

The New York Times

FRUGAL TRAVELER

Beach Is in This California Town's Name, but It Offers Much More

Long Beach has a cute and compact downtown, good food, ethnic and cultural diversity, a thriving L.G.B.T. community, and some unparalleled wildlife viewing opportunities.

By Lucas Peterson

June 26, 2018

The word “discover” is always a misnomer when used by travelers: when a place is new to you, that doesn't mean it's new to everyone else. This was reinforced recently in the midst of my excitement exploring a dynamic midsize city close to where I live in Los Angeles, one with roughly the population of Miami or Kansas City. No, I'm not referring to San Diego nor Palm Springs.

I'm talking about Long Beach, Calif., a port city less than 20 miles south of downtown Los Angeles. It's got a cute and compact downtown, good food, ethnic and cultural diversity, a thriving L.G.B.T. community, and some unparalleled wildlife viewing opportunities. It is, in short, a city entirely worthy of anyone's time — and I have no one to blame but myself for not realizing it sooner. I spent a few days last month exploring Long Beach by foot, car and bike, and left feeling like I had plenty more to explore. Even better, I was able to have a great time without spending much cash.

Long Beach certainly thrives on ocean culture but, contrary to what its name might imply, the draw isn't necessarily surf and sand — there are better beaches nearby. Instead, expect to enjoy the shoreline in other ways: waterside eating and drinking establishments, boat trips and bike rides along the ocean.

Two of Long Beach's biggest tourist draws, just south of downtown, are the docked RMS Queen Mary, a 1930s-era ocean liner that once served as an Allied troop ferry during World War II, and the Aquarium of the Pacific, with marine science and conservation programs, right on Rainbow Harbor. Both are worthy attractions (I visited the Queen Mary a few years ago) but I headed to the area with a different goal in mind — I'd heard Long Beach was fantastic for whale and dolphin watching, and I wanted in.



The Museum of Latin American Art is dedicated to the support of Latino and Latin American art and artists. Beth Collier for The New York Times

I picked up a Groupon for Harbor Breeze Cruises, spending just \$36.80 for two tickets (down from a walk-up price of \$90) for a 150-minute ocean cruise and whale-watching tour. My girlfriend and I boarded the big catamaran hoping for the best.

It didn't look good initially. Undulating gently in the Pacific Ocean with a couple dozen other locals and tourists, we were treated to little more than a pleasure cruise during the first two-thirds of the trip. But then those of us on deck heard it — the distinctive sound of air and water blasting through a whale's blowhole, like a short burst of television static.

From our location about halfway between the shore and Santa Catalina Island, we spotted two long, slender, grayish bodies of fin whales, the second largest mammals on earth, bobbing gently like apples in a barrel at 2 o'clock off the starboard bow. Each emitted a powerful blast or two from their blowholes before disappearing under the water with little warning — our guide on board explained that fin whales don't make a big show of their tails before taking a deep dive.

We spotted a few groups of two to three whales, then cruised for another few minutes to a different spot, where we saw at least a half-dozen more. The massive and enchanting creatures lolled gently before snorting indignantly a few times and submerging; they seemed entirely unconcerned with us humans. As a bonus sighting, a pod of dolphins joined alongside our boat on the way back to shore.



Past and Present is an eclectic shop offering everything from old Disney merchandise to glassware and board games. Beth Collier for The New York Times

Long Beach's outdoor delights can be enjoyed by boat, but perhaps a more terrestrial approach is your thing. I used the Social Bicycles app (now owned by Uber, if that matters to you) to buy some time on the Long Beach bikeshare network, which is fairly extensive, with hubs throughout the city. The per-hour rental cost is \$7, and I took advantage of an offer that gives a free hour with the purchase of three.

The interface was temperamental, but I eventually was able to rent a bike and enjoy a ride along Junipero Beach. Salty sea air and ocean views aside, it was also a good vantage point for one of Long Beach's offshore historical oddities: the THUMS oil islands. In the 1960s, following a lift on a drilling ban, American energy companies spent \$22 million on a series of artificial islands to extract oil from beneath the harbor. You wouldn't know it by looking at them: the islands look like shopping malls from shore, with extraction facilities masked by phony building facades. You can't visit them, but they're an odd and interesting footnote in the area's long history with the oil industry.

Getting back to things you *can* visit: The Earl Burns Miller Japanese Garden, on the Cal State University Long Beach campus, is a respite of tranquillity, with koi, ducks and beautiful landscaping. Admission is \$5, but I was allowed in for free since I arrived close to the garden's closing time. Alamitos Park, at the end of the Alamitos Peninsula, isn't a huge green space, but has a calming energy and is a nice place to walk or bike to.



Joe Jost's, a 1920s-era tavern that looks like it hasn't changed much since it opened — which is just how the regulars like it. Beth Collier for The New York Times

Much of Long Beach is quite walkable, and one of the most fun areas to explore, on East 4th Street near Cherry Avenue, happens to have a number of excellent vintage and thrift shops packed into just a couple of blocks. The nonprofit AIDS Assistance Thrift Store is a good place to start, with a mountain of secondhand merch for treasure-seekers, ranging from old paintings to furniture. Assistance League of Long Beach Thrift and Vintage Shop is another good one, selling \$4 shirts and \$12 suits; I picked up a pair of shoes for \$8.

A few other stores fall more into the vintage (not thrift) category: curated collections that are slightly pricier. Past and Present is an eclectic shop definitely worth popping into, with everything from old Disney merchandise to glassware and board games. Most of it isn't cheap, but there is a shelf with \$10 shirts and \$5 art prints. Meow is another good vintage store, specializing in accessories and apparel never previously sold or used. And La Bomba may have been my favorite, if only for the cute little dog there that snoozes among the piles of old clothes and shoes.

Over at The Hangout, another place on East 4th, I struck up a conversation with Marissa Baklayan, a stylist and photographer who was working at the shop. We chatted for a bit about The Hangout's decidedly singular concept — succulents and ice cream — and I asked her how she liked Long Beach. "Everyone here knows each other, especially in this neighborhood," she said.

Across the street at the fast casual restaurant The HipPea, where I picked up a good falafel sandwich (\$7.99), one of the employees, a nice guy named Brian, echoed a similar sentiment, but added that a lack of rent control has become problematic. Rents have indeed risen sharply in Long Beach in recent years as people have realized it's a progressive and diverse community that's cheaper than many neighboring coastal cities. The resulting gentrification threatens the livelihoods of some renters, including many of the city's nonwhite and L.G.B.T. residents.



At Riverside Supermarket in Cambodia Town, you can pick up hot food as well as groceries.

Beth Collier for The New York Times

For years, Long Beach has had a reputation as one of the nation's most gay-friendly cities. The Alamitos Beach neighborhood has pride flags flying outside numerous bars and restaurants, and rainbow crosswalks are painted in intersections along East Broadway. I spent a very enjoyable karaoke night at Executive Suite, an L.G.B.T.-friendly nightclub in the Zaferia neighborhood northeast of downtown. The club takes a creative approach to incentivize patrons to perform, awarding \$2 tokens, redeemable at the bar, per song sung for up to three songs. One of the owners, Lenny Sinatra, deftly ran the show.

Also in Zaferia is Joe Jost's, a 1920s-era tavern that looks like it hasn't changed much since it opened — which is just how the regulars like it. I struck up a conversation with Doug Pricer, a local writer and historian who explained to me the interesting history of Zaferia, which was once its own town, and its relationship to Long Beach, which was a dry city even before Prohibition. "Zaferia used to be wet when Long Beach was dry," he said.

When I visited, Cathleen Buck, the wife of Ken Buck, the owner (and Joe Jost's grandson), was busy in the large back room. I ordered a Coors Light (\$2.60) and a Joe's Special, a nicely spiced Polish sausage with Swiss cheese and a pickle on rye bread (\$3.45) and a mountain of pretzels and spicy yellow chilies. Ms. Buck and I chatted while I noshed on a pickled egg (\$1.35), another of Joe Jost's signature snacks.

If you're looking for more of a meal, I'd recommend heading to Cambodia Town, centered around a roughly mile-long stretch of East Anaheim Street and home to one of the largest Cambodian populations outside of Asia. At Riverside Supermarket, just west of Cherry Avenue, you can pick up hot food as well as groceries. I bought a container of mixed-seafood sour soup for \$4.99 that was sharp and tangy. You can pick up plants outside the market as well — I bought a jasmine bush for \$10 and a rice paddy herb plant, called ma om in Khmer, for just \$3. Another day, I picked up an order of pad kee mao (\$8.25) from Tasty Food to Go, a small restaurant specializing in Thai and Lao cuisine.

I was equally happy with the variety of different cultural activities I sampled, beginning with the Museum of Latin American Art (\$10 admission), an institution dedicated to the support of Latino and Latin American art and artists. I enjoyed the exhibit "El Exploratorio," which focused on the intersection of art, science and technology. A standout was Linda Vallejo's "Datos Sagrados," which wove together mesmerizing pictographs with data about Latino immigration.

At the Long Beach Playhouse, I took in a show — a solidly acted performance of Lynn Nottage's "Crumbs From the Table of Joy," which explores issues of adolescence, race and religion in the life of a black family in 1950s New York City (\$20). Afterward, I headed to Ballast Point, an absurdly large brewpub with great views on the Alamitos Bay Marina. I picked up a Moscow Mule sour beer (\$5) and got lost on one of the property's patios. Sipping on the gingery drink, I plotted my next visit: My to-do list was barely halfway done. Long Beach, it seemed, demanded — and deserved — more attention.

Lucas Peterson is the Frugal Traveler columnist. He has written for GQ, Lucky Peach, Eater, LA Weekly and Food Republic. His video series for Eater, "Dining on a Dime," is now in its 11th season. @FrugalTraveler