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SUMMER DAYS

IT'S THE BEST TIME OF YEAR FOR FAMILIES,
SURFERS, GRADUATES, FOODIES, AND
JUST ABOUT EVERYONE ELSE.





SURF'S UP in San Clemente

The waves are tops, but small-town charm is what makes this “Spanish village by the sea” a family-friendly destination.

By Mallory McCreary Photographs by Gary Moss

Opposite: *Palapas* on the beach at T-Street, just south of the pier, are available on a first-come, first-served basis. This page: The Casino (right), built in 1937, is an example of the architectural style Ole Hanson had in mind when he developed San Clemente. It served as a dance hall and attracted big-name entertainers like Judy Garland. San Clemente resident Tai Stratton (far right) warms up after an afternoon surf session at T-Street, a popular surf spot with a nearshore break.



It's hard to get lost on the purposefully wending and winding streets south of the freeway in San Clemente, because most of them end, eventually, at the ocean.

And it's hard not to notice that a drying wet suit hangs on almost every fence or balcony, and that nearly every car—whether it's a Lexus or a VW—sports a surfboard rack. *Surfer* magazine was founded in the area, and *Surfing* magazine was published here in the '70s; surfboard and catamaran maker Hobie and surf-inspired Hoffman California Fabrics have roots here as well. In short, this is *the* place to surf, with excellent southern swells in the summer and reliable waves at world-famous breaks all year round. A revitalized downtown retains a unique architectural legacy, which many have called SoCal's version of Mayberry: a sleepy beach hamlet with a small-town, family-friendly feel.

It's the location—exactly halfway between Los Angeles and San Diego—plus a topography shaped like a natural bowl around the ocean that first attracted former Seattle mayor Ole Hanson to develop the city in 1925. His vision was to create a "Spanish village" with strict building guidelines: white stucco, red tile roofs, and landscaping featuring palms, hibiscus, and geraniums. About half of the original Hanson structures still remain, faithfully protected by the San Clemente Historical Society. Hanson's office, the old Hotel San Clemente, and the old firehouse are visible on the main street through town, Avenida Del Mar, where chichi restaurants coexist peacefully with down-home eateries and mom-and-pop establishments that cater to locals and tourists alike. Del Mar ends at the beach where swing sets, *palapas*, fire pits, and fishing from the pier attracts families.

"San Clemente is a pie-shaped city at the end of everything," says Georgette Korsen, president of the San Clemente Historical Society. She notes that Cleveland National Forest to the north



and Camp Pendleton to the south create boundaries to keep it isolated. There's also the train, which runs along the beach and has curtailed true oceanfront development.

Maybe that's why San Clemente remains a hidden gem compared to its SoCal cohorts, even if the surfing is better (see "Where to Surf," page 56). "You'll always find some waves that are at least rideable," says Ian Burton, a San Clemente city marine safety officer. The consistency and variety of waves make it a good place to learn or improve, which has spawned an active surf-camp business.

Endless Summer Surf Camp (out of San Onofre; endlesssummersurfcamp.com), run by former surf champion Jason Senn, attracts people from all over the world to learn how or improve their ride. Overnight campers bond around the campfire as they watch videos of their surfing each day. "A lot of surfing is overcoming your fears of the ocean," Senn says. "You do lose control when the waves take over and throw you around. But after someone gets their first ride, a lot of those fears drop away." Endless Summer has both adults-only and all-ages weeks, and families return year after year for the experience.

Ocean Academy (oceanacademy4u.com), run by former teacher and lifeguard Dylan Portillo, surfs out of Doheny State Beach and offers a strong foundation in ocean safety. Kids as young as 4 years sign up for private lessons or weeklong day camps; "Resort Days" are good for visiting families and pair a half-day of surfing with kayaking, Jet Skiing, or lessons in first aid/CPR. "A lot of surf camps just let the kids paddle out and cheer for them," Portillo says, "but my whole concept was to mix junior lifeguard [training] with a modern-day surf camp."



Where to Surf

Ian Burton, a San Clemente city marine safety officer; Barry Haun, curator and creative director of the Surfing Heritage Foundation; and Dylan Portillo, owner of Ocean Academy surf school offer their tips on local surf breaks.

T-Street: A reef bottom and waves that peel in both directions means both regular- and goofy-footed surfers can get a good ride, says Burton.

San Onofre, aka “San-O”:

A bedrock reef with a flat bottom means a clean, long wave with no abrupt changes. Portillo: “It slowly makes its way to the beach, so beginners have time to get to their feet and learn.” Haun adds that Stand Up Paddle (SUP) surfing is regulated here, unlike other beaches. Note: While there’s a view of undeveloped hills above the beach, a nuclear power plant commands attention to the south.

Trestles: A natural cobblestone bottom with a point wave that breaks consistently means surfers “can try the same thing over and over again” to perfect a technique, says Haun. “It’s a groomed, perfect-shaped wave that allows for high-performance,” says Portillo.

San Clemente State Beach and Riviera:

Portillo says the shifting sand bottom changes the ocean floor contour, making the waves more challenging.

Lifeguard HQ (200 yards north of the pier): Proximity to lifeguards and town makes this a good spot for beginners and visitors, says Burton.

For more information, visit san-clemente.org, click on the Recreation tab, scroll down to Surf, then click on Tour Our Breaks. For a surf report, call 949-492-1011.

When it’s time to get out of the water, the Surfing Heritage Foundation (surfingheritage.org) showcases an impressive collection of surfboards that chronicle the evolution of surfboard design. It’s off the beaten track north of the freeway (yes, that means away from the beach), but it’s well worth a visit. A surfboard timeline starts with re-creations of the 155-pound wooden behemoths used in the late 1800s to the modern-day short, long, and tow boards. There are boards used by recent hotshots like Kelly Slater, boards from surfers who revolutionized board design (Bob Simmons, George Greenough, Pat Curren, Simon Anderson), and four boards belonging to the father of surf himself, Duke Kahanamoku, which is “three more than anyone else has,” says curator and creative director Barry Haun. The laid-back, barefoot Haun is on hand to answer questions and share his wealth of knowledge about the sport, and he’s passionate about preserving its history and influence. “People don’t dress their kids up in bowling clothes and send them off to school,” he says of the worldwide cultural phenomenon surfing has become.





Opposite: The Beachcomber Motel sits above the pier and offers unobstructed ocean views (top). Decorated boards show a surfer's personality (bottom). This page, clockwise from top left: Surfers ride the waves in front of Lifeguard HQ, to the north of the pier. San Clemente resident Ben Doran's blue 1954 Ford Ranch Wagon embodies the dry-land surf aesthetic: "I wanted a fun cruiser to rally the crew around and enjoy the beach. It fits six people, occasionally a dog, the cooler, and all the boards we need." Dylan Portillo of Ocean Academy starts his surf lessons at Doheny State Beach with a dry-land orientation before hitting the water.



Where to Eat

BeachFire Bar & Grill

(beachfiresanclementerestaurant.com) is a casual eatery decked out with local art; suitable for kids but also has a lively bar and music scene.

The Cellar (thecellarsite.com) has a retail wine and cheese counter in the front, a dark and intimate wine and small-plates lounge in the back.

A drink and a taste of seafood at **Fisherman's** (thefishermansrestaurant.com) on the pier is a must as the sun dips into the horizon.

Pipes Cafe (pipescafe.com) attracts local surfers who tank up on bottomless cups of good coffee and hearty breakfast burritos to fuel them through hours of riding the waves.

Families, surfers, and other locals flock to the San Clemente South location of **Pedro's Tacos** (pedrostacos.com) for fish tacos and carne asada done right. It's drive-through or first-come outdoor seating only, but stays open until 10 for late-night cravings.



This page, from left: Visitors to the Dana Point location of Hobie surf shop can watch Terry Martin (front) or Mark Johnson (rear) as they shape surfboards to customer specifications; custom orders take four to six weeks. Surf-themed murals dot the sides of buildings all over town. Opposite: Surfers catch the last waves of the day at T-Street, which is only open for morning and evening surfing in the summer.

Speaking of attire, the surf shops here are the real deal. Hobie Alter opened Southern California's first surf shop in Dana Point in the 1950s after honing his skills as a board shaper. There are two Hobie shops (hobie.com) in San Clemente; visitors to the Dana Point Hobie can see a board shaper at work custom-creating the perfect surfboard for clients. Shaper Mark Johnson says people are attracted to the retro-style of custom Hobie boards, which pay homage to surfing's heritage.

Stewart Surfboards' (stewartsurfboards.com) flagship store is a local favorite, where new and used (i.e., cheaper) boards and gear are available. There's also a rotating selection of local surf art for sale, as well as more gift-y items like surf history books and mailboxes adorned with Katsuhika Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*.

A decorated mailbox may seem a little hokey, but it somehow works in San Clemente. There's an attitude here that's hard to describe. It's part surfer-dude, part next-door neighbor. Whatever it is, it can't be faked: Visitors are treated like locals, locals like friends. Hanson's initial vision for San Clemente was to create a whole city that was a park, where people could get "a healthy joy out of life." Haun perhaps sums it up best: "There's no bad day surfing. Just bad attitudes and bad equipment choices." ■

Where to Stay

Diehard surf buddies may not mind crashing at motels around San Clemente, but resorts in nearby Dana Point offer enhanced services and amenities.

Laguna Cliffs Marriott Resort & Spa

Centrally located with a view of the harbor, this recently renovated AAA Four-Diamond resort has a kids club and splash zone with fountains and pools, plus an adjacent park and playground. (lagunacliffs.com)

The Ritz-Carlton, Laguna Niguel

A stunning beachside location, Thursday night poolside movies, decadent dining, and beach butler service are the draws here. (ritzcarlton.com/laguna)

St. Regis Monarch Beach California's only *Forbes Travel Guide* Five-Star and AAA Five-Diamond resort offers packages and special spa treatments just for teens. (stregismb.com)

A Day in Dana Point

Just seven miles from San Clemente, Dana Point's bustling harbor is home to the **Ocean Institute** (ocean-institute.org; open only on weekends), a living museum with touch tanks of starfish, sea urchins, sea cucumbers, and stingrays. After exploring the tide pools down at the beach, head over to **Dana Point Jet Ski & Kayak Center** (danapointjetski.com) for a water's-eye view of the harbor from a kayak or Jet Ski. The wharf (danapointharbor.com) contains tourist-friendly shops and restaurants including **The Woody Hut** (thewoodyhut.com), with surf tchotchkes and a darling selection of Hawaiian clothes for wee ones. **Doheny State Beach** (dohenystatebeach.org) is right next to the harbor, with wide-open beaches and full-scale facilities, including surfboard rentals, picnic grounds, fire pits, and camping.

What's Happening

Ocean Festival, San Clemente's family-friendly annual celebration, attracts more than 50,000 people and includes a sandcastle-building contest, dory races, and a woody car exhibit on the pier; July 16–17, oceanfestival.org.

Outdoor summer concerts take place Thursday nights in July and August, san-clemente.org.

San Clemente Fiesta Street Festival with music, food, kids rides, clowns, and face painting; August 14, Avenida Del Mar, scchamber.com.

At the Ocean Institute, Dana Point Harbor, ocean-institute.org:

Family Science Nights feature guest speakers and hands-on science activities; select dates in July and August.

Whitey Harrison exhibit showcases memorabilia from the surfing legend; through August 31.

Extra Credit

The Surfing Heritage Foundation sells an "Oral History Field Guide," which kids (or adults) can use to interview surfers to add to an oral history project the foundation has underway.

