotel in Southern California and as with all Kimpton hotels, there is a free wine and beer hour at 5pm to come and get social with your fellow guests. They also have complimentary s'mores kits at the front desk for you to grab a spot by the fire pit and toast your marshmallow and chocolate then slam it between the Graham crackers to get your American summer nights groove on.

We Uber'd the 15-minute drive into Santa Barbara to eat in the Funk Zone but the smashed avocado on toast with an egg and a side of crispy roasted potatoes was just the fortification we needed for breakfast before our winery tour the next day.

Shopping on State Street

This is the main street that runs perpendicular to the beach and is where you'll want to bring the car and spend a couple of hours. Parking is free, but tricky to find as curbs are painted red or green and woe betide you if you park beside the red!

But once you do get a carpark, wander around the shops, pop into the old courthouse and admire the tiles and even climb up to the bell tower if you're feeling energetic enough.

Duck down alleyways and you'll find piazzas and boutique shops.

La Arcada courtyard is a quaint, art-lined square with 1920s Spanish Colonial Revival style. You'll find some of the city's top restaurants, art galleries and boutiques dotted between fountains and sculptures.

Paseo Nuevo open air shopping mall which has stores like Abercrombie & Fitch, Gap, Lucky Brand, MAC, Nordstrom, Sephora and restaurants and cafes.

La Cumbre Plaza, with its Mission style architecture is anchored by Macy's and includes Pottery Barn and Williams-Sonoma and a few smaller stores and more food outlets.

La Arcada