

# Immersed in Adventure

Santa Barbara is a  
water wonderland

By Rob Dunton

Before me stretches the vast Pacific Ocean; behind me unfurls a palm-fringed beach, hills dotted with Spanish-tiled homes and the dramatic Santa Ynez Mountains. It is a sunny December morning in Santa Barbara and the sea is still glassy before the midday breezes arrive.

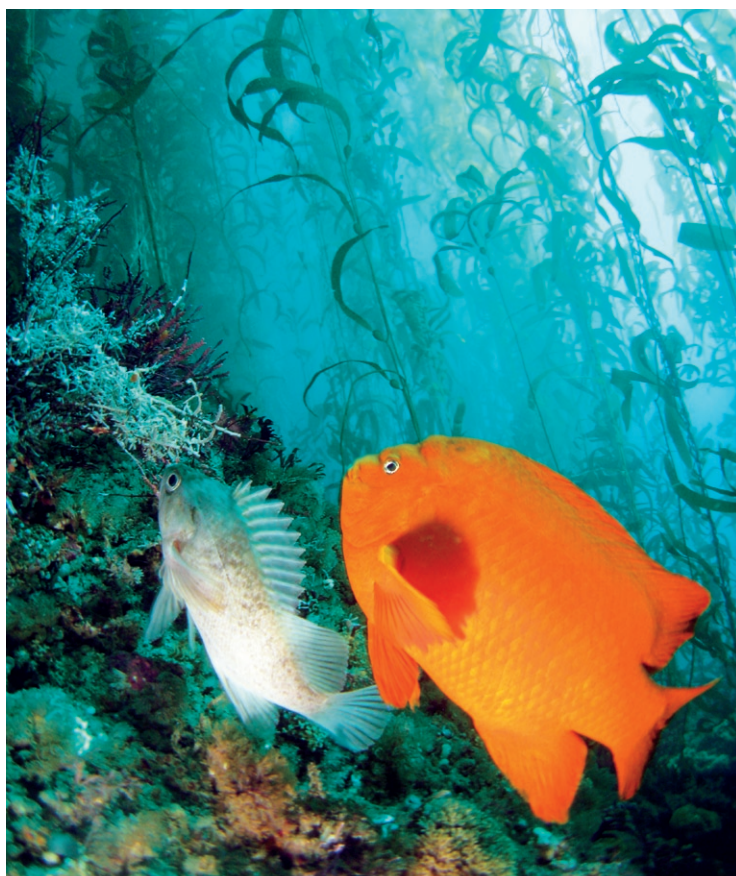
With paddle in hand, I am standing on a surfboard. Not riding, mind you, *standing* like big-wave surfer and über-athlete Laird Hamilton—well, except that he’s tall, buff and married to Gabrielle Reece. In the early 2000s Laird, along with other Hawaiian icons such as Brian Keaulana, Dave Kalama and Archie Kalepa, helped popularize the sport of stand-up paddle surfing as an alternative way to train when the surf was down.

I’ve tried standing on a stationary surfboard before, and it felt a bit like balancing on a soccer ball, on one leg, while inebriated. But today I am



Susan McArver takes a break from paddling outside Santa Barbara's marina as a sizable sea lion looks on.





ROB DUNTON (2)

standing comfortably on a specially designed stand-up paddle surfboard. It is longer, wider and more stable than any board I've been on before. In my hands is a light paddle with a high-tech design that makes it extra strong and effective. I dig it into the water, pull, and my board glides forward as I follow my friend Susan and our guides toward a pair of dolphins just beyond the surf zone. Flashbacks of riding a two-wheeler for the first time run through my head—I wobble and teeter, but the faster I go, the more stable I get, and the thrill of not falling is palpable.

**WITH ITS LOW-RISE MISSION** Revival-style buildings, oceanfront setting and temperate climate, Santa Barbara has the coziness of a centuries-old Mediterranean town. Its beaches are wide and uncrowded, and it

around downtown's waterfront: stand-up paddle surfing, whale watching, scuba diving, kayaking and sailing. In Santa Barbara, you can enjoy the yin and yang of adventure and relaxation more easily than in any place I know. The downtown's compact design—with sidewalks and bike paths—makes cars unnecessary. We can walk or bike to everything on our itinerary—from docks to dance clubs, restaurants and hotels.

**"THIS IS A HECK OF** a lot easier than when you took me surfing," Susan calls out as she stands and paddles with confidence over soft-rolling swells and kelp paddies. The dolphins are gone before we reach them, so we turn toward shore to explore the dramatic coastline off Leadbetter Point. Small waves peel around the prom-

(Left) Scuba diver Martin Vega swims beneath the canopy of a kelp forest off Santa Cruz Island. (Right) A brilliant orange Garibaldi—California's state saltwater fish—and a juvenile kelp bass swim together in their kelp-forest home.

ontory, and I brazenly try to catch one. I am quickly reminded I'm a first-timer as I'm pitched into the drink. I climb back on my board and rejoin Susan for more graceful paddling. After 90 minutes, we return to the beach, hand our gear to our guides and walk east along the shore for a warm breakfast of blueberry wheat-germ pancakes at East Beach Grill.

After breakfast, Susan and I stroll the beach. Flocks of birds lounge on the empty sand and dolphins fish in the waves. We migrate to a bike path and find people of all ages pedaling surreys, mountain bikes and beach cruisers past artists and craftspeople selling paintings, blown glass, wind chimes and jewelry.

After half a mile, we arrive at historic Stearns Wharf, the city's most visited landmark. Named after builder and log merchant John Stearns and completed in 1872, the wharf is the oldest in California,



and one of the state's longest working wooden wharves. At 3.8 acres it is massive enough to house a range of restaurants and shops and the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History's Ty Warner Sea Center.

We walk the length of the pier, indulge in a scoop of ice cream, then swing by the Sea Center. As we enter, a 38-foot, life-size model of a California gray whale floats above us. We talk to passionate marine biologists who introduce us to live guitarfish, rays and horn sharks—marine life visible along the California coast. Gazing into a tank, we see baby swell sharks hanging in translucent womb sacs and day-old sharks swimming around, then move upstairs, where we touch seastars, urchins and anemones in a shallow tank. We pass other hands-on oceanographic exhibits, take a free card that lists sustainable and unsustainable fish to buy (and not buy), then circle around the gray whales model on our way out. We spend the rest of the day along the waterfront doing nothing in particular—just enjoying the relaxed pace and sunshine.

**THE NEXT WEEKEND BEGINS** with scuba diving. Since Susan is not a diver, I'm joined by my dive buddy Martin Vega for a one-day trip to Santa Cruz Island, 20 miles off Santa Barbara. Santa Cruz, one of five islands off the coast, is a diver's paradise. Martin and I arrive at the marina at 9 P.M.

#### Twilight at the Inn of the Spanish Garden.

Friday to grab bunks on the boat and hit the hay. The boat motors out at 4 A.M. and by the time I awake, we are cruising between Santa Rosa and Santa Cruz islands, and the cook is taking orders for breakfast.

By 8:30 Martin and I are in the sea. I drop into the clear, 56-degree water in my 8 mm wetsuit without a shiver. As we slowly descend to 50 feet below the surface, the island above disappears, replaced by an amber kelp forest before me. This living ecosystem is rich with fish, molluscs and crustaceans: colorful sheephead fish, kelp bass, scallops and lobsters. As we enter the kelp forest, rays of light fan out like sunbeams into an underwater cathedral. Even the sand on the ocean floor has been shaped into geometric patterns. Martin and I glide between stone pinnacles in search of sea life, dramatic lighting and interesting rock formations to photograph. I am weightless and quiet except for the sound of my bubbles—a universe away from the city I left this morning.

When we return to the boat, an hour has passed. My camera is full of images and Martin's game bag is weighted down with pounds of hefty sheephead. Other divers have surfaced with bags of seasonal spiny lobster. We recharge on snacks as the boat scouts the shoreline for our next dive site. An hour later we dive in for our sec-

## WHEN YOU GO

### FIVE WAYS TO GET IN THE WATER

**Stand-Up Paddle Surfing:** Stand-Up Paddle Surfing, 121 Santa Barbara St. 805-962-SUPS; [www.surfindingsports.com](http://www.surfindingsports.com).

**Scuba Diving:** Truth Aquatics, 301 W. Cabrillo Blvd. 805-962-1127; [www.truthaquatics.com](http://www.truthaquatics.com). Licenses for lobster and fish: [www.dfg.ca.gov/marine/permits.asp](http://www.dfg.ca.gov/marine/permits.asp).

**Whale Watching:** Condor Cruises at SEA Landing. 805-882-0088; [www.condorcruises.com](http://www.condorcruises.com).

**Kayaking:** Santa Barbara Adventure Company. 805-898-0671; [www.sbadventureco.com](http://www.sbadventureco.com).

**Sailing:** Sunset Kidd Sailing Cruises, 125 Harbor Way #13 (boat is moored in front of the Maritime Museum). 805-962-8222; [www.sunsetkidd.com](http://www.sunsetkidd.com).

### FOOD AND LODGING

**Harbor View Inn,** 28 West Cabrillo Blvd. 805-963-0780; [www.harborviewinnsb.com](http://www.harborviewinnsb.com).

**Inn of the Spanish Garden,** 915 Garden St. 805-564-4700; [www.spanishgarden-inn.com](http://www.spanishgarden-inn.com).

**Elements Restaurant,** 129 E. Anapamu St. 805-884-9218; [www.elementsrestaurantandbar.com](http://www.elementsrestaurantandbar.com).

**SOHO Restaurant & Nightclub,** 1221 State St. # 205. 805-962-7776; [www.sohosb.com](http://www.sohosb.com).

ond journey into the underwater world. I explore caves and outcroppings, swim through strands of kelp and soak up the tranquillity. When we surface, the crew is barbecuing burgers and hot dogs and serving warm cookies.

Susan is waiting when I return to the dock, and whisks me away to our boutique hotel, the Inn of the Spanish Garden. The Colonial architecture and open courtyards offer serene elegance in the heart of the city. We check in, light the fireplace in our room, uncork a local Bridlewood pinot noir and chill until the yearning to eat trumps our desire to relax; then we step out into the heart of the city. We wander a few blocks to Elements Restaurant and



Bar, a stylish cottage restaurant located across from the magnificent county courthouse, a Spanish-Moorish masterpiece with stunning tile work, murals, towers and a sunken garden. We begin with a tantalizing roasted-butternut-squash-and-arugula salad.

In honor of the scallops and lobster I dived with this morning, we order pan-seared diver scallops with tomato-corn risotto and a Creole-saffron cream sauce, and the surf-and-turf special—local lobster with filet mignon—all of which are absolutely succulent and amazing.

Sunday morning we are back at the marina for a four-hour whale-watching tour. Different whales swim off Santa Barbara's coast throughout the year, from blue whales to humpbacks to killer whales. In December, gray whales such as the model displayed at the Ty Warner Sea Center are frequently spotted as they migrate from Alaska to the placid lagoons of Baja. The first animals we spy are a vast pod of dolphins—1,000 or more—and for almost 40 minutes we idle along as they cut, jump and twirl around us like an excited pack of puppies. Finally, we continue toward the gap between Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa islands, an area where our captain frequently finds grays. We spot a pair of adult gray whales near the bluffs. As they dive below the surface, their misty flumes fade before their broad tails break the surface. For an hour we follow these graceful behemoths at a respectful distance of 100 yards or more as they work their way down the coast, each exhale and dive a thrill.

All this communing with nature has whetted our appetite for a little urban adventure. On our return, Susan and I scour the weekly *Independent* and discover that renowned reggae star Pato Banton is playing at a nearby club, SOHO. We wander up State Street, rich with Mediterra-



Catching a wave on a stand-up surfboard at Leadbetter Point.

nean-style buildings filled with small, locally owned galleries, restaurants and boutiques. The club is quintessential Santa Barbara—medium-size, with an alfresco deck and an eclectic mix of easygoing patrons. Pato Banton and the Mystic Roots Band waste no time in getting the entire club jumping. Susan and I dance until the wee hours and head home blissfully exhausted.

**THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER** *USS Ronald Reagan* arrives offshore as we celebrate our third and final weekend of waterfront exploration. Susan and I set off for what has become our second home—the marina—this time to try kayaking. Four bright-blue kayaks are waiting on the boat ramp with two smiling tour guides. We review basic safety and paddling techniques, then slip our kayaks into the water. We explore the marina's wide mix of boats, from modest to commercial to mega-yacht, paddling past one of the world's largest catamarans, then make our way out into the open sea. We paddle a mile out to the fringe of the *Ronald Reagan's* safety zone, then head west to Leadbetter Beach for lunch. As we come into shore, one by one, we ride on the backs of waves as they collapse, then paddle like mad, hop out and pull our kayaks to dry sand. By the time Susan and I land, our guides have assembled a festive picnic of fresh fruit and sandwiches.

After lunch, we paddle back through

waves that have grown bigger. Susan, the novice of our group, claws her way up a 3-foot wave only to be confronted by a larger one right behind it. She paddles fearlessly up the cresting wave ... and clears it. The rest of us get flipped, tossed or soaked—which, aside from the utter humiliation, is a total blast.

Back on shore, Susan and I walk a few hundred yards and check in for the weekend at the Harbor View Inn, a handsome waterfront hotel directly across from Stearns Wharf. I've reserved one of the ocean-view suites in their new annex and from the comfort of our balcony, we can observe the throngs enjoying the pier, waves and esplanade.

We settle in to people-watch, soak up the sun and read the daily paper until it's time to board the *Sunset Kidd* for a sunset sail—our last hurrah. Cocktails are offered, and we order a glass of local merlot. The late-afternoon breeze fills the sails and we quietly head out to sea. We sail past the breakwater we kayaked past earlier, happy to let the wind do the work this time. We sail past the *Ronald Reagan*, out toward the islands as the sun dips behind Leadbetter Point. Behind us, lights begin to sparkle onshore. I can see silhouettes of surfers at Leadbetter's taking a few last runs in the fading light, as a few harbor seals swim past in rippled orange-hued water. Stars appear as the sky turns indigo and our days of water-filled frolics fade to black. I smile as I imagine all the other activities we have yet to try—outriggers, surfing, kiteboarding—maybe even a trip 30 miles inland to the wine country for a different kind of liquid experience. Fortunately, in Santa Barbara, the next chapter is only a weekend away. ↑

*Rob Dunton writes about travel and adventure from his home in Santa Barbara.*

## GETTING THERE



Alaska Airlines ([alaskaair.com](http://alaskaair.com), 800-ALASKAAIR) serves Santa Barbara daily via sister carrier Horizon Air (800-547-9308, [horizonair.com](http://horizonair.com)).