

## TRAVEL

## California city offers more than a beach

FRUGAL TRAVELER

Just south of Los Angeles, Long Beach pulses with cultural diversity

BY LUCAS PETERSON

The word “discover” is always a misnomer when used by travelers: When a place is new to you, that doesn't mean it's new to everyone else. This was reinforced recently in the midst of my excitement exploring a dynamic midsize city close to where I live in Los Angeles, one with roughly the population of Miami or Kansas City. No, I'm not referring to San Diego or Palm Springs.

I'm talking about Long Beach, a port city less than 20 miles south of downtown Los Angeles. It's got a cute and compact downtown, good food, ethnic and cultural diversity, a thriving gay and lesbian community and some unparalleled wildlife viewing opportunities. I spent a few days recently exploring Long Beach by foot, car and bike and left feeling as if I had more to explore. Even better, I was able to have a great time without spending much money.

The city thrives on beach culture, but the draw isn't necessarily surf and sand — there are better beaches nearby. Instead, expect to enjoy the shore through waterside eating and drinking establishments, boat trips and bike rides.

Two of Long Beach's biggest tourist draws, just south of downtown, are the RMS Queen Mary, a docked 1930s-era ocean liner that served as an Allied troop ferry during World War II, and the Aquarium of the Pacific, with marine science and conservation programs on Rainbow Harbor. Both are worthy attractions, but I headed to the area with a different goal — I'd heard Long Beach was fantastic for whale and dolphin watching.

I picked up a Groupon for Harbor Breeze Cruises, spending just \$36.80 for two tickets (down from a walk-up price of \$90) for a 150-minute ocean cruise and whale-watching tour.

Along with a couple dozen other locals and tourists, we were treated to little more than a pleasure cruise during the first two-thirds of the trip. But then, the distinctive sound of air and water blast-

ing through a whale's blowhole, like a short burst of television static.

About halfway between the shore and Santa Catalina Island, we spotted the long, slender, grayish bodies of two fin whales, the second-largest mammals on earth, bobbing gently like apples in a barrel. Each emitted a powerful blowhole blast or two before disappearing under the water with little warning — our guide explained that fin whales don't make a big show of their tails before taking a deep dive.

We spotted several groups of two to three whales. The massive and enchanting creatures lolled gently before snorting indignantly a few times and submerging; they seemed entirely unconcerned with us humans. As a bonus, a pod of dolphins joined alongside our boat on the way back to shore.

Long Beach's outdoor delights can be enjoyed by boat, but perhaps a more terrestrial approach is your thing. I used the Social Bicycles app to buy some time on the Long Beach bikeshare network, which is fairly extensive, with hubs throughout the city. The rental cost is \$7 per hour, and I took advantage of an offer that gives a free hour with the purchase of three.

I was able to rent a bike and enjoy a ride along Junipero Beach, a good vantage point for one of Long Beach's offshore historical oddities: the THUMS oil islands. In the 1960s, following a lift on a drilling ban, American energy companies spent \$22 million on a series of artificial islands to extract oil from beneath the harbor. You wouldn't know it by looking at them: The islands look like shopping malls from shore, with extraction facilities masked by phony building facades. You can't visit them, but they're an odd and interesting footnote in the area's long history with the oil industry.

Getting back to things you can visit: The Earl Burns Miller Japanese Garden, on the Long Beach campus of California State University, is a respite of tranquility, with koi, ducks and beautiful landscaping. Admission is \$5, but I was allowed in free of charge since I arrived close to the garden's closing time. Alamitos Park, at the end of Alamitos Peninsula, has a calming energy and is a nice place to walk or bike to.

Much of Long Beach is walkable, and one of the most fun areas to explore, on East 4th Street near Cherry Avenue, has a number of excellent vintage and thrift



The eclectic Past and Present is in a Long Beach neighborhood filled with vintage shops and thrift stores.

BETH COLLIER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

shops packed into a couple of blocks. The nonprofit AIDS Assistance Thrift Store is a good place to start, with a mountain of secondhand merchandise for treasure-seekers, ranging from old paintings to furniture. Assistance League of Long Beach Thrift and Vintage Shop is another good one, selling \$4 shirts and \$12 suits; I picked up a pair of shoes for \$8.

Other stores fall more into the vintage (not thrift) category with curated collections that are slightly pricier. Past and Present is an eclectic shop with items ranging from old Disney merchandise to glassware and board games. Most of it isn't cheap, but there is a shelf with \$10 shirts and \$5 art prints. Meow specializes in accessories and apparel never previously sold or used. And La Bomba may have been my favorite, if only for the cute little dog there that

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snoozes among the piles of old clothes and shoes.

At The Hangout, another place on East 4th Street, I struck up a conversation with Marissa Baklayan, a stylist and photographer who was working at the shop. We chatted for a bit about The Hangout's decidedly singular concept — succulents and ice cream — and I asked her how she liked Long Beach. “Everyone here knows each other, especially in this neighborhood,” she said.

Across the street at the casual restaurant The HipPea, I picked up a falafel sandwich (\$7.99). One of the employees,

Brian, echoed a similar sentiment, but added that a lack of rent control had become problematic. Rents have risen sharply in Long Beach in recent years as people have realized it's a progressive and diverse community that's less expensive than many neighboring coastal cities. The resulting gentrification threatens the livelihoods of some renters.

For years, Long Beach has had a reputation as one of the United States' most gay-friendly cities. The Alamitos Beach neighborhood has pride flags flying outside many bars and restaurants, and rainbow crosswalks are painted in intersections along East Broadway. I spent an enjoyable karaoke night at Executive Suite, a gay-friendly nightclub in the Zaferia neighborhood northeast of downtown. To encourage patrons to perform, the club awards \$2 tokens, re-

deemable at the bar, for each song that is sung.

Also in Zaferia is Joe Jost's, a 1920s-era tavern that looks like it hasn't changed much since it opened. I struck up a conversation with Doug Pricer, a local writer and historian who told me that Zaferia was once its own town. “Zaferia used to be wet when Long Beach was dry,” he said.

I ordered a Coors Light (\$2.60) and a Joe's Special, a nicely spiced Polish sausage with Swiss cheese and a pickle on rye bread (\$3.45) and a mountain of pretzels and spicy yellow chilies.

If you're looking for more of a meal, I'd recommend heading to Cambodia Town, centered on a roughly mile-long stretch of East Anaheim Street and home to one of the largest Cambodian populations outside of Asia. At Riverside Supermarket, just west of Cherry Avenue, you can pick up hot food as well as groceries. I bought a container of mixed-seafood sour soup for \$4.99 that was sharp and tangy. You can pick up plants outside the market as well — I bought a jasmine bush for \$10 and a rice paddy herb plant, called ma om in Khmer, for \$3. Another day, I picked up an order of pad kee mao (\$8.25) from Tasty Food to Go, a small restaurant specializing in Thai and Lao cuisine.

I was equally happy with the variety of different cultural activities I sampled, beginning with the Museum of Latin American Art (\$10 admission), an institution dedicated to the support of Latino and Latin American art and artists. I enjoyed the exhibit “El Exploratorio,” which focused on the intersection of art, science and technology. A standout was Linda Vallejo's “Datos Sagrados,” which wove together mesmerizing pictographs with data about Latino immigration.

At the Long Beach Playhouse I took in a performance of Lynn Nottage's “Crumbs From the Table of Joy,” which explores issues of adolescence, race and religion in the life of a black family in 1950s New York City (\$20). Afterward, I headed to Ballast Point, an absurdly large brewpub with great views on the Alamitos Bay Marina. I picked up a Moscow Mule sour beer (\$5) and got lost on one of the property's patios. Sipping on the gingery drink, I plotted my next visit: My to-do list was barely halfway done. Long Beach, it seemed, demanded — and deserved — more attention.

## Doing the one-way math

To get a great airfare, you don't have to book a round-trip itinerary

BY DAVE SEMINARA

If you want to find bargain airfares during peak holiday travel periods, particularly in the summer, you'll need to be flexible and creative. For example, I frequently book one-way flight segments, even if it means using airports that weren't in my original plans. In my world of traveling, a trip to Greece can veer off into Britain, Denmark or anywhere else that saves me money.

Conventional wisdom dictates that you have to book a round-trip itinerary to get a great price. This was once true, but it isn't necessarily the case anymore. Most major American carriers used to price what some call open-jaw segments — flying into one city and then returning from another — for price-insensitive business travelers. But competition and the increasing popularity of one-way flights has changed this dynamic.

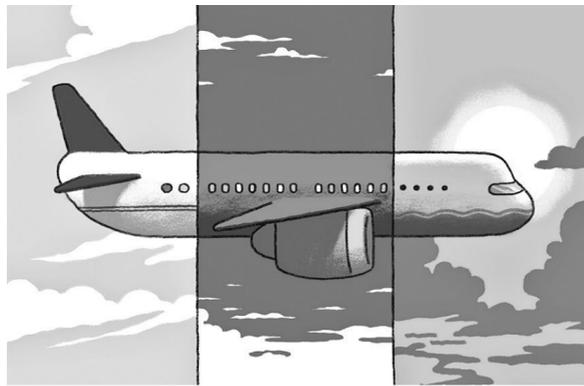
The Airlines Reporting Corporation (ARC), which provides intelligence on air travel, released a report last summer on one-way tickets that concluded, “The long-held belief that it is better to purchase round-trip tickets whenever possible to get the best fares is simply no longer true.”

Updated data provided to The Times by ARC shows that the percentage of one-way tickets (versus round-trip tickets) purchased by American travelers increased from 29 percent in 2014 to 44 percent in the first four months of 2018. And the premium airlines charged for one-way tickets declined from 44 percent in 2014 to 11 percent in 2018.

My recent experiences mirror this trend. When I wanted to travel from my home airport in Redmond, Ore., to Los Angeles and Palm Springs, Calif., around Christmas last year, I found nothing but exorbitant airfares. Then I expanded my geographic range and saved by flying into McCarran International Airport in Las Vegas and departing from Los Angeles International Airport about 10 days later.

Las Vegas, 280 miles from Los Angeles, isn't normally associated with saving significant money for a traveler bound for Southern California, but in this case, because I was buying four tickets for my family, it was worth changing my itinerary, even accounting for the higher price I paid for my rental car (a common problem related to open-jaw itineraries that can sometimes be solved by redeeming points for a one-way car rental). Ultimately, I ended up saving about \$1,200 over all.

When shopping for fares to Europe, I often search for one-way deals using Google Flights and simply adding



RICHE POPE

nearby airports in the search function and looking at the fare calendar. If you're flexible, it pays to find the cheapest entry and exit points to Europe and then fill in the gaps overland or with flights on low-cost carriers like Norwegian Air, Ryanair, easyJet, Vueling, Wizz Air, Primera Air and others.

For example, if you're traveling from North America to Europe, try flying into London or the Nordic capitals of Reykjavik, Oslo, Stockholm, Copenhagen or Helsinki. They are often great access points for travel to almost anywhere on the Continent.

In the summer, it can be hard to score a great fare directly to Mediterranean

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countries, particularly Greece and Italy. When recently searching for fares from Oregon to Athens, I found most round-trip fares were about \$2,000 each — a pricey proposition since I'm buying four tickets. But then I noticed a one-way fare under \$400 to London on WestJet, a Calgary-based, low-cost carrier. A few more clicks and I realized that I could spend the weekend in London and then proceed to Corfu on Ryanair for \$125.

I didn't see any cheap flights home from Corfu, but I found that Norwegian Air had a \$90 flight from there to Copenhagen. Norwegian makes it easy to find their lowest fares, displaying them by month on their route map and fare calendars. Ryanair also has a useful route map with pricing.

Copenhagen wasn't part of my original plan, but it's a splendid place to spend a few days, and Norwegian often has ridiculously low, one-way, transatlantic fares from \$200 and up.

After booking my trip to London, I learned that WestJet's pilots had voted

to strike days before I made my plans. I contacted the airline and a spokeswoman said that WestJet would refund passengers if flights are canceled because of union action.

At first I was concerned, knowing that if there was a strike, a refund wouldn't help us get to Europe, at least not at the rock-bottom price I had found. But the more I thought about it, I realized that labor issues present both risks and opportunities for low fares. Strikes are often averted at the last minute or last only a few days. If your timing is flexible, it could be worth a gamble.

In this case, my concerns — including the possibility of an actual strike — were alleviated quickly as WestJet pilots agreed to a mediation process with the airline.

Brian Kelly, the founder of the website The Points Guy, which helps travelers maximize their frequent flier miles and find deals, says that in assessing the risk of airline labor problems, he's more concerned when he hears of potential strikes in Europe, as they tend to drag on longer.

Strikes aside, Mr. Kelly said he frequently does what I do: adjust his travel plans if he finds one-way fares that are more tempting than round-trip options.

“I buy open-jaws and fill in the gaps, especially in Europe with all the low-cost carriers,” he said. “British Airways is now charging for water in coach, so it's not like you're getting a luxurious experience flying on the bigger airlines.”

It's a fair point; my flight on WestJet turned out to be comfortable and on time.

On European low-cost carriers, however, it is best to board flights with low expectations.

My \$125 flight to Corfu felt like a bargain when I bought it, but not when I had to actually endure the journey. As with everything else, you get what you pay for, so do your research and weigh your pocketbook concerns against your tolerance for discomfort.

The New York Times

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