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Californian time warp

In a forgotten corner of California, it's as if the '60s never ended. With fantasies of surfer boys and hippy chicks it can only be Santa Cruz

Amanda Hyde Published: 24 June 2012

I t's the holiday of my dreams, and I'm running late for the flight. By around 50 years.

You see, the place I really want to visit is the California in that grainy old footage from the '60s: girls with flowers in their hair dancing uninhibitedly to some band just off camera; lines of honey-toned boys dashing towards the waves with their surfboards, outlines blurred by the haze of a hot morning in an endless summer – you know the kind of thing. Those old film reels of sun-drenched freedom make me long to holiday in the days when life was simpler and trunks were shorter.

But my nostalgic, hippy-populated vision of the Golden State has largely disappeared. Anyone who's been to Los Angeles will tell you times have changed: residents maintain their golden-haired, lithe-limbed good looks through bikram yoga and botox rather than surfing and skateboarding.

And they no longer live on sea air and self-sufficiency alone, demanding daily wet-decaff-chai-lattes to go with their raw food. California is just as weird as it ever was, but not always in a good way.

Luckily, one town in the Golden State has refused to change with the decades. I'd read about Santa Cruz's peculiarly laid-back non-conformism so many times, eventually I was moved to head there, in the hope of experiencing some celluloid dreams for real. And I knew I'd made the right decision as soon as I rolled down my hire-car window and felt the warm breezes along the town's peeling, tree-lined avenues: Santa Cruz is the place for a holiday in the Summer of Love.

Cruising down Cedar Street, I'm the only motorist in a traffic jam of skateboarders. Weaving between them as they swish impressively from sidewalk to road and back, I'm momentarily distracted by a pedestrian who seems to have been beamed in from 1963. His wrist bears a friendship bracelet, which he runs through waist-length, sunbleached hair. Shaking out a crease in his denim bell-bottoms, he enters the Well Within Spa. (Later I look up this establishment on the internet, to discover a hippy's approximation of Japanese onsen baths, complete with an array of private whirlpools and bamboo.)

In the 30°C heat, it's not just the long-haired lad's trousers that look washed-out. Everything about Santa Cruz, from its '30s cinemas to its rickety old rollercoaster on the seafront, resembles a years-bleached postcard. Over the next few days, I'll discover, Santa Cruz is one giant commune. Even Pacific Avenue, the main thoroughfare, has made few concessions to American mega-consumerism. There's a string of tarot readers and mystics, organic delis filled with every variation of coconut water, and fancy-dress shops selling drag, Disney costumes and some rather spook-looking
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On the pavement, a lone drummer with an old chopstick taps out an impressive array of hits on a garbage can. He may look like a bum, but he has a serious talent. If Santa Cruz teaches you one thing, it's not to judge a book by its cover. Later, I'll learn, chatting to a waitress in a coffee shop, the town has a sizeable community of tech-millionaires living in the seaside mansions on West Cliff Drive, commuting to nearby Silicon Valley. With their surfboards and straggly dogs, they're completely indistinguishable from the rest of the population.

I didn't realise this when I sat down for lunch (one of the finest burgers I've ever eaten) at the Walnut Avenue Cafe, so I spent an hour puzzling over the multi-million dollar real-estate prices in the local rag. It seems bizarre that the cost of housing is so 21st-century, when everything else about the town is so timewarped. Just off Pacific Avenue, this restaurant, with its vinyl booths and lounge-jazz soundtrack, is a prime example – the waiter wears a movie approximation of classic '60s diner garb, with name badge, hat and neat tie. And it's just a little bit, well, weird. Alongside the kids' menu, there's one specifically for dogs. Later, I wonder if it's been created especially for those stealth-wealthy IT geeks and their pampered pooches.

For now, though, I can think of nothing but the sea. Santa Cruz is famed for its dramatic Californian surf – you can smell the water even from the landlocked end of Pacific Avenue. I've been in town for three hours, and a glimpse of the glittering blue is long overdue, so I take a stroll along the front. I plan to head 15 minutes up the hill to West Cliff Drive and see how the other half live, but as soon as I get to the water, I'm distracted by the looming red, white and blue rollercoaster at the Beach Boardwalk. From a distance, this sand-straddling amusement park seems like a screaming statement of American pride, as impressive now as when it first put this seaside slice of California on the map, back in 1924.

Then, despite Prohibition, the whole complex was dedicated unashamedly to fun and frolics. Sure, you couldn't officially place a bet at the Cocoanut Grove Casino – but you could take one of its pleasure cruises out into the harbour and happily play the tables until the tide carried you home. And while alcohol was formally off the menu, the elaborate dancing that accompanied its raucous Big Band concerts seemed imbued with plenty of Dutch courage.

Today's crowds come out to play only in the holidays, flocking to Spring Break concerts and summer movie showings. By the time I turn up in October, the whole place is eerily deserted. The only person making any noise is Laughing Sal, and she's made of wood. On display behind a wall of

glass by the penny slot machines, this vintage life-size marionette vibrates constantly with alarmingly malicious giggles, and her body language makes it very clear that she's laughing at you.

Across the way, the rollercoasters and waltzers stand still. The clapboard cafes lining the promenade are empty, staring out over gigantic waves. As dusk paints a wash of electric blue over the sea, I retreat to one, nursing a hot chocolate and burying my head in a guidebook as the Beach Boys sing out from the speakers. I'm only a paragraph in when my itinerary for the next day jumps out of the page: I'm going to dedicate myself to Santa Cruz's green and pleasant suburbs.

I leave the town centre the following morning, trailing a truck with the numberplate 'Let™ rule' out towards Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park. It's about time I communed with Mother Nature in true hippy style – and I'm told I'll find her at her most wildly dramatic just beyond the city limits. Unlike the busy roads around LA, there is no six-lane highway in this part of California. Instead, my route dances around winding mountains, sugared with a white mist that descends through tangy, scented pines. I'd been told that many of Santa Cruz's hippies had moved out to the little villages in these parts and, sure enough, for every neat cabin topped by a Star Spangled Banner, there's a tumbledown shack accessorised with wind chimes and fluttering prayer flags.

The park is only 20 minutes or so beyond the city centre, but seen from the parking lot, it seems to go on for ever. Golden grass melts to rust-coloured mulch as millennia-old redwoods spring up, hundreds of metres above the forest floor. They beg to be explored. I haul on my walking boots and head off in search of a map.

The visitor centre has been invaded by a Japanese tour group, and the ranger is struggling to answer their cryptic queries.

'Can we stay in tree?' asks their leader.

'Er, no...' she responds, encouragingly.

'We stay in tree,' the lady repeats.

'It's illegal here, I'm afraid,' she replies. 'But there are cabins in Big Basin State Park.'

'Ahhh,' they all chorus. 'Cabin.' And then, inexplicably, every one of them joins the queue for the loo.



California dreamin: a lifeguard station stands out on the busy seafront (Joe Schmelzer)

and when I clamber up to the viewing platform, I have the outlook all to myself.

Jagged waves of pine forest segue to a hazy beach, with a twinkling sea beyond. The curve of the bay creates optical illusions behind it, so that the water seems to break on a distant island. Unidentified birds of prey swoop and circle overhead. After a few minutes of blissful gazing, there's nothing for it but to stretch out on a picnic bench for a doze in the sun, with distant waves singing a lullaby. It's a sensory experience that's somehow almost cinematic.

Which brings me back to town. I can barely summon enough energy even for the movies, but it seems like sacrilege to ignore the Del Mar, a '30s picture house edged in bright neon and furnished in plush velvet. If you hate identikit multiplexes, downtown Del Mar is the place to fall in love with the big screen again. Not much has changed here in 75 years – the ladies 'powder room' still has the original chaise longue sitting primly beside eau-de-nil-coloured stalls, the popcorn is served in mirrored, saloon-like surrounds, and damson curtains hem the screens. As I take my seat in the darkness,

it's just me, a lone surfer and a distinct smell of weed. The movie is *Drive*, the electro soundtrack reverberates through the empty cinema, and an enigmatic Ryan Gosling grows ever more blood-spattered as the reels roll. It's a lonely film, and I'm submerged by a wave of loneliness when I head back outside onto deserted Pacific Avenue.

So I'm grateful when a man jumps out of the shadows and hands me a flyer for the next day's 'Cold Water Classic' surf competition. This annual event is a huge fixture in Santa Cruz's calendar. At my hotel, the excitement is mounting, as yellow-haired, treacle-skinned surfers descend on the bar from as far afield as Australia and South Africa. Despite appearances, these are some of the world's top sportsmen, and like screen sirens they get to stay rent-free and eat for nothing, in the hope that some of their star quality will rub off on the place. Their beer-fuelled banter certainly gives the Dream Inn a new buzz, and I'm glad when they invite me to join them for a couple of hours.

The next morning, slightly hazy from socialising, I wake expecting a full-scale surfing spectacle. But – in keeping with Santa Cruz's less-is-more

My request is more simple – I want a route that'll take me all morning, winding through the shady redwood forest and up towards the park's celebrated view: a knockout panorama of Santa Cruz, and Monterey Bay beyond. The ranger obligingly scrawls a trail on a map in highlighter, and sends me on my way. 'You'll love it,' she says.

She's right – even the most hardened urbanite would melt on seeing this Middle Earth mix of tumbling waterfalls, soaring trees and dappled silver-birch sunlight. Orange leaves flutter to the floor like kamikaze pilots and the lazy trickle of a handful of streams echoes in the still air. I pass a man apparently dressed as a leprechaun, in a green suit and hat with primroses in the brim (is this his flowers-in-your-hair moment?).

'Beautiful day for a walk,' he says, in a California drawl that sounds as though it's been slowed on a tape deck. He doesn't look in the least bit out of place.

After about an hour, the earth turns to sand and the trees to scrub. The sun beats down with full force as the trail winds round the edge of a mountain towards the observation point. Aside from a lone power jogger, running at Olympic pace despite the midday heat, the leprechaun is the only person I've passed on my trail,

ethos – the Cold Water Classic turns out to be a low-key affair. As I direct the hire car up West Cliff Drive and cruise towards the poshest part of town, I can see only groups of fleece-clad spectators huddling on the headland, and an empty, windswept tent pitched on the hillside, blaring out soft rock.

In the grey sea, surfers lurk in packs, awaiting the special wave that will send them soaring towards the shore. They are being watched from the water, too – huge sea lions, sitting on rocks hundreds of metres from the beach, honk encouragement through worryingly blocked sinuses. Surfing philistine that I am, it's these outsized animals that I want to get a closer look at as I pull into one of the bays by the shore. But I've barely got out of the car when a VW Camper parks up beside me and an excitable woman runs frantically towards the edge of the cliff.

'It is,' she squeals. 'It's a whale!'

Is this another one who's been at the weed? For a moment I wonder, but when I squint at the horizon, I see it, too – a humpback performing a series of ungainly dives while ploughing through the water. We watch it silently for a couple of minutes, before she turns to me. 'Pretty awesome, isn't it?'

'Utterly awesome,' I reply, turning back towards the breaking waves as I realise that's the first time in my life I've ever used the word 'awesome'.

I'm grabbing a coffee in town before I embark on the journey back to San Francisco airport on my final morning when I notice something. Nobody has bothered to dress for breakfast. Nobody, that is, apart from me. Sporting jeans and a T-shirt, I'm the oddball in a sea of pyjama wearers. Not that I'm made to feel out of place; I get the feeling you could do anything, wear anything or say anything you like in this town and nobody would bat an eyelid. Just as you could in the '60s.

NEED TO KNOW

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San Francisco is the nearest international airport to Santa Cruz, and the city makes a great stopover

before the drive south. Virgin Atlantic (0844 209 7777, www.virgin-atlantic.com), BA (0844 493 0787, www.ba.com) and United (www.united.com) all fly non-stop from Heathrow, from around £450. Stay right on the Bay at the Hotel Vitale (00 1 888 890 8688, www.hotelvitale.com; doubles from £225, room only), or head to the hip Clift (00 1 415 775 4700, www.morganshotelgroup.com; doubles from £250, room only). The Dream Inn (00 1 831 426 4330, www.dreaminnsantacruz.com; doubles from £125, room only) is Santa Cruz's coolest sleep: rooms come with terraces and there's a buzzy restaurant, Aquarius, overlooking the beach. The only downside is that it's 20 minutes' walk from downtown. If you'd rather be close to shops and restaurants, try the Adobe on Green Street (00 1 831 469 9866, www.adobeongreen.com; doubles from £100, B&B). To get around, you'll need a car, but driving is easy in this part of California as traffic is light. Alamo (0871 384 1086, www.alamo.co.uk) has cars from £118 per week.

Go packaged

Virgin Holidays (0844 557 3859, www.virginholidays.co.uk) can arrange a week in California, with three nights at a four-star hotel in San Francisco, and four at a three-star in Santa Cruz, as well as flights from Heathrow, from £1,099pp, room only. The price includes four nights' car hire for the journey to, and stay in, Santa Cruz. Or try American Sky (0844 332 9392, www.americansky.co.uk) or Complete North America (0115 961 0590, www.completeorthamerica.com).

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