

L.A.'S FRONT PORCH

Take a walk along Santa Monica's retro and ritzy Ocean Avenue, where city meets sand

by Jenny Hontz

Lounging on the veranda of the art deco landmark Georgian Hotel, I'm watching women with large sunglasses stroll down Santa Monica's palm-lined Ocean Avenue when I overhear a screenwriter eagerly pitching her idea for a movie. This spot, where urban glamour crashes gorgeously into nature's awesome domain, is the California I pictured as a kid.

Tony restaurants and hotels line one side of the broad avenue just two blocks from Santa Monica's popular Third Street Promenade, while Palisades Park, running atop sandstone bluffs, drops straight down to the sandy beach on the other. The Santa Monica Pier blinks and whirs and stretches into the ocean. From my perch overlooking the blue Pacific, I feel as though I'm sitting on Los Angeles' front porch and taking in all the action.

Even though I've lived in L.A. for more than a decade, I have never, until today, actually stopped to take a stroll through Palisades Park, where twisted Australian tea trees creep along the ground near a cream-colored statue of St. Monica. Benches with views of the sparkling Pacific are sprinkled among patches of grass and towering palms. There are no bikini-clad roller-skaters, but there are plenty of people out enjoying this peaceful strip at the edge of the metropolis.

Although this is my first daytime visit to the park, I have spent plenty of time on Ocean Avenue after the sun sets. Chic new restaurants sprout up all the time, keeping things fresh. Sushi spot Tengu arrived in January with its Zen crunch rolls (tempura-style spicy albacore rolls) and to-die-for macadamia-nut tortes.

Of course, not all of Ocean Avenue is this up-to-the-moment and posh. There are still a few places that remind us of a time when Santa Monica was more lazy beach town than "it" crowd hangout. Down the street, the dive bar and steakhouse, Chez Jay, remains unchanged since it opened in 1959. Sawdust and peanuts still cover the floor of this tiny shack, with its red-and-white-checkered tablecloths.

WHERE TO STAY

Georgian Hotel Ghosts supposedly haunt the speakeasy of this recently renovated blue beauty, built in 1933. INFO: From \$250; 800/538-8147.