



A NEW WAVE HITS OCEANSIDE

ARTISANAL COFFEE, BREWPUBS, VINYL DRAW VISITORS TO MILITARY TOWN

BY CHRISTOPHER REYNOLDS

FOR DECADES, A LOT OF TOURISTS overlooked Oceanside. It was the blue-collar city that operated in the shadow of Camp Pendleton, a beach town without the frills found farther south in Del Mar and La Jolla. † But maybe that reputation has reached its expiration date. It certainly feels that way now when you stand downtown, flanked by a pair of shiny new hotels, watching the sun set beyond the old wooden pier and deciding whether to eat vegan, tacos or barbecue at the weekly street fair. † “It’s a beautiful beach city. It was a matter of time,” said Harrison Dwelley, 33, who has just taken over from his parents as co-owner of South Oceanside’s Beach Break Cafe on the Coast Highway. † Despite the pandemic, Oceanside has launched and sustained a new generation of lodgings, restaurants and retailers, including several lively places in the neighborhood locals call South O. † When asked about his hometown’s image, Dwelley acknowledged the old days, when billboards urged passers-by to “Tan Your Hide in Oceanside,” often in vain. He also mentioned the ongoing TNT drama “Animal Kingdom,” in which members of the wicked Cody family strut, tussle, surf and commit felonies in one of California’s last blue-collar beach towns. † That show has actually lured some visitors, Dwelley said. Yet for five years now, as viewers have been watching the crime-soaked municipal caricature, the actual Oceanside has been edging in the opposite direction.

In the course of two trips to the city in January, I came to realize that Oceanside now is a destination with substantially more avocado toast, artisanal coffee and designer surfwear than is required by the average TV outlaw or real-life Marine.

In fact, the city’s last strip club, the Main Attraction, which endured for years across the street from the Chamber of Commerce, was leveled in 2021, soon to be replaced by an upscale apartment building. Gentrified in Oceanside.

SOUTH O

I started my South O explorations at the Green Room, a ’60s motel that’s been rehabbed into a 12-room boutique hotel. Opened last summer, it has surf-minimalist white interiors, no lobby, forward-looking technology and flat black exteriors.

I paid \$184 (after taxes) for a night and liked being able to go straight to my room and open it with my phone number. I mostly liked the minimalist surfer-chic look of the place too. (Only problem: The bathroom had no place for me to lay down my toilet kit. Excessive minimalism.)

Still in South O, I had a tasty polenta at the Plot, a vegan restaurant that opened in 2020, followed by ceviche at the Wrench & Rodent a block away and a local brew from the Pour House. The next

morning, I had part one of breakfast at the Buccaneer Cafe and part two at the Captain’s Grounds, which is the star of a handsome Coast Highway shopping-and-snacking strip.

Along that strip you’ll find a coffee roastery, bikini shop, organic hair-removal salon, yoga studio, apothecary and the Captain’s Helm, which sells vintage jewelry, old-school T-shirts, torn jeans and hipster books like “Accidentally Wes Anderson.”

As I learned, the Captain’s Helm is just the beginning of South O’s temptations for those who consider “thrift” a verb. Estate Sale Warehouse takes up most of a city block along the Coast Highway, and Lucky Street Productions antiques is across the street. Farther north, but still south of Oceanside Boulevard, there’s the deceptively large Sea Hive Marketplace with 13,000 square feet of vintage vinyl, clothes, art, furniture and other weird old stuff.

I had a look in all of those places (and was tempted to buy a 45 of Elvis Presley singing “In the Ghetto”). For lunch and lager I stopped at Municipal Taco, a brewpub that opened in spring 2021 with perhaps the coolest mural in a town full of cool murals: It’s Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, standing by a longboard in “American Gothic” fashion.

Often, “It’s younger locals or tourists who are attracted to us, because we are more crafty and upscale,” Municipal Taco general manager Mercedes Engren told me. “They let you know if they are local to Oceanside, and you can tell they want new restaurants in the community to stick, so they are not shy about giving feedback.”

Next trip, I’ll try the Privateer, a coal-fired pizzeria, or South O Brewing Co., which opened in late 2021, pushing the city’s brewery tally to about 15.

Or maybe I’ll try to see a gig at the Oceanside Moose Lodge #1325, founded in 1948, which now books rock shows and promises that “this ain’t your grandpa’s lodge.”

Anyway, I’m now a fan of South O. But the city’s changes reach far beyond that neighborhood.

THE PIER, THE CORPS AND THE CUISINE

Since long before the first Marine showed up, newcomers to Oceanside have been starting with the pier. Built in 1887 and rebuilt five times since then, it stretches for 1,942 feet, which makes it a focal point of the city’s three-mile coastline and one of the longest wooden piers on the West Coast.

It’s got plenty of anglers, a bait shop halfway out, an empty restaurant space at the end where a Ruby’s Diner used to be, and usually several surfers below, riding dangerous close to the pilings.

Tourism officials say a new pier eatery probably will open later this year, as will new restrooms and other improvements just below the pier and along the Strand, a mile-long beachfront street that’s mostly pedestrian and full of runners, walkers and cyclists, especially around sunset.

Is the beachfront scene a random humanity situation like the Venice boardwalk? No. Is it a pageant of volleyball and prosperity like the Manhattan Beach



THE MISSION PACIFIC and Seabird hotels, seen above from the Oceanside Pier, opened in May 2021. Oceanside has newly become a tourism destination with its historic pier, good surfing and fun shopping draws such as Lucky Street Productions, right.





Photographs by CHRISTOPHER REYNOLDS Los Angeles Times



MUNICIPAL TACO in South Oceanside sports what may be the coolest mural in a town full of cool murals.



Strand? No again.

It's in between, with plenty of surfers and strolling couples. On the afternoon I first walked the pier, a young guitarist named Zachary LaMontagne was playing "Stairway to Heaven" for tips. He was fit, his haircut was short, and I had him pegged as a moonlighting military guy.

"Nope," he said. "I just look like a Marine."

Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton (population about 38,000) has been northern next-door neighbor to Oceanside (population about 174,000) since it was established during World War II. Around downtown, you still see several military surplus stores, tattoo parlors and barber shops, where many Marines get their "high-and-tight" haircuts weekly.

With so many active and retired military on hand, the city has a more blue-collar, conservative feel than most other SoCal beach towns. It's also more culturally diverse, according to the most recent U.S. Census numbers.

But, as new businesses multiply, Oceanside is looking a bit more like civilian neighbors to the south (Carlsbad and Encinitas) and north (San Clemente).

"We liked it the way it was. But it's got to move," said Jonny Gomez, 84, owner of the Esquire barber shop since the early 1960s.

Exhibit A in the city's evolution might be the Tremont Collective, a restaurant-retail complex that opened in November, replacing an old warehouse. Tenant businesses include Communal, a very popular coffee shop-florist-gift boutique; Bottlecraft, a beer bottle shop and bar; Atacama Surf Shop; the online surf magazine Stab; Brixton clothing; a courtyard cycling studio called Verve; and a poke-and-tacos-and-beer place called Shootz.

Bagby Beer Co., a brewery and pub that opened in 2014, stands back to back with the collective and faces the Coast Highway. J.S. Industries — the Australia-based surfboard empire of shaper Jason Stevenson — opened last year on Wisconsin Avenue, offering \$800 surfboards in a converted garage that's painted flat black, like the Green Room.

"I believe we're now up to eight coffee shops in downtown," said Gumaro Escarcega, chief operations officer of the civic nonprofit MainStreet Oceanside. With the cost of living rising fast — Zillow estimates that home values are up about 25% in the last year — "we have to be careful because of gentrification," he added.

Oceanside's restaurant boom began about a decade ago, perhaps driven by the city's high commercial vacancy rate and low rents in comparison with neighboring beach areas.

Escarcega said the city's restaurant surge began with ventures including 333 Pacific (seafood, since 2009), The Flying Pig (American gastropub, since 2011), Miss Kim's by That Boy Good (Southern barbecue, since 2012) and Local Tap House (American gastropub, since 2014), later joined by others including Dija Mara (Balinese, since 2017) and Matsu (Japanese, since 2019 as a pop-up, now in a permanent space).

Since then, the population hasn't changed dramatically but the number of restaurants and bars has jumped from about 50 to more than 100, Escarcega said.

The brewpub count is beyond a dozen, augmented by Oceanside Distillers (opened in 2017, tasting by appointment) and Pacific Coast Spirits, a small-batch distillery and restaurant opened in 2019.

Food and drink options multiply further on Thursdays, which begin with the Oceanside Farmers Market.

It runs 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on a stretch of Pier View Way just west of the Coast Highway. Then, from 5 to 9 p.m., you can try the Oceanside Sunset Market, a street fair that fills two blocks of Pier View Way and two blocks of Tremont, often featuring live music and scores of merchants, including Frida's Grill, where I grabbed excellent tacos while the evening's Grateful Dead cover band was getting started.

"Good evening," the frontman said, stepping up to the microphone. "We're Not All Dead."

THE FIN, THE BRICK AND THE BIG FELLAS

The two big new hotels near the pier are the Mission Pacific Hotel and its sibling, the Seabird Resort, both opened in May. They're both six stories, across the street from the beach, near the pier

and managed by sub-brands of the Hyatt chain.

Of the two, the 161-room Mission Pacific Hotel caught my eye first. It aims to be more contemporary and its Rooftop Bar is a brilliant spot for sunset-viewing.

Look from that roof deck and you'll see the U-shaped hotel is wrapped around a tiny Victorian beach cottage. Why?

The answer is Hollywood. That little home was Kelly McGillis' house in the 1986 Tom Cruise Navy-pilot movie "Top Gun." It was moved to the resort site from elsewhere in town and is expected to open soon as a dessert bar called Top Gun House.

As for the 226-room Seabird Resort just south of the Mission Pacific, it aims to be more timeless. It features plenty of conference rooms on its ground floor, along with the inland-facing Piper restaurant. Rates at both hotels start at about \$250 nightly plus a hefty \$42 "guest amenity fee."

The Fin Hotel, on the Coast Highway, opened in 2018 with 27 rooms in a reclaimed 1920s building with exposed brick walls. The hotel is part of Hilton's boutique Tapestry collection, but it feels like an indie. Weekend rates start around \$170. Its ground-floor restaurant (Hawaiian cuisine) and bar is called the Switchboard because the building served as a communications center during World War II.

Meanwhile, there's another boutique lodging about to open a few blocks away in a similarly historic space. The Brick Hotel, owned by a fourth-generation local family, is due to be unveiled sometime this spring. It's a 10-room hotel with a restaurant and rooftop bar in a brick building (now reinforced) that dates to 1888. Rates will start around \$135 nightly.

In the next few years, more hotel openings are expected, along with an ambitious mixed-use redevelopment of the Oceanside Transit Center, where Amtrak trains stop.

Also proposed: Ocean Kamp, a 92-acre mixed-use project at the inland site of the city's old Valley Drive-In that would include housing, a hotel, retail space and, believe it or not, an artificial wave lagoon for surfers.

NOT FOR SURFERS ONLY

Some day, maybe, that fake lagoon will be explained in the California Surf Museum on Pier View Way, which needs to be on the itinerary of any Oceanside visit.

The museum explains the science of wave action, details the history of the Boogie Board and includes a board cut from a 2,700-year-old sequoia. The top attraction, however, is the surfboard that 13-year-old Bethany Hamilton was paddling off Kauai in 2003 when a 14-foot tiger shark took her left arm.

The shark's jaws also took an enormous crescent-shaped chunk out of the board. Looking at the damage, it's hard to believe Hamilton survived the attack, returned to the water within a month, went on to win several tournaments, has written several books, got married in 2013 and has three children.

Hamilton's story is a remarkable tale of resilience and adaptation, and it's a nice one to have in mind as you wander Oceanside, where evolution continues.

IF YOU GO

WHERE TO EAT

The Switchboard Restaurant & Bar, 131 S. Coast Highway, Oceanside; (442) 266-2781; theswitchboardrestaurant.com. Hawaiian-inspired cuisine in a building that was a communications center during World War II.

The Plot restaurant, 1733 S. Coast Highway, Oceanside; (442) 266-8200; theplotrestaurant.com. Ambitious vegan cuisine.

Captain's Grounds Coffee, 1832 S. Coast Highway, Oceanside; (760) 522-4271; captainsgroundscoffee.com. Coffee, tea, smoothies, breakfast.

Municipal Taco, 2002 S. Coast Highway, Oceanside; (760) 231-1999; municipaltaco.com. Taqueria and bar.

WHERE TO STAY

Mission Pacific Hotel, 201 N. Myers St., Oceanside; (855) 365-5078; missionpacifichotel.com. 161 rooms, multiple restaurants, trendy shop. Weekend rates start at about \$360 before taxes, weekdays around \$300, plus a \$47 guest amenity fee. Prices are largely the same at the 226-room Seabird Resort across the street, 101 Oceanside Ave., Oceanside; (855) 413-7573; theseabirdresort.com.

The Green Room Hotel, 2020 S. Coast Highway, Oceanside; (760) 978-1191; thegreenroomhotel.com. 12 rooms. Weekend rates start around \$275, weekday rates around \$155.

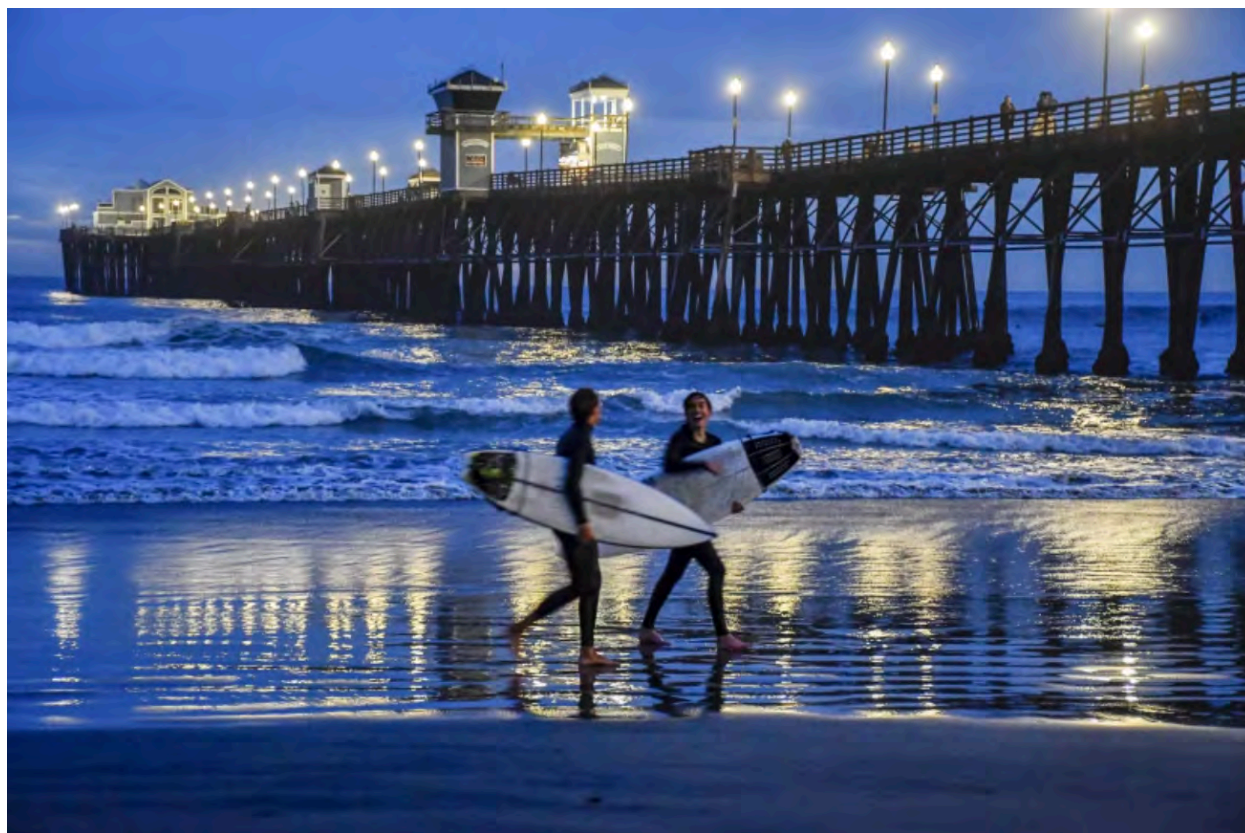
The Fin Hotel, 133 S. Coast Highway, Oceanside; (760) 231-1897; thefinhotel.com. 27 rooms. Weekend rates start around \$230, weekdays around \$150.

WHERE TO GO

California Surf Museum, 312 Pier View Way, Oceanside; (760) 721-6876; surf-museum.org

Los Angeles Times

Today's Headlines: A new poll finds that L.A. isn't as unpopular as you might think



YOUR WEEKEND

Pay Oceanside a visit (yes, Oceanside). For decades, a lot of tourists overlooked the blue-collar city that operated in the shadow of Camp Pendleton. But there's a [new generation of lodging, restaurants and retailers](#), writes The Times' Christopher Reynolds. Among his recent stops: the Green Room, a 12-room boutique hotel with surf-minimalist white interiors, no lobby, forward-looking technology and flat black exteriors; also, the Mission Pacific Hotel Rooftop Bar, a "brilliant spot for sunset-viewing." The U-shaped hotel is wrapped around a tiny beach cottage. Why? It was Kelly McGillis' house in the 1986 movie "Top Gun." It's set to open as a dessert bar called the Top Gun House.

Los Angeles Times

Artisanal coffee, brewpubs and vinyl: Oceanside's new wave



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