

12 Unique Things to do in Santa Barbara

by Paul Joseph | Published August 23, 2016 Mediterranean-like weather, beautiful architecture and vibrant nightlife help make Santa Barbara a hugely popular place to visit all year round. Nestled in southern California between the ocean and the foothills of the Santa Ynez Mountains, it is the ideal retreat from the big-city life of nearby Los Angeles.



The city of Santa Barbara overlooked by a cloudless blue sky (Photo: Michael de la Paz via Flickr)

A university town, it is also bursting with youthful energy, and has a distinctively European feel. No surprise, given it was once European, having been home to Spanish settlers some four centuries ago.

Today Santa Barbara's sophisticated charm make it a magnet for the rich and famous, with a number of prominent personalities having visited down the years, including Charlie Chaplin, who built a hotel here, to Oprah Winfrey, who owns a residence nearby. When you're not celebrity spotting, visitors may wish to indulge in a few of the unique activities listed below.

1. Santa Barbara Surfing Museum

With its long stretch of coastline and almost year round blue skies, it should come as no surprise that surfing is a popular pastime in Santa Barbara. After enjoying the waves, visitors can also learn about the history of surfing at the Santa Barbara Surfing Museum. Surfing is believed to date back to before 1000 B.C and the museum is designed to take visitors through this long and illustrious history. From the chan-chan in Peru to Captain Cook and the creation of Marvel's The Silver Surfer, the museum offers visitors a comprehensive look at how surfing has intersected with popular culture down the years.



Historic surfing memorabilia at the Santa Barbara Surfing Museum (Photo: Martin Chalifour photos via Flickr)

2. Marcia Burt Gallery

A must-visit for art lovers in Santa Barbara, the Marcia Burt Gallery features contemporary landscape paintings by a number of noted American artists. Exhibitions at the gallery change frequently and local Santa Barbara vistas are a permanent feature on the wall. Larger on the inside than it looks from the street, the airy skylit gallery opens through glass doors onto a deck bordered with bougainvillea and a garden overhung by grapevines. The gallery is located in SoCo, a unique downtown Santa Barbara neighborhood two blocks from the 101 freeway. There is parking out front, a local winery on the corner, and several restaurants close by.



Wall art at the Marcia Burt Gallery (Marcia Burt Gallery)

3. Santa Barbara Botanic Gardens

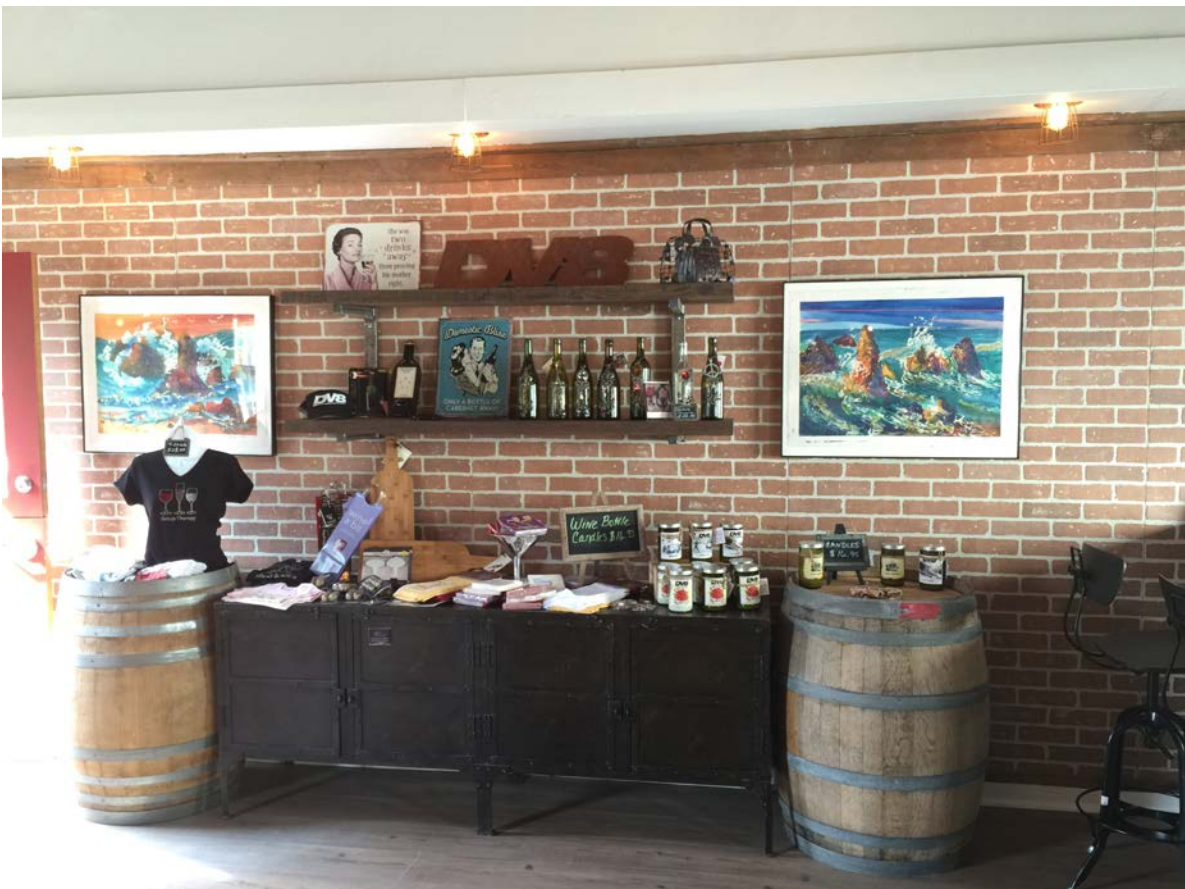
When travellers depart Los Angeles and head up the Californian coastline, they will notice the unique variety of flowering plants, leaving a sweet scent even along the highways at certain times of year. One of the first stops when driving up the coast is Santa Barbara and a great place to see native California native plants, including Californian redwood trees, is the Santa Barbara Botanic Gardens. Spanning 78 acres, the Gardens offer sweeping views of the Santa Ynez Mountains and the Santa Barbara Channel Islands. The Gardens also feature 5.5 miles of winding walking paths, as well as several picnic spots, a Japanese Tea House and numerous historic landmarks. And if you happen to be visiting in January or February, that's when the plants really come alive and the Manzanita start to bloom.



A lush green landscape at Santa Barbara Botanic Gardens (Photo: Santa Barbara Botanic Gardens)

4. DV8 Cellars

Located in the infamous Santa Barbara funk zone, DV8 Cellars is a winery that was designed to be different. Created by Marc Simon, former member of the glam rock band The Wild Side, and his wife Dominique, the boutique winery aims to recreate wines from France's Rhone Valley, right here on the west coast of America. The tasting room is open seven days a week from midday, and Marc and Dominique are always available to discuss anything from how their wines are made to their passion for Formula One racing.



The inner sanctum of DV8 Cellars (Photo: DV8 Cellars)

5. Natural History Museum

Opened in 1916, the Natural History Museum is the oldest museum in Santa Barbara. Legend has it that Albert Einstein visited the museum in 1931 and remarked that, "I can see that this museum has been built by the work of love". With ten exhibition halls, the museum is known for its displays showcasing wildlife indigenous to Southern California. In particular, the museum features an exhibition focussed on the story of the California Condor, which explains why this majestic bird is classed as 'critically endangered' and what is being done to save it.



The exterior of the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History (Photo: J Brew via Flickr)

6. Chaucer's Bookstore

With the popularity of online bookstores, independent sellers are becoming harder and harder to find. However, after opening in 1974, Chaucer's has stood the test of time to become Santa Barbara's most revered bookstore. The independent store, hidden away in a shopping mall, boasts knowledgeable, friendly and experienced staff that will help customers find what they're looking for or recommend a title that can't be found online. This family run business welcomes customers who wish to casually browse their collection or simply treat it as a quiet place to read, just like an old-fashioned bookstore.

7. Santa Barbara Orchid Estate

Orchids are known for their colour and for giving off strong aromas, making them one of the most popular plants for flower enthusiasts to examine. Located a couple of hundred metres from the famous Santa Barbara coastline is one of the world's most extensive collections of orchids and orchid hybrids. The Santa Barbara Orchid Estate was opened in 1957 and holds over 1,000 varieties of orchids across its many greenhouses.

Visitors are able to wander around the five acre estate or purchase orchids that have been especially grown in this area, which is renowned for its perfect growing conditions.



Colourful orchid plants at the Santa Barbara Orchid Estate (Photo: Amanda via Flickr)

8. Witchcraft Winery

The valleys that open up onto the Pacific Ocean create a unique climate that has helped make Santa Barbara famous as a wine growing region. It is for this reason that Santa Barbara is home to a series of boutique wineries. A great place to sample some of the locally made wine is at the family owned Whitcraft Winery, which has a tasting room open to the public from Friday to Monday each week. Whitcraft Winery was founded in the mid-eighties by two married, amateur wine lovers. Now, twenty years on, and run by the second generation of Whitcrafts, this boutique winery has grown into a local favourite for wine tasting.

9. Carriage and Western Art Museum

Throughout the 19th century, the carriage was the primary mode of transport in America and particularly important for those making the long journey out west to California. The Carriage and Western Art Museum is a celebration of this time and of the vehicle that was so important to the development of America's west coast. Located within Perishing Park Historic Village, the museum has been in Santa Barbara for over forty years and as such holds an impressive collection of carriages and saddles, some of which were once owned by such iconic cultural figures as Clark Gable and Jimmy Stewart.



An antiquated carriage at the Carriage and Western Art Museum (Photo: Carriage and Western Art Museum)

10. Santa Barbara Museum of Arts

One of southern California's finest art museums, the Santa Barbara Museum of Art attracts visitors from far and wide thanks to its nationally recognised collections and special exhibitions of international importance. Highlights of the museum's remarkable permanent collection include antiquities; 19th-century French, British, and American art; 20th-century and contemporary European, North American and Latin American art; Asian art; photography; and works on paper. Visitors to the museum this Fall will have the chance to enjoy several exhibitions, including "British Art from Whistler to World War II", "Cecil Beaton's 'London's Honourable Scars': Photographs of the Blitz" and "Highlights of the Permanent Collection". There's also a wide range of amenities, such as an interactive Family Resource Centre, a Museum Store and a Museum Cafe.



A painting displayed at Santa Barbara Museum of Arts (Photo: Santa Barbara Museum of Arts)

11. Wall Space Gallery

There is a vibrant artist scene in Santa Barbara and the city is dotted with boutique galleries. One of the most interesting is the Wall Space Gallery. The gallery first opened in Seattle in 2005 before opening its Santa Barbara outpost in 2010. It has become internationally renowned for its fresh and original take on photography, which is achieved by “expanding the ideas of what photography is as well as what it can be.”

12. The Arlington Theatre

First opened in 1931, The Arlington Theatre is Santa Barbara’s oldest theatre and is hard not to notice while driving down State Street. Built in Mission Revival and Spanish Colonial Revival style, the interior is designed to replicate a Spanish village, making it as full of character as the building’s striking exterior. While the 2,000 seat theatre has hosted everything from The Nutcracker to The Clash, it regularly converts itself into a movie theatre. The memorable indoor decor is given a complete faux outdoor feel by the large ceiling mural that, when dimly lit, replicates the night sky.