

# TAKE ME TO THE COAST

VETERAN BAND TOUR MANAGER RICK MARINO - WHO HOSTS A TRAVEL TV SHOW CALLED "STATE X STATE" THAT AIRS ON THE PLANES, TRAINS + AUTOMOBILES NETWORK AS PART OF DELTA'S IN-FLIGHT ENTERTAINMENT - DRIVES US TO **SOUTH ORANGE COUNTY** FOR BEACHSIDE BEAUTY.

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**T**here is a part of Orange County that has fascinated me every time I pass by on my way from LA to San Diego: the first time you see the Pacific Ocean heading south on Interstate 5. It has always been my favorite part of that drive, but I'd never stopped to check it out except to get some gas. I had no idea what I'd been missing. San Juan Capistrano, Dana Point and San Clemente have been there the whole time, begging for a road trip right in front of me.

I start the day in San Clemente, located at the southern tip of Orange County and known by locals as the "Spanish Village by the Sea." My first stop is Casa Romantica, the original home of the city's founder, Ole Hanson, to get a history lesson on the town's origins. For a \$5 admission fee, you can tour the classic Spanish Colonial home, which houses a small museum, gardens and art galleries. The property is used for events but is open year-round - the architecture and view alone are worth a stop.

Next, I head to the San Clemente Pier to find The Fisherman's Restaurant & Bar. Built as part of the pier over the crashing waves, it's the perfect place to get the feel of this sleepy little beach town, watch some surfers and sip a few drinks at sunset. The pier is also an Amtrak stop, and you walk across the tracks to get to it. From here, you can mosey down the beach path alongside the trains to the surf breaks on the south end.

There are few cool hotels nearby as well: Beachcomber Inn overlooks the pier and has small Spanish tile roof casitas, while Nomads Hotel is a very cool, very small "surf" hotel with six rooms and bunkhouse. Nomads Canteen, located upstairs, is covered in surfboards and boasts 33 beers on tap. The menu is inspired by the owners' travels; I recommend some poke.



Head up to Avenida Del Mar, and you'll find that this is the town's main street for shopping and eating. There is no shortage of restaurants in this city. I got so many recommendations from friends and locals that I have to go back to eat it all. To name a few: Brick for pasta and pizza, The Riders Club for burgers and beer, Cafe Rae for breakfast (it's owned by a retired rock and roll tour caterer) and MRK Public for sandwiches and salads. There seems to be no shortage of surf shops either – one cool spot I found was menswear boutique Ambsn, a small store that shares space with Wake Up Coffee. Look for the eyeball to the right of the building on El Camino Real.

Driving north on Pacific Coast Highway along the beach, I leave San Clemente and head toward Dana Point. My first stop is Doheny State Beach. At the entrance is a small gift store and aquarium, which is very small but has a few fish tanks and a tide pool exhibit. The rangers and docents even give me the nickel tour, where I learn that this beach's surf spot was made famous by the Beach Boys' song, "Surfin' U.S.A.," which includes a shout out to Doheny Way. As you pull in, you can see plenty of surfers out in the water. The park offers day use and overnight camping, with several spots right on the beach for RVs or tents complete with fire rings and picnic tables. Who knew?!

Past the beach is Dana Point Marina. I've since learned that this is one of the best places in California to go whale watching. With grey whales in the winter and blues in the summer, the spot is often home to these mammals gathering rather close to shore. At the dock, there are several charters available for sport fishing and whale watching, in addition to the Catalina Express. Several small shops and restaurants are located in the marina, and one that catches my eye is Turk's, a nautical themed classic – think dive bar meets greasy spoon, where one might order a Bloody Mary and fish 'n chips after a long night or a boat ride. Open from 7 a.m. until after midnight, the decor and vibe can't be beat.

At the north end of the marina is the Ocean Institute, which hosts school field trips during the week and is open for public tours of its tallship on Sundays. Walk toward the beach behind the buildings, and you'll find a staircase to the right that leads to an awesome secret beach cove and natural tide pools. There is no sign, just follow your instincts – this was one of my favorite discoveries on this trip!

I continue north for my next stop, San Juan Capistrano, which is famous for its Spanish mission founded by Saint Junipero Serra in 1776. I park at the Capistrano train depot located in the center of old downtown, and everything I want to do from here is within walking distance.

Cross the tracks into the Los Rios Historic District, one of California's oldest residential neighborhoods. Mostly private homes, there are some very cool restaurants, shops and galleries as well as a small park under the trees. One of the original adobe structures is surrounded by a butterfly garden, and the O'Neill Museum is definitely worth checking out.

At the recommendation of several folks, I eat breakfast at The Ramos House Café. Everything is made from scratch and features local organic produce – the owner lives in the house that



San Clemente Pier



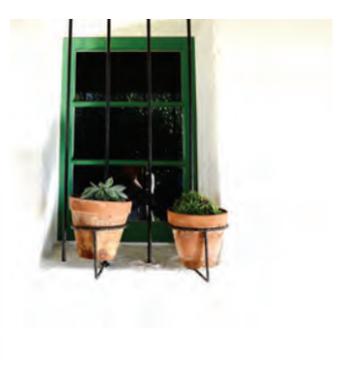
Mission San Juan Capistrano

was built in 1881. I have already told a few friends in LA to jump on the Amtrak for the day just to come and eat here. It was that good! Don't judge me by my order because I had to try as much as possible in order to write about it for you. My breakfast started with apple-cinnamon beignets (a house specialty), and then biscuits with homemade apple butter. These were followed by the Flannel Hash, with roasted root vegetables and tater tots, topped with a poached then fried egg and citrus crème and orange juice squeezed to order. Ok, ok, it was a lot of food and was big enough to share for sure. I hear the weekends are pretty busy, but this brunch is off the hook.

Back across the tracks, I am off to see the mission. If you grew up in California, you learned all about the Spanish missions along El Camino Real, otherwise known as "The King's Highway" in grade school. I have been lucky enough to visit a few of them and grew up very close Mission San Gabriel Arcangel near LA, but San Juan Capistrano is now my personal favorite. I understand why it is considered the "Jewel of the California Missions." As soon as you enter, it feels like you're transported back more than 200



Mission San Juan Capistrano



Casa Romantica

years. The grounds and gardens are perfectly manicured, and each of the buildings contains museums and displays – you can easily spend a few hours here. There are guided tours available, or you can just stroll around at your own pace.

Across the street from the mission is a cool little shop called the Capistrano Trading Post that is worth a look, and further down the road is really big antique store called The Old Barn Antiques Mall – it's packed floor to ceiling with everything you can imagine. Right next door is Swallow's Inn, a classic country music bar, and it reminds me of a honky tonk in downtown Nashville. My last stop is for a snack at El Adobe de Capistrano, an old school Mexican restaurant that opened in 1948. It's part of a building that includes an adobe home dating back to 1797. The food is classic California-style Mexican – the perfect ending for this road trip to the birthplace of Orange County.

Millions of cars pass by these towns every day, and I wonder how many know what they are missing. I honestly forgot that I was even in Orange County – who knew it was just road trip (or train ride) away?! 🌱