

Summer in Santa Barbara



Santa Barbara lies along the South Coast, California’s rare east-west shoreline nicknamed “The American Riviera.” *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

Posted July 02, 2024 10:43 am

By Katherine Rodeghier

Ninety-five miles north of Los Angeles, the California coast jogs left along a stretch of shoreline nicknamed “The American Riviera.” Santa Barbara lies at the heart of this South Coast. The climate is Mediterranean, the architecture Spanish, and the vibe is both sophisticated and bohemian.

Rains that made headlines last winter have long gone by summer when temperatures usually max out in the 70s. It’s a perfect time to stroll along three downtown beaches, sip wines in 40-plus Urban Trail tasting rooms and find out why visitors — celebrities and common folk alike — find Santa Barbara so appealing.

It’s the geography

The South Coast is the longest east-west shoreline between Alaska and the tip of South America, a geographic orientation impacting life on land and in the ocean.

The Santa Ynez Mountains funnel Pacific breezes inland, sending them swirling into microclimates ideal for viticulture. Seven official wine appellations can be found here along with 80 grape varieties, some similar to those in France.



Former Chicagoan Magan Kunin owns Kunin Wines where Pape Star is a popular choice in her tasting room. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

Pape Star is Kunin Wines' popular take on Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape wines from southeast France where popes once ruled. Magan Kunin got her start in the food and beverage industry in Chicago forming relationships with restaurants such as Tru and Charlie Trotter's. She remembers first bottling Pape Star in her kitchen on Addison Street. "We could see the sodium vapor lights at Wrigley Field," she says.

In 2007 she moved to Santa Barbara where her late husband started [Kunin Wines](#) in 1998. She took over the winery after his death and now produces about 5,000 cases a year, sourcing grapes from nine ranches. Santa Barbara has the highest proportion of women winemakers in California, says Kunin. "I'm happy to live in a great town and make a product to be proud of." Sample some of her wines at her tasting room in El Presidio, a neighborhood she says has "so much charm per square inch." kuninwines.com/

Let's eat

With fine wine comes fine food. The 2023 Michelin Guide California lists 14 South Coast restaurants. Take afternoon tea in the garden at posh [San Ysidro Ranch](#) owned by former LaGrange resident Ty Warner who made a fortune selling Beanie Babies. sanysidroranch.com/dining



Afternoon tea is served at San Ysidro Ranch, which is owned by former Chicago suburban resident Ty Warner, creator of the Beanie Baby. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

For an entirely different Chicago connection, order an Egg McMuffin at the McDonald's on Upper State Street. The iconic breakfast sandwich made its world debut here in 1972, the invention of former Chicago advertising executive and franchise owner Herb Peterson. On Herb Peterson Day, Jan. 27, you can buy one for \$1.

With a year-round growing season, Santa Barbara restaurants offer a bounty of fresh tastes. Feast on California coastal cuisine, Mexican fare and, of course, seafood. Sea urchin, a local specialty, appears on menus as uni, the tender interior of the spiky sea creatures. Divers harvest them from the warm waters of the Santa Barbara Channel where kelp, their favorite food, grows in abundance.

Whales like it, too

Naturalist Dennis Houghton says when his family members back East visit, they want to go to In-N-Out Burger, the popular California fast-food joint. "That's how whales look at the Santa Barbara Channel." Ocean currents from Mexico and Alaska collide off the South Coast, bringing up nutrients such as zooplankton that whales crave.

Last October, the channel was designated a Whale Heritage Area — one of two in the United States — by World Animal Protection in partnership with the World Cetacean Alliance. Heritage areas earn the title for their commitment to responsible and sustainable whale and dolphin watching.

Houghton volunteers on the whale-watching vessel [Condor Express](http://condorexpress.com/) docked at Santa Barbara Harbor. The 127-passenger catamaran won't pursue whales, he says, but will sit quietly and allow them to come close. With luck, passengers will view their spouts, see them surface and show their flukes when they dive. If no whales are spotted, the captain issues a "whale check" good for a free trip during the same whale-watching season. Summer and fall are best for viewing humpback and blue whales. Gray whales pass along the coast in winter and spring during their annual migration between Alaska and Mexico where calves are born. Dolphins, orcas, seals and sea lions also frequent the channel. condorexpress.com/

Spanish Colonial roots

Spanish explorer Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo sailed through the Santa Barbara Channel in 1542. The first permanent European residents, Spanish missionaries and soldiers, followed in the late 1700s constructing buildings in the Spanish Colonial style with white adobe walls and red tile roofs.

Santa Barbara's self-guided [Red Tile Walking tour](#) weaves through city streets with stops showcasing architecture and history. santabarbaraca.com/



The Santa Barbara County Courthouse is a must-stop on the Red Tile Walking Tour highlighting the city's Spanish Colonial architecture. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

Don't miss the [Santa Barbara County Courthouse](#), a castle-like Andalusian-style building completed in 1929 following an earthquake that damaged much of the city. Its architecture set the tone for rebuilding the city, contributing to its distinctive look. It offers free guided and self-guided tours. (sbcourthouse.org/) Ride the elevator to the top of the clock tower for a 360-degree view of the city, the mountains and the courthouse's sunken gardens, a favorite venue for weddings. Inside, check out hand-painted tiles and wrought-iron chandeliers and learn local history depicted in the artwork in the Mural Room. In the Bisno Schall Clock Gallery, you can view the inner workings of the clock that's kept time in Santa Barbara for nearly a century.

Uphill from the downtown courthouse stands the "Queen of the Missions." Founded in 1786 as the 10th in a string of 21 California missions, [Old Mission Santa Barbara](#) was destroyed in an earthquake and tsunami in 1812 and rebuilt in 1820. The Franciscans replaced the old structure with a grander one now considered the best-preserved California mission. It remains an active church on a 15-acre site that includes a historic cemetery, gardens and museum. santabarbaramission.org/

The oldest buildings on the Red Tile Walking Tour lie within the 5.5-acre [El Presidio de Santa Barbara State Historic Park](#) downtown. (sbthp.org/presidio) Dating from 1782, it preserves

the last Spanish fortress built in the New World. Two of its original adobe buildings remain. Pick up a tour booklet at the visitor center and make your way to the chapel, padre's quarters, heritage gardens, the exposed archaeological site of the outer defense wall, and reconstructions of rooms that housed soldiers and their families.

If you would rather ride than walk past Santa Barbara attractions, take the 90-minute [Santa Barbara Trolley Tour](http://sbtrolley.com/) (sbtrolley.com/). The driver/guide will point out historic sites as well as Spanish Colonial Revival-style homes built all over the city, especially in the upscale residential area of Montecito. The enclave is the home of several celebrities, including Oprah and Prince Harry and Meghan, who live in guarded estates well off the trolley route.

Gilded Age glitterati

The uber-wealthy have been coming to Montecito and Santa Barbara since the late 1800s. One of their estates has been shrouded in secrecy since its reclusive owner departed in 1953, never to return. For decades, Santa Barbara residents have whispered about the mysterious 24-acre property perched on a mesa overlooking East Beach and wondering who, what and why? Last year some questions were answered when Bellosguardo opened for hard-to-get docent-led tours. Tickets are released via email every few months and usually sell out quickly. bellosguardo.org/



Mystery surrounds Bellosguardo, a mansion left empty for decades except for its caretakers. It opened for limited tours last year. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

[Bellosguardo](http://bellosguardo.org/), Italian for “beautiful lookout,” was built in 1902 by a moneyed oil family from Oklahoma. Copper baron Sen. William Andrews Clark, one of the richest men in America, bought the lavish Italianate villa in 1923 as a beach house for his second wife, Anna, and their two daughters. After his death, the much younger Anna — who styled herself as French but was born in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula — had the villa torn down after it was damaged in an earthquake. She replaced it with a chateau-style mansion designed by the architect who created the prestigious Santa Barbara Biltmore.

Clad in Indiana limestone with concrete walls 13.5 inches thick, the 23,000-square-foot villa has 27 rooms. The receiving room has hand-carved wood paneling, another room contains a display of 17th-century fans and a Louis XV desk stands in the library. Some of its rooms are furnished with items moved from Clark’s Gilded Age mansion in Manhattan.

Anna's daughter, Huguette, inherited Bellosguardo but never set foot in it after her mother died. Withdrawn from society and increasingly isolated, she lived her final two decades in hospital rooms in New York City. Bellosguardo's caretakers remained on the payroll but had not seen her for more than half a century by her death in 2011 just two weeks shy of her 105th birthday.

The property was bequeathed to the Bellosguardo Foundation, which is restoring it. None of the plumbing works and the second floor is currently off limits due to Americans with Disabilities Act restrictions. Tours shed light on this strange family and the home they abandoned, but are likely to whet appetites for more of their story. Pick up the bestseller "Empty Mansions: The Mysterious Life of Huguette Clark and the Spending of a Great American Fortune" by Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist Bill Dedman. Film rights have been optioned for an HBO TV series.

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If you go

Information: Visit Santa Barbara, santabarbaraca.com/

Where to stay: Kimpton Canary's 97 rooms were renovated last year. The boutique hotel has Spanish-style architecture, four-poster beds, complimentary bicycles, hosted wine hour and a rooftop pool and lounge area overlooking downtown Santa Barbara. canarysantabarbara.com/

Where to eat:

Finch & Fork: California farm-to-table cuisine in the Kimpton Canary Hotel. finchandforkrestaurant.com/

Flor de Maiz: Celebrating the cuisine of Oaxaca, Mexico; open kitchen and patio seating across from East Beach. flordemaizsb.com/

Barbareno: Serving regional flavors of Santa Barbara County including Santa Maria-style barbecue; has an extensive California wine list. barbareno.com/

Getting there:

Santa Barbara Airbus shuttles visitors from Los Angeles International Airport about 96 miles away. sbairbus.com/ As an alternative to big and busy LAX, laid-back Santa Barbara Airport is just 10 miles from downtown. flysba.santabarbaraca.gov/

• *Information for this article was gathered during a research trip sponsored by Visit Santa Barbara and Visit California.*

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