

# So-Cal So Cool

*Catching a glimpse of how the rich and famous vacay during Spring Break in Southern California, avid traveller Sophie Chung paints a picture so sumptuously grandiose, you'll be booking your next direct flight to LA as soon as you've saved half of your remunerated salary.*

WORDS BY SOPHIE CHUNG



Following a sleepless 11-hour economy red-eye flight across the Pacific Ocean, I finally arrived in the City of Angels, stars and unrealistic dreams. Greeted with a continuous stream of long honking, where no driver gives way and a blue sky that has yet to be infected with the SoCal summer smog, a large stupid grin spread across my face. “Ah yes. The glorious polluted aroma of a real city. What great luck that I won’t be suffering from any respiratory illnesses at this time of the year,” I thought to myself. Ironically, the breathing problems kicked in soon after mingling with more than 100,000 people at the Coachella music festival in the desert – tip of the day: don’t forget the mask.

Fighting for an Uber in cyberworld with all the arrivals at LAX, grabbing a cab seemed to be a daunting yet somewhat gratifying feat. On a mere 13-kilometre drive to Santa Monica, I sank into a daydream of how I could truly utilise the convoluted highways jammed dead in traffic: wearing a bright yellow skater dress with a polka dot headband, I’d burst into “Another Day of Sun”, in which 100 other drivers would join in a perfectly timed and choreographed jazz-dance number. I was perhaps a touch too inspired by the opening pre-credits sequence of my in-flight entertainment, *La La Land* – but then again, this is the city where people chase the unachievable American Dream and what better way is there to celebrate one’s arrival than the art of animated song and dance?

All jokes aside, upon arrival at Casa Del Mar, every inch of air left my lungs and I was completely frozen and flabbergasted in a moment of shock by its sheer opulence and poetic beauty – cue the jaw and bag drop. LA, you dragged and dropped me into another reality. Transported back to the Roaring 20s, the entrance opened up to a warm, two-storey lobby lounge framed by a double staircase with potted palm trees, Venetian chandeliers and Spanish tilework. A perfect mélange of the luxurious romantic Mediterranean with the relaxed elite savoir-faire of Southern California, this unique regal gem is truly any dreamer’s ‘home by the sea’.

Built in 1926 with a then inconceivable investment sum of \$2 million, Club Casa Del Mar was considered the grandest, high regency beach club in Los Angeles where Hollywood’s A-list silver screeners indulged in good ol’ fashioned law-breaking fun. A time when president Calvin Coolidge was revered by many for his taxation policy, or more the lack thereof, America’s economy was in full swing and everyone was lapping up luxury like there was no tomorrow. The west coast was a fresh new hub of exclusive lavish beach clubs but Club Casa Del Mar at 1910 Ocean Way was the place to preen and be seen.

In the grip of Prohibition, scandalous swinging parties, Sunday-night operas, classical music concerts, grand balls, banquets and all other festive affairs were well oiled with top-notch hooch, while free-flowing fortunes exchanged hands on the gambling tables and fed through the slot machines, an income that paid off better than Las Vegas. Having friendly relations with the right people, a practiced warning system to signal approaching policemen and thwarting publicity in the papers, Casa Del Mar operated successfully with a continuous stream of supplemental income from the hotel rooms and slot machines as the owners had no capital debt. Holding Santa Monica’s fort as the haven of escapism, Casa Del Mar had its final flourishing stage during The Great Depression before hundreds of naval personnel took over the rooms and thousands of soldiers made the coast their home during World War II.



Rehabilitated in 1999 with a hefty \$50 million renovation by the owners of Shutters on the Beach, Casa Del Mar’s name and reputation was restored as one of the most sophisticated and high-end properties serving SoCal’s most elite on the west coast. The two sister hotels, tucked into a quiet cul-de-sac, are the only properties that serve a genuine oceanside villa stay with direct beach access in the entire LA area. Despite its buzzing location in Santa Monica, these two hotels possess a distinct boutique resort-esque vibe that makes you feel like you’re on holiday away from the city.

Offering 129 rooms and suites, most of them with unobstructed views of the Pacific and Santa Monica Pier, the owners sure as hell spared no expense in their interior decor. Carefully picked sea-themed books line the built-in bookcases and lavish lamps next to comfortable armchairs make it ever so easy to have a low-key night in. Shades of calming ocean tones matched with muted neutrals adorn the walls and intricately carved furniture; and the rich walnut four-poster bed with patterned high-end John Robshaw linen offer an upscale Mediterranean beach-house ambience fit for a queen. So much so, that on my first night in the outrageously vast city that is Los Angeles, I stayed in the plush, high thread-count king bed with two bags of bright red, toxic Cheetos and Fritos and last but not least, a six-pack of Lagunitas – happiness had never come to me at such a low price. It truly is the little things that count.

The bathroom is without doubt the main highlight of the room with its insane cream-of-the-crop fitout; never have I ever

been in a room where the walls and floor are lined with Italian Calacatta marble – the light reflects off it in a way that makes one look super selfie-worthy, I ended up spending a lot of time just dancing in front of the mirror to Beyoncé and Rihanna. Chuck in a jaw-droppingly gorgeous, deep hydrothermal massage tub with 42 jets into the mix, you’ll probably want to take the savings from your spa appointment cancellations and splurge on a bottle of Armand de Brignac aka Ace of Spades to re-enact Beyoncé’s sassy pouring in that historic Nicki Minaj music video. Even the showers are designed in a way that makes you want to film a sensual, narcissistic music video – the bathroom’s peekaboo window that looks out to the beach via the room seems to make this creative idea plausible for production.

For those who love the feeling of wading through expensive air, Casa Del Mar boasts downright glorious hedonism in a way so unapologetic, you’ll just float and gloat around like Daisy Buchanan in her stupidly extravagant home. A paradise retreat showcasing the pinnacle of luxury, Casa Del Mar is the unquestionable lodging destination when it comes to cloud-nine relaxation. Why go anywhere else when you can unwind to the view of the Pacific while dissolving all your stresses away in the jacuzzi? I’ve already started planning a fabulous return to hold my wildest dream wedding in its ballroom...

After a long yarn to Tim, the ever-so-friendly gentleman at the concierge desk, I had compiled a handful of must-do’s that I needed to tick off while residing at Casa

for three short but sweet days. First up, I needed to taste some fresh, Cali-inspired wellness food that the ridiculously good-looking cast of 90210 ate at brunch every episode. Looking hopelessly confused with my ultimate dork of a fold-out map, I couldn’t have made myself an easier target as I hunted down Santa Monica Place. After 20 minutes of passing through palm-tree adorned streets full of tall five-star hotels and taking quick snaps of the symmetrical Deco Moderne-styled City Hall, I finally arrived at the place that will host my first dining experience – True Food Kitchen. With all the hype and anticipation (or perhaps it was just pure hunger) that I accumulated during my walk, I had my suspicions that perhaps I had set myself up for disappointment. To my absolute delight, I was greeted by the friendliest, most patient waiter ever and I’ve yet to lower my expectations in hospitality service following this trip. Serving up the most unreal guacamole with a ginger margarita made with fresh-pressed fruit and organic spirits, True Food Kitchen had made its mark as the restaurant to revisit for a splurge meal.

Next up, shopping; an activity best done solo. Santa Monica Place is the home of high-end fashion with the best department stores like Bloomingdale’s, Barneys and Nordstrom; all spots that I resolutely avoided to ensure there would be enough dosh to last me my entire trip. Smoothly adjoining to Third Street Promenade, this place was my own shopping heaven – just three blocks of bright lights with all the clothes and shoes I’ve ever wanted. I



#### BOOKING TIP

A high-level ocean-facing room or suite to wake up to the waves and watch the spectacular sparkling sunset. For ultimate flexibility and freedom in updating or cancelling your bookings, use the booking.com travel app. For a pricey high-end accommodation option such as Casa Del Mar, it really makes a difference in your budgeting plans to be able to pay on arrival as opposed to coughing up your funds when you book months in advance. For any last-minute changes, booking.com also has a 24-hour cancellation policy so that no one is receiving the short end of the stick.



managed to track down some sale items, but my past affliction of shopaholism was slowly rising to the surface and would soon affect my commonsense... I returned first thing the next morning to just be there in the midst of it all.

Feeling the need to venture out a bit further than Third Street Promenade, I grabbed a rental bike from Shutters and let the 42-kilometre oceanside promenade take me away with the wind. Lined with palm trees, sand and an ocean view, it was an unforgettably surreal moment. The cool salty breeze mixed with the pungent aroma of dear Mary-Jane rushing through my hair and billowing my silk blouse was a goosebump-inducing sensation I can still recall. As I cycled, I became aware that Venice Beach had the most unexpected amalgamation of people I’ve ever seen in one area. Anyone with an urge to release their creativity seemed to gather there. From vendors with boom mics reeling in tourists to show off a three-headed turtle, to skaterboys doing tricks and flips that made my joints hurt by simply watching them, Venice Beach gave me a proper juicy slice of how they live on the other side of the world... and I loved every bit of it.

*Accommodation courtesy of booking.com.*



#### WHERE TO EAT:

#### Catch

Taking over the hotel’s prime oceanfront real estate is Catch, where dramatic floor-to-ceiling windows frame the picturesque sunset of the Pacific. The modern American seafood restaurant has a raw bar, and the menu offers a wide range of fresh seafood from the finest-quality sushi to pared-back grilled fish, pasta and Hamachi Crudo.

#### Terrazza Lounge

Coastal Italian with a Cali twist, Terrazza Lounge serves up breakfast daily with weekend brunch menus, weekday lunches, Wednesday tapas night and, of course, a four-hour happy hour from Sunday Funday to Thirsty Thursdays. Enjoy a mixologist’s craft cocktail creation or two in one of the cabanas while listening to live jazz, pop or soul.

#### Coast

Shutter’s laidback beachfront cafe and bar, Coast is a secret haven where celebrities go to brunch. Straight off the sandy boardwalk, the Californian-inspired, seafood-based menu goes down a right treat with some Chardonnay. Try the epic lobster roll with a side of guacamole and chips for a waterfront dining experience that doesn’t break the bank.

#### EXPERT TIP

If you’re feeling fancy enough to don some sequins and Louboutins, ask the concierge for the latest trendy hotspots in WeHo and downtown LA. New bars and restaurants are popping up every day, so ask a local who’s got their party game down pat to avoid pricey tourist traps.



EXPERT TIP

Utilise the hotel's Audi A8 hotel car and be dropped off at Santa Monica Place or anywhere within a 5km radius of Casa del Mar.

WHAT TO DO:

Venice Beach

Grab a complimentary rental bike from Shutters and cycle along the boardwalk to Venice Beach. Full of eccentric local performers, best-of-the-best skaters, artists, vendors and tourists from all around the world, it's a one-of-a-kind, bucket list-worthy place to tick off.

Abbot Kinney Boulevard

Just a few blocks up from Venice Beach is one of the coolest, most hip streets in LA; full of bohemian boutique stores that offer a wide range of commodities from vintage clothing to herbal remedies, it most definitely deserves a visit for some quirky avant-garde acquisitions.



IMAGE CREDIT: DISCOVER LOS ANGELES

Third St Promenade

A treasure trove of all the stylish international brands, this is your one-stop shop, from high-end brands in Nordstrom and Bloomingdale's in Santa Monica Place to more affordable casual wear on the northern end of the promenade. With three blocks of open-air shopping, dining and entertainment, there's nothing that this place doesn't have.

Santa Monica Pier

Just a short walk from the hotel, the pier offers up another quirky beach destination worth visiting. The world's one-and-only solar-powered ferris wheel is the famous landmark to walk towards. Restaurants are lined up on Ocean Avenue for some oceanside dining.

Take care mid-flight

These flight-friendly products will help you arrive looking fresh.

1



2



3



1. COMBAT DEHYDRATION

Alleviate parched, cracked skin during your flight with this balm, which can also be used to shape your eyebrows, save chapped lips and condition your cuticles.

Antipodes Saviour Skin Balm, \$19.90. [antipodes.co.nz](http://antipodes.co.nz)

2. FRESH BREATH

Possibly the coolest, most practical, creation to come out of Lush. Simply pop a tab with some water for long-lasting refreshment.

Lush Mouthwash Tabs, \$12.90. [lush.co.nz](http://lush.co.nz)

3. BRIGHT EYES

Sleeping on the plane isn't easy, so sometimes we need a little help looking fresh and ready for the day.

Patchology Anytime Perk Me Up, \$24.00. Available from Mecca

Going PLACES

Whether you are travelling for business or pleasure, be prepared.



MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Often we want to make a difference, especially when we are traveling and face to face with the realities of a different culture. Abercrombie & Kent has announced a new tour through Southern India that gives you the opportunity to meet inspiring individuals who are making a real difference fighting poverty and empowering women. The tour includes a visit to the 'Hand in Hand India' project, and a chance to meet founder of the 'Knit One Change One' (KOCO) project, Danielle Chiel. Both projects help provide women with an income so they can support their families and help local communities. Additionally, a contribution on behalf of every guest is made, which provides one month's employment for one knitter at the KOCO project, and skills training for five women at the Hand in Hand India project. [abercrombiekent.com.au](http://abercrombiekent.com.au)

From flight attendant to mindreader

Air New Zealand may be able to help you make up your mind soon, by predicting what it is you want – before you even really know yourself. No, the airline isn't hiring a bunch of mind readers, although it is close. They are the first airline worldwide to be collaborating with Dimension Data and to use Microsoft HoloLens headsets, which will allow attendants to aggregate and display key customer information directly in front of them via augmented reality. This will include things such as your preferred meals and drink choices and your final destination. The program used is even sophisticated enough to detect the mood you are in by picking up on visual and audio cues – tea or wine, perhaps? They may not look cool, but they are definitely worth a shot. [Airnewzealand.co.nz](http://Airnewzealand.co.nz)

TRAVEL MORE TO BE MORE SUCCESSFUL

It's not uncommon to hear that doing your OE will help you attain a job later down the track. It I, more often than not, said by someone either returning or justifying their choice to head off overseas. However, it turns out this isn't just a little white lie told to make travelers feel better. According to Forbes, the Brightspark Edu-Travel report found that 94 percent of American business leaders believe that "being well-travelled provided them with a competitive edge in the workplace." There's no time like the present to book a holiday, your next pay rise or promotion could count on it.