

Santa Barbara features long stretches of quiet beachfront that keep kids entertained. On the right is the view from the upscale Bacara Resort & Spa. PHOTOS: MHAIRRI WOODHALL

CALIFORNIA DREAMING

Beachfront resorts along Pacific coastline ideal for family vacation

MHAIRRI WOODHALL

When planning a family holiday with our four-year old daughter, there are always two non-negotiable amenities: a beach and a pool — with bonus points awarded for a hotel Kids Club.

Sure, I'd prefer the destination we visit also has exceptional cuisine and unique cultural activities, but let's face it, kids don't give a toss about five-diamond restaurants or critically-acclaimed museums.

And if they're not happy, then neither are we. So, with its miles of coastline, endless sunshine and

friendly laid-back style, Southern California is as dreamy as it gets for families.

A road trip — braving greater Los Angeles traffic — allowed us to explore the three coastal towns of Santa Barbara, Huntington Beach and Santa Monica. Each location offers a unique experience, and all are well worth a visit. However, somehow in our family of three, we each have our own favourite.

For myself, Santa Barbara, which is coined as the American Riviera, is absolutely exquisite. I found long stretches of quiet beachfront, impeccable hotels, Mediterranean-

style architecture and a charming downtown, lined with lush palm trees, fountains, public art, boutiques and sidewalk cafes. What more could I ask for? Oh, yes, Santa Barbara has an amazing wine region as well.

When you're able to tear your kids away from beach combing, which speaking from experience takes some serious negotiation, they'll love the Santa Barbara Zoo — and so will you. It's a beautifully landscaped, easy-to-walk park with an excellent array of exhibits, and countless wildlife attractions. Of the more than 145 species that

call the zoo home, including snow leopards, giant anteaters and gorillas, we were most in awe of the creepy-but-cool California Condors.

Beyond the wildlife, there are art displays, live shows, a safari train, a climbing wall and a fantastic playground for kids.

For a casual California dining experience, with an epic backdrop, head to the Boathouse at Hendry's Beach. The outdoor patio space is always hopping, which means that it's loud enough to drown out the sounds of kids being kids.

SEE CALIFORNIA ON **H6**

IF YOU GO

There are a few outfits that offer a great selection of beach rentals, like boogie boards, umbrellas and chairs, cruiser, tandem and kids bikes, as well as baby carriers and trailers. East Beach Rentals in Santa Barbara, Toes on the Nose in Huntington and Perry's in Santa Monica were our go-to-favourites.



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Southern California resorts all about surf, sun and fun

CALIFORNIA FROM H5

Arrive just before sunset and watch the locals flying kites and walking their dogs. Happy hour specials are Sunday through Thursday, from 3 p.m. on. We loved the fresh shucked oysters, seared ahi and lobster-and-truffle mac and cheese.

The area also boasts some of the state's most upscale hotels, including the beachfront Bacara Resort & Spa where we stayed. Our daughter loved hanging out on the beach, swimming in the resort's multiple pools and playing in the oversized sandbox.

You'll also find one of OpenTable's Top 100 Best Al Fresco Dining Restaurants in America — the Bistro. The food is delicious, the prices are reasonable and the view is matchless. A great, lower priced alternative for accommodation is the Franciscan Inn, which is just a few blocks from the beach and includes daily continental breakfast.

HUNTINGTON BEACH

Travel about three hours south and you'll reach my daughter's preferred playground, Huntington Beach. Here it's all about surf, sun and fun.

From its exceptionally organized Kids Club that our daughter enjoyed, to its poolside cabanas and fire pits, the oceanfront Hyatt Regency Huntington Beach offers the ultimate escape for families. If you're feeling brave enough to weather the Pacific Ocean, Toes on the Nose offers surf lessons through the Hyatt, for ages six and up. We chickened out on the lessons, and opted to watch the amazing junior surf competition that was taking place.

Our favourite meal in Huntington was at Sandy's, which is about a 20-minute walk from the hotel. Fresh seafood, craft cocktails and ocean views make it a popular haunt with both locals and tourists, so reservations are recommended.

After overloading on crab cakes, ahi tuna and prawns we wandered back to the Hyatt's beachside fire

pits. Evening bonfires are a hugely popular Huntington Beach tradition. Just before the sun goes down, you'll see groups of families and friends setting up beach chairs and building their fires. We absolutely loved hanging out on the beach like locals, sipping hot chocolate, making s'mores, building sandcastles and watching the sunset.

If you book a beach bonfire package through the Hyatt, everything is organized and ready to go — with no set-up or teardown required.

For a fun, family meal head to the 1940s inspired Ruby's Diner on the Huntington Beach Pier. You'll find everything from cinnamon roll French toast and corned beef hash, to burgers, old-fashioned milk shakes and Cobb salad. And you'll love the classic diner decor and memorabilia.

SANTA MONICA

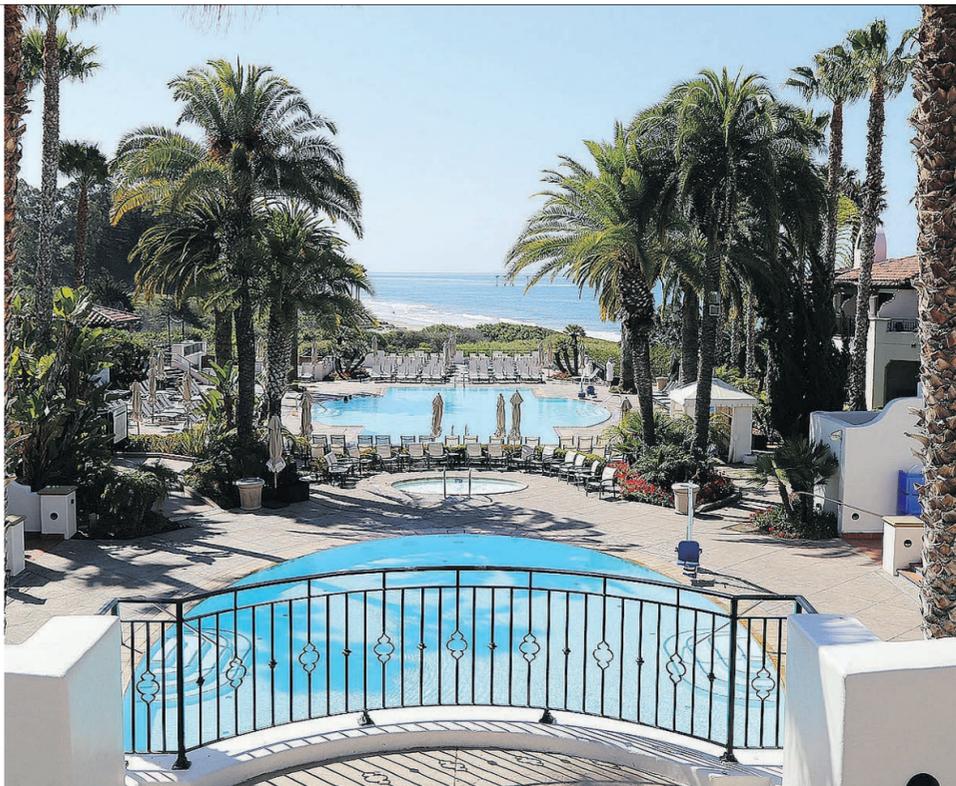
Our final night in California was spent in one of my husband's all-time favourite places — the Loews Santa Monica. This elegant beachfront property is in the perfect location for exploring the area's top sights.

By day we lounged at the ocean view pool and played on the sandy shores of the Santa Monica State Beach. In the late afternoon — when it was slightly cooler — we wandered through the shopping and entertainment district, and rode the carnival rides at Pacific Park, on the iconic Santa Monica Pier.

Fresh seafood is always our preferred dining option while traveling, and The Lobster, at the entrance of the pier, was the ideal choice. We managed to time our meal with the restaurant's happy hour, which featured steamed mussels and king salmon sashimi (our daughter's favourites), as well as oysters and craft cocktails.

The restaurant also offers unobstructed views of Santa Monica's famous Ferris wheel and breathtaking sunsets.

Mhairri Woodhall is a freelance writer who can be reached at arrivalstravel.com.



The Bacara Resort & Spa in Santa Barbara features multiple beachfront pools. MHAIRRI WOODHALL



Evening bonfires are a popular Huntington Beach tradition. Just before the sun goes down, people set up beach chairs and build fires for roasting marshmallows. CURT WOODHALL

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