

World's best beaches and attractions are so accessible, writes **Brian Farrell**

CALIFORNIA is a Mecca for sun worshippers, surfers and celeb-spotters. With Aer Lingus now flying direct to L.A. four times a week (as well as daily to San Francisco, with each-way fares starting at €339 in September and October), it's never been easier to discover America's west coast.

It's home to some of the hottest beaches, golf courses and theme parks in the U.S.

So here's the best that southern California – or SoCal, as the locals call it – has to offer...

It's all on L.A.'s

Best for beaches

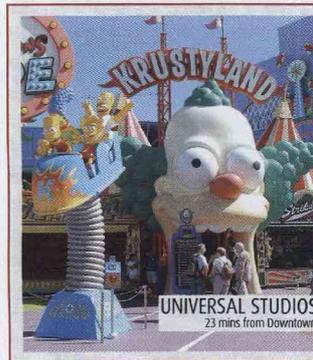
Southern California is blessed with some of the finest beaches on the planet, with miles and miles of golden sand and crystal clear waters.

The most famous of all the SoCal resorts is **Malibu**. Home to Hollywood A-listers like Charlie Sheen, Halle Berry, Pamela Anderson, Britney Spears, as well as TV shows like Baywatch and Two-and-a-half Men, Malibu is less than an hour's drive from LAX and stretches for 51km along Pacific Coast Highway.

Malibu is made up of a host of individual strands, inlets and coves, each better than the next. Beaches like Point Dume, which famously featured in the closing sequence of the 1960s blockbuster Planet of the Apes, Topanga (the State park of the same name is close by) and a brilliant spot for hiking and mountain-biking), El Matador, Zuma and Surfrider Beach are must for anyone visiting this stunning stretch of coastline.

Less than a 20-minute drive south from Malibu is **Santa Monica Pier**. The pier itself is one of the most iconic and easily-recognisable images in all of California, with its famous ferris wheel and amusement park. The town boasts some of the best waterfront restaurants and bars in SoCal and is a perfect spot for sipping cocktails as the sun sets.

Just a short stroll from Santa Monica is the posers' paradise of **Venice**. Famed



Top for theme parks

No trip to L.A. would be complete without a visit to one of southern California's three high-octane theme parks - Universal Studios, Disney and Knott's Berry Farm.

Universal Studios is a must-see, and is one of the oldest and most-famous Hollywood studios still in use. Among the park's signature attractions is the hour-long tram tour which takes you through sets, from Jurassic Park, King Kong, Psycho and the Vin Diesel blockbuster, the Fast & Furious.

In the recently-opened Wizarding World of Harry Potter, fans can stroll through Hogsmeade Village, visit the famous Hogwarts Castle and join the wizard on a terrifying simulated broom-

stick adventure on the amazing Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey ride. *Ticket from €81 per adult and €76 per child. See attractionticketsdirect.ie.*

Just a 40-minute drive from downtown L.A. is **Disneyland**. The resort is made up of two theme parks, Disneyland Park and Disneyland California Adventure.

The original resort, which opened in 1955, is made up of several themed lands - Adventureland, Fantasyland, Tomorrowland, New Orleans Square, Frontierland, Critter Country and Toon Town. Among its main attractions is the Space Mountain roller-coaster, the Pirates of the Caribbean boat ride and the Big Thunder Mountain railroad.

for its Muscle Beach open-air gym, Venice is a great place to watch the bold and the beautiful work on their abs and their tans. It can be a little tacky (think Blackpool in the sunshine), but the place epitomises the cool, laid-back vibe that's associated with California beach life.

Travelling further south (a 45-minute drive from LA), you'll come across the neighbouring Seal and Huntington Beaches in **Orange County**. Though Huntington may be the more famous of the two, Seal Beach is beautiful stretch of sand, and its Main Street

is packed with quaint shops, bars and restaurants.

Call into the super-cool Hangout Bar and Restaurant right on the seafont (opposite the pier). This Irish-owned joint, run by Dubliner Susan Coughlan and her husband Aaron, serves up some of the best cocktails, burgers and seafood in Orange County, and is a brilliant spot for people-watching on a sunny SoCal afternoon. See www.thehangoutrestaurant.com.

A short 15-minute hop from Huntington is the millionaire

playground of Newport Beach. The waterfront mansions around **Newport** and its neighbouring **Balboa Island** have been, at one time or other, home to some of the most-famous celebs in Hollywood.

Stars like Humphrey Bogart, John Wayne and Nicholas Cage were all residents, while singer Cindy Lauper and basketball superstar Kobe Bryant still live in the area.

You can take a 45-minute narrated boat trip around the resort. At just \$14 for adults and \$7 for kids, it's a great way to see how the other half live. See funzoneboats.com.

SUNDAY WORLD
A REAL IRISH SUNDAY



NEWPORT & BALBOA ISLAND
1 hr 29 mins from Downtown

FAMOUS RESIDENTS:
Bogart, Cage and
Cindy Lauper

They're good sports

Angelenos are pretty serious people when it comes to their sport. Whether it's watching our own Robbie Keane and Liverpool legend Steven Gerrard in action for the Galaxy (tickets start at \$19.50, see www.lagalaxy.com), the recently-retired Kobe Bryant's Lakers (pre-season begins in October with tickets starting at \$30) or city rivals the Clippers at their shared Staples Center home, there's no shortage of action in this town.

L.A. also has two baseball teams (Dodgers and Angels), two hockey franchises (LA Kings and Anaheim Ducks) and NFL side the LA Rams. The baseball season is still in full swing at the moment and tickets for the Dodgers are available from \$26, while you can find a seat at the Angel Stadium in Anaheim for as little as \$11. See www.mlb.com.



DODGER STADIUM
15 mins from Downtown

PAMPERING FOR PILGRIMS ON CAMINO ROUTE



CaminoWays.com, the walking and cycling specialists, are now offering their Superior Collection to pilgrims on the Via de la Plata Camino route from Ourense. This fab new (and no doubt very welcome) initiative gives pilgrims the chance to stay in some of the best and most unique properties along the way, including four and five-star hotels.

What better way to take the pain out of all that walking? "Our Superior Collection gives clients an opportunity to feel pampered after a long day walking," says Roland Monsegu, CaminoWays.com director. "We have selected top-quality properties and boutique stays that will make the Camino trip even more special. We have also added a complimentary Spa treatment in Santiago de Compostela."

The last section of the Via de la Plata covers over 100kms from the historic city of Ourense (famous for its hot springs) to Santiago de Compostela. It's a stunning trail of country scenery, perfect for those looking for a Camino route that is off the beaten track.

And now weary walkers can bed down in ultimate comfort in boutique country properties and luxury hotels along the way, which tend to be family-run and use local, seasonal produce for their food.

Walk the walk...

Walk the last 107kms from the city of Ourense in Galicia to Santiago de Compostela.

Stay in the best accommodation along the way, including unique casas rurales, spa hotels and the historic Parador dos Reis Catolicos in Santiago.

Enjoy a complimentary spa treatment in Santiago de Compostela.

When & how much...

Available all year round, the Superior Collection starts at €850 per person sharing for a 7-night trip on the Via de la Plata, walking from Ourense to Santiago de Compostela. Half-board stay, luggage transfers from hotel to hotel, holiday pack with practical information and complimentary spa treatment in Santiago de Compostela are included. Not included: Airport transfers (available upon request), transport, flights or travel insurance.

Log on to CaminoWays.com or call 01 252 2886.

doorstep...

There's also the usual Disney faves like Sleeping Beauty's Castle and the amazing nightly fireworks displays.

A two-day Disneyland Park Hopper ticket is from €204 per adult and €194 per child. See attractionticketsdirect.ie.

A 10-minute drive from Disney is the adrenalin-junkie paradise of Knott's Berry Farm. Originally opened in the 1920s as a berry farm, it is now home to some of the most-terrifying rides in U.S that will certainly scare the pants off you, while classic rides from the park's early days - like Calico Railroad and Stagecoach - will get the blood pressure back into safe territory.

Daily tickets from \$43. See www.knotts.com.



THE HANGOUT BAR
54 mins from Downtown

Masters of golf courses

If hitting the fairways is your thing, you're spoiled for choice. Southern California boasts the most picturesque golf courses in the States, many of which feature on the PGA Tour.

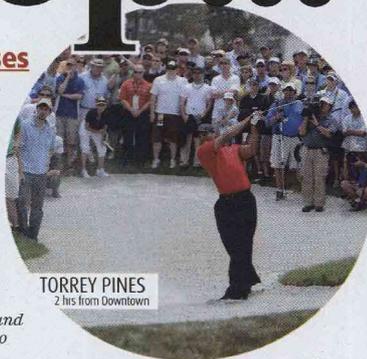
The most recognisable of all the SoCal courses is Torrey Pines in San Diego. Just a two-hour drive from Los Angeles, this cliff-top monster famously hosted the 2008 US Open, won by Tiger Woods. The club has two championship courses - the North and South.

During the summer months, a round at Torrey Pines averages from \$163 to \$292. See torreypinesgolfcourse.com.

Another golf club which regularly features on the Tour is the PGA West at La Quinta. Although the resort is a three-hour drive from L.A, it's well worth the journey, as La Quinta has six individual courses.

A round at the Greg Norman-designed course can be booked online for \$39, while 18 holes on the Jack Nicklaus Tournament course is \$49. The TPC Stadium course (voted the fourth toughest in the U.S.) attracts most visitors. Considered to be the equal of the legendary Sawgrass, it can be booked for \$49 a round. See www.laquintaresort.com.

Billionaire Donald Trump is the proud owner of some of the world's greatest golf courses. Just a short



TORREY PINES
2 hrs from Downtown

30-minute hop from downtown L.A. is the Trump National. The course, which annually hosts the Michael Douglas celebrity PRO-AM, has amazing views of the Pacific Ocean and Catalina Island, and is believed to be the most expensive golf course ever constructed.

A round costs \$160, but an evening tee-time can be booked for half the price. See www.trumpnationallosangeles.com.

A one-hour drive down the coast to Newport Beach is where you'll find the stunning Pelican Hills Resort. The club has two 18-hole courses and the scenery is second to none.

A round costs \$320, which includes caddy and golf car rental. See www.golfpelicanhill.com.