

Car free and foot loose in Santa Barbara

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The Lark restaurant in the Funk Zone.
Cori Solomon

There is something to be said about visiting a city car free. Hoofing it, breathing in the local culture and taking local transportation can get you right into the spirit of the location you are visiting. [Santa Barbara](#) has made it easy for you to discover the city without having to get yourself behind the wheel of your car. Come onboard and visit [Santa Barbara Car Free](#) experience.

Amtrak's Pacific Surfliner has better facilitated getting to Santa Barbara from environs as far south as San Diego. Boarding the [train](#) in Van Nuys gave us the opportunity to enjoy the scenic coastline from Oxnard to Santa Barbara in about two hours. The ride is relaxing.

Santa Barbara's train station is in close proximity to State Street, the Funk Zone, and the coastline known as the "American Riviera." Strolling the streets from the train station one finds the charm of Santa Barbara is its Spanish Colonial influence that today is being preserved making most of the older properties historical buildings.

In walking distance to the train station is the **Hotel Santa Barbara**. This [hotel](#) dates back to the 1920s. In fact the hotel boasts the oldest elevator in Santa Barbara, having been installed in 1926. This was not the first hotel in this location. The original hotel was built in 1876 but was destroyed in an earthquake in 1925. The hotel was rebuilt to standards that were very advanced for the time. Most interesting were the rollers the structure was built on that allowed for movement during an earthquake. Several owners later the hotel underwent a major renovation that was completed in 1996. Today one finds old world charm as you enter the arched lobby. With soft classical music playing in the background, one immediately understands they have embarked on a calm relaxing hotel stay. The rooms are tastefully done and are quite comfortable. Hotel Santa Barbara's location on State Street is accessible to many Santa Barbara attractions, galleries or shopping at the nearby Paseo Nuevo.



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Head down to East Cabrillo to pick up the **Santa Barbara Trolley** that gives you an overview tour of Santa Barbara and stops at many of the [tourist attractions](#) including the Queen of all California Missions, the Old Mission Santa Barbara, the Santa Barbara Zoo, Museum of Natural History, Harbor Maritime Museum, SB Museum of Art and much more.

Santa Barbara has a great waterfront pedestrian path that extends from Shoreline Park to the Andrée Clark Bird Refuge. Walking this path, breathing in the fresh sea air you feel like you are walking the Côte d'Azur in Nice and Cannes. This experience exemplifies why they call Santa Barbara the American Riviera. If you don't want to walk the waterfront, bicycle rentals are available allowing one to enjoy the coastline from the adjacent bike lanes.

Gaining notoriety is the wine of Santa Barbara County that encompasses the region from Summerland on up to Santa Maria. Many vintners now have a presence in Santa Barbara. These tasting rooms are known as part of the **Santa Barbara Urban Wine Trail** and are primarily located in either in the **Funk Zone** or the **El Paseo** in the Presidio neighborhood. Those wanting a very youthful experience should opt for the Funk Zone. You will definitely have a lively encounter. Looking for an intimate, quiet and more traditional tasting that personifies the old world charm of Santa Barbara, one should head for the Wine Collection of El Paseo.

Our [winery](#) visit included both locations. In the Funk Zone we visited **Riverbench Winery**, a winery that was established in 1973 and specializes in Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and sparkling wine. Under the guidance of the charming winemaker, Clarissa Nagy, the wines with her elegantly feminine touch define the fruit and vineyard character of the Santa Maria Valley AVA.

Juxtaposing the character of the Funk Zone are the tasting rooms of the El Paseo in the old colonial styled building on De La Guerra Street. Originally built as the home of Military Officer, Civil Servant José de la Guerra y Noriega in the 18th century. The building was expanded to include artisan shops in the early to mid 20th century. Today the Spanish Revival style complex features several restaurants and tasting rooms. We visited **Jamie Slone Winery**, which offers an eclectic and consistent collection of wines that includes Rhones and Bordeaux blends as well as single varietals. The wines are very balanced and approachable. After meeting with the charismatic and engaging Jamie Slone, you will walk away with an enchanting experience. Not only will you learn about the history of the wines of Santa Barbara County, you will also garner information on racing cars as Jamie was a race car driver.

Santa Barbara hosts a small inviting zoo. Its size is perfect for spending a couple of hours without being overwhelmed. As our trolley tour guide mentioned, “how often do the giraffes have an ocean view?” The giraffes are of particular interest. You also must not miss the flamingos, penguins and gorillas.

Santa Barbara has a wide variety of cuisines to indulge in every gourmand's delight. Our visit took us to Lucky Penny, The Lark, The Hungry Cat and Joe's Cafe. The Lark and the **Lucky Penny** are located in the Funk Zone and are run by Acme Hospitality. Your luck will have it when you stroll by the lucky penny and see the 167,000 pennies that make up the motif of the building. Unique to the Lucky Penny is the wood-fired eggs. These eggs are baked in a cast iron skillet in the pizza oven. Open daily from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. It is best to go for breakfast or lunch. Sitting is mainly outdoors on the patio.

Dinner at **The Lark** is both a culinary and fun experience. Open now for three years, the restaurant was originally Santa Barbara's fish market. Named after the overnight Pullman train of the Southern Pacific Railroad that serviced Santa Barbara from 1910 -1968, the restaurant features New American family style dining with a farm to table approach. It is delightful to sit out on the patio if the weather permits. The staff is very knowledgeable and the food is superb. On the current menu one must savor the Crispy Brussels Sprouts with Medjool dates, garum, sesame and lime. This is a sweet and savory dish. This House made Gnocchi & Dungeness Crab with Spanish chorizo, navel orange, castelvetrano olives, lobster roe and cilantro is a meal in itself. If you love Pork Belly do not miss the Smoked Pork Belly with roasted blackberry, almond brittle, pickled summer peppers and house made chicharron. Leave room for dessert. The Spring Doughnut will knock your socks off. Made with lime curd, strawberry, poppy seed meringue and English pea ice cream. It is the ice cream that is a winner.

The Hungry Cat specializing in fish, seafood and seasonal produce is one of a series of restaurants owned by David Lentz and Suzanne Goin. From the Chorizo'n Clams to the King Crab Risotto that was accompanied with a Fried Brussels Sprouts, you will not go hungry but will be a happy cat. Top off your meal with the Hungry Cat Chocolate Bread and Butter Pudding. Think Bread pudding meets Crème Brûlée with the added ingredient of chocolate.

Finally there is the old time Santa Barbara establishment since 1928, **Joe's Café**. The oldest restaurant in Santa Barbara, speaks for itself. It is known for its cocktails and if you are looking for an all around American meal this is the place.

We are so attuned to spending so much time in our cars, it is literally a breath of fresh air to visit Santa Barbara car free. It also makes for good exercise. You will not regret leaving your car at home or getting away from the rush hour traffic that accumulates on Highway 101 or the Interstate 405.

SUGGESTED LINKS

- ▶ **Riverbench Vineyard and Winery: Brings elegance to the Funk Zone and beyond**



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LA Epicurean Travel Examiner