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[Specs](#)

Title: 15 Best Beaches in Southern and Northern California

<H1>The 15 best beaches in Southern and Northern California

So you're headed to California and looking for the funnest-in-the-sunniest beaches to visit. At first you might think of household names like Santa Monica – but those aren't necessarily the best choices. In fact, Santa Monica doesn't even make some top-ten lists.

The fact is, this huge coastal state has tons of gorgeous beaches, and each of them has something to offer, depending on what you're looking for.

Want to go swimming? Southern beaches are best – the water is warmer and calmer. Up for horseback riding with dramatic scenery? Northern California is the land of adventure.

Ultimately it's up to you, but here's a list of the California beaches most often recommended as must-visits, from San Diego to [San Francisco](#).

[Southern California](#)

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Southern California

La Jolla, San Diego County

 La Jolla Beach.jpg

Alt: A La Jolla beach with purple flowers

✓ Snorkeling ✓ Surfing ✓ Family-friendly ✓ Tide pools ✓ Seals

Where to find it: A few minutes northwest of San Diego

[Google Maps](#)

No self-respecting "best beaches" list can go without La Jolla. Just reading the word makes you feel – dare we say it? – jolly.


(Okay, we know, it's pronounced *la HOY-a*.)

Bad jokes aside, this beach is **high in the running for California's prettiest**. Sunbathe on the pristine sand, learn to surf at Tourmaline Beach, swim in the calm (and well-guarded) waters of the main beach, and snorkel among leopard sharks and Garibaldi fish.

If you love to explore, do *not* miss a [kayaking tour of the sea caves](#)!

And of course, we can't forget the **beloved seals**, which you can see at Children's Pool Beach. If you wanted to be a marine biologist when you grew up, go a little farther south to check out the tide pools with their unique, hardy ecosystems.

Coronado Beach, San Diego County

 Coronado Beach.jpg

Alt: Hotel del Coronado beside the beach

✓ White sand ✓ Famous hotel ✓ Surfing ✓ Family-friendly ✓ Close to city

Where to find it: A few miles from downtown San Diego by ferry or car

[Google Maps](#)

You may have already heard of the nearby [Hotel del Coronado](#) – it has a dual claim to pop culture fame as the filming location for *Some Like It Hot* (1958) starring Marilyn Monroe, and as a notorious haunted spot.

But even if you never step foot in the hotel, Coronado Island has plenty more attractions – especially its beach, **a gorgeous strip of white sand with calm waters for swimming**. But not *a/ways* calm: in the right conditions, this is a popular surf spot too.

Between stretches of sunbathing, you don't need to drive back to the mainland or downtown San Diego to refresh yourself. Orange Avenue waits a few streets away from the south end of the beach to entertain you with **restaurants, shops**, and decidedly less haunted **hotels**.

Laguna Beach, Orange County

📁 Laguna Beach.jpg

Alt: Staircase leading down to Laguna Beach and Pacific Ocean

✓ Surfing ✓ Rich & famous ✓ Hiking ✓ Wildlife spotting ✓ Arts scene

Where to find it: About 60-90 minutes southeast of LA

[Google Maps](#)

The OC? Don't call it that. "The real Orange County" is way more than a teen reality show, and its best drama is its **seven miles of eye-popping coastline**.

While it's true that some of the beach views from the Pacific Coast Highway are blocked by the homes of the rich and famous, you can still access the beach by stairs down the bluffs.

Some of the best-known strands are Thousand Steps, Victoria, and Main Beach, and one special feature of the coastline is its **cove beaches – a relative rarity in SoCal**. Come here to surf, wander the boardwalk, watch for whales, hike the coastal canyon trails – really, what can't you do here?

It's not just about sun and sand, though. Laguna Beach was **originally an arts colony**, and its creative scene is still a major attraction – especially with its prestigious [annual festival of the arts](#). Be sure to check out the beautiful local galleries while you're in town!

Huntington Beach, Orange County

📁 Huntington Beach.jpg

Alt: Huntington Beach and pier seen between palm trees

✓ Surfing ✓ Campfires ✓ Family-friendly ✓ Dog-friendly

Where to find it: 60-90 minutes south of LA

[Google Maps](#)

Also known as "Surf City USA" after the 1963 hit by Jan and Dean, this 8.5-mile-long (13.7km) beach is **THE destination for hanging ten**. Its consistent waves are popular with newbies and advanced surfers alike, and at night you can see their campfires along the shore.

It's also so **beautiful** that you might just catch yourself saying, "I want to retire here," even if you're 25. Or already retired.

As you might expect, Huntington is mega **crowded on summer weekends**, not just with surfers but with families and their dogs on a day out, volleyball players spiking on the sand, and people of all shapes, sizes, and bank accounts soaking up rays or swimming in the **jewel-toned water**.

Besides living that beach life, you can walk to the end of the picturesque pier to dine on seafood at Bud & Gene's, successor to the iconic Ruby's Diner.

Venice Beach, Los Angeles County

📁 Venice Beach.jpg

Alt: Bike lane curving through sand and palms at Venice Beach

✓ Tourists ✓ Fitness ✓ Boardwalk ✓ Street art ✓ Close to city

Where to find it: 30-60 minutes west of downtown LA

[Google Maps](#)

For chill bohemian folks as well as fitness junkies and everyone in between: there's so much to do here, it's no wonder Venice Beach is so popular.

Everywhere people are **swimming, jogging, cycling, or getting swole** at Muscle Beach. The shopping and dining options in town are as hip and hoppin' as you might expect, while the **funky beach boardwalk** offers a livelier vibe with **groovy shops and street performers**. Meanwhile, walls all around the city are emblazoned with [colorful street art](#).

In the evening, be sure to stroll out on the pier to be surrounded by sea and sunset.

By the way, if you're curious why it's called Venice, you might want to **check out the canals** just a few streets from the beach.

Malibu, Los Angeles County

📁 Malibu El Matador State Beach.jpg

Alt: Wooden stairs leading down to a sandy Malibu beach

✓ Rich & famous ✓ Long coastline ✓ Mega photogenic ✓ Sea caves ✓ Tide pools

Where to find it: About an hour west of LA

[Google Maps](#)

Huge houses. Expensive boutiques. High-end restaurants. If this is where Malibu Barbie had her dream house, she and Ken must have been rolling in the dough.

The wealthy have staked their claim here for good reason, though: **the beaches are both soothing and breathtaking**. And there are lots of 'em.

While Zuma is the largest, **El Matador State Beach** is one of the most highly recommended. It's small but dramatically **beautiful** with craggy rocks and sea caves surrounding smooth sand. Take a stroll on the water's edge, parody a swimsuit photoshoot (common here), or slip on good water shoes to explore the tide pools.

Manhattan Beach, Los Angeles County

📁 Manhattan Beach.jpg

Alt: Manhattan Beach and pier through palm trees

✓ Clean ✓ Family-friendly ✓ Water sports ✓ Close to city ✓ Restaurants

Where to find it: 30-60 minutes southwest of downtown LA

[Google Maps](#)

If you're looking for a Los Angeles beach area that's **cleaner and more family-friendly** than, say, Santa Monica, this is it. Manhattan is upscale and a bit less touristy while still keeping the fun-in-the-sun beach town vibe.

Photos usually center on the historic pier, where you can enjoy not only a walk but also free admission to the [Roundhouse Aquarium](#). From there you can watch the many water sports going on – or head back to land to take part in them yourself. Surfing, paddle boarding, kayaking, boating, jet skiing? Take your pick.

And when your belly starts growling, the city has a **phenomenal restaurant scene**. Work up an appetite on the waves, then get thee to a foodery!

Hermosa Beach, Los Angeles County

■ Hermosa Beach.jpg

Alt: Lifeguard tower on white sand at Hermosa Beach

✓ Family-friendly ✓ White sand ✓ Surfing ✓ Nightlife ✓ Close to city

Where to find it: 40-60 minutes southwest of downtown LA

[Google Maps](#)

Literally "Gorgeous Beach" in Spanish, Hermosa **stands out among the other Beach Cities for its nightlife**. If Manhattan is classy, this Gorgeous George is cool and down to party, especially near the pier.

By day, surfers ride the waves, anglers fish from the pier, and volleyball dramas play out on the sand. By night, the beat drops and the single are ready to mingle.

Otherwise, the usual Beach City draws all apply: excellent surfing, soft sand, beautiful and swimmable waters.

Stearns Wharf and East Beach, Santa Barbara

■ Stearns Wharf Santa Barbara.jpg

Alt: Stearns Wharf with Santa Ynez Mountains in the background

✓ Picturesque city ✓ Wharf ✓ Close to downtown ✓ Mountains

Where to find it: About 2 hours north of LA

[Google Maps](#)

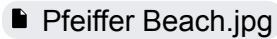
Santa Barbara itself is a lovely oceanfront city full of **palm trees and white-stucco, red-tile houses backed by the Santa Ynez Mountains**. The fact that its downtown ends in a beautiful beach is just icing on the cake – or is it the other way around?

Head down State Street to the pier and cross the wooden piles to visit Stearns Wharf, a historic landmark with **restaurants and souvenir shops**. Oddly enough, you can even drive out there – but if you indulge in both fish 'n' chips and ice cream on the wharf, we recommend walking it off.

Then spend some quality time on sandy East Beach sunbathing, playing volleyball, or swimming in the calm blue water. If you're here in fall, count on fewer tourists, milder temperatures, and even more intense sunsets.

Northern California

Pfeiffer Beach, Monterey County

 Pfeiffer Beach.jpg

Alt: Keyhole Rock at sunset with purple sand

✓ Rock formations ✓ Hiking ✓ Purple sand ✓ Scenic drive

Where to find it: Near Big Sur (about 2.5 hours south of San Francisco)

[Google Maps](#)

It sounds like a lyric from an LSD-fueled Beatles song, but **the sand here really is purple**. Maybe not grape-flavored-popsicle purple, but it's visible enough after a good rain! That's thanks to eroded manganese garnet coming down from the hills.

Pfeiffer is also known for its rock formations, like the **iconic Keyhole Rock** – super cool to see at any time of year, but especially around the winter solstice, when the sunset thrusts a ray of light through the keyhole.

While it's windy and the water isn't safe for swimming, there are plenty of other things to do in the area – this is, after all, Big Sur! **Hike and camp among redwoods**, or drive scenic Highway 1 to see the rest of this **famous coastline**.

Life balances that way – less sunbathing, but more adventuring!

Carmel-by-the-Sea, Monterey County

 Carmel-by-the-Sea beach.jpg

Alt: Cypress tree on a white-sand beach by Carmel Bay

✓ Cute town ✓ White sand ✓ Dog-friendly ✓ Surfing ✓ Wildlife spotting

Where to find it: 2 hours south of San Francisco

[Google Maps](#)

Wish upon a star, and you might end up in the fairytale beach city of Carmel-by-the-Sea. That's no joke – the frankly adorable downtown looks like a **storybook village** and offers visitors restaurants, museums, and art galleries.

And that's just the town. Carmel Beach is known for **pearly white sand, eye-catching cypress trees, and brilliant aquamarine water**. While the sea here is cold, there are good waves for surfing, and both [dogs and campfires are welcome](#) on the beach.

For even more adventure, check out [Point Lobos State Natural Reserve](#) to the south. Snorkel, hike, and keep your eyes peeled for wildlife, including seals, otters, and the occasional whale.

Santa Cruz beaches

📁 Santa Cruz beach.jpg

Alt: Santa Cruz beach and boardwalk aerial view

✓ Surfing ✓ Wildlife spotting ✓ Amusement park ✓ Long coastline

Where to find it: About 80 minutes south of San Francisco

[Google Maps](#)

Santa Cruz and Huntington actually sparred over the title of "Surf City" in the early 2000s, so we'll let Huntington keep the title for SoCal and call Santa Cruz **the surf capital of the north**. Not only is it an international destination for wave riding, but it even has a [surfing museum](#).

Santa Cruz's 29 miles (47km) of beaches also boast the **West Coast's oldest amusement park**, the Beach Boardwalk, which gives landlubbers the chance to ride the waves of the historic Giant Dipper roller coaster.

Animal lovers should keep an eye out for local sea and bird life, like **otters, sea lions, herons, and pelicans**. Whales and porpoises can also be seen from a boat offshore. And if you liked *Jaws*, well... Santa Cruz and the northern part of Monterey Bay have become a nursery for Great Whites, and some whale watching companies offer [shark tours](#).

Half Moon Bay State Beach, San Mateo County

📁 Half Moon Bay.jpg

Alt: Rugged California coastline on Half Moon Bay

✓ Camping ✓ Hiking ✓ Surfing ✓ Fishing

Where to find it: About 45 minutes south of San Francisco

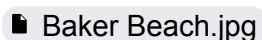
[Google Maps](#)

This state park's four sandy beaches make a great **day trip out of San Francisco** – or a whole vacation on their own. The most popular, Francis Beach, comes with a visitor center as well as a campground with both **RV and tent camping**. (Book in advance on [Reserve California!](#))

For beaches **less crowded** but just as attractive, head **north** to Venice Beach (yes, another one!) or Dunes Beach. The northernmost, Roosevelt, is currently only open to foot traffic. That makes it a good spot to get some peace and quiet along with views of Miramar and Pillar Point Harbor.

Half Moon Bay has even more to offer, though: **surfers should check out Mavericks Beach** to the north to see its famously massive slabs (or surf them if you have the cojones), while hikers and horseback riders have easy access to the [California Coastal Trail](#) from here.

Baker Beach, San Francisco County

 Baker Beach.jpg

Alt: Golden Gate Bridge view from rocky Baker Beach

✓ Sightseeing ✓ Picnics ✓ Fishing ✓ Hiking ✓ Nude beach

Where to find it: Just west of downtown San Francisco

[Google Maps](#)

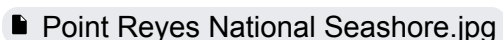
Three words: **Golden Gate Bridge**.

Sure, you can get excellent bridge views at Fort Point, but what you're not getting is these scenic cliffs, caramel sands, and pounding surf. Plus, it's not exactly OK to drop your pants at Fort Point, but **North Baker Beach is, ahem, "clothing-optional."**

[picture censored]

Cold water, big waves, and rip currents make swimming here a definite Nope, but there's still plenty to do: go **fishing or crab snaring**, hike the **cliff trail**, or work on your tan with a picnic on the sand.

Point Reyes National Seashore, Marin County

 Point Reyes National Seashore.jpg

Alt: Staircase leading over a cliff to Point Reyes Lighthouse

✓Headlands ✓Lighthouse ✓Hiking ✓Camping ✓Wildlife spotting

Where to find it: 60-90 minutes northwest of San Francisco

[Google Maps](#)

Just an hour from downtown [San Francisco](#), this visually stunning coastal park remains wild and weirdly underrated. Its shoreline offers a twofer with both **dramatic rocky headlands and long stretches of sand**.

Like at many other northern California beaches, the water here is cold and the currents are dangerous. It's also remote enough that some beaches can be reached by car while others are only accessible by boat or on foot. Luckily, the typical favorite – family-friendly [Limantour Beach](#) – can be driven to, and its waters tend to be calmer.

Because of its protected status, this park is a great place to **hike through the wilderness** and also spot **wildlife**. Elephant seals hang out on the beach during their mating season, and gray whales can be spotted from the Point Reyes Lighthouse.

Before your visit, check the [National Park Service website](#) for alerts and closures!

There you have it...

... fifteen reasons to head west. Now go off and have an adventure!