



(clockwise from this image) Overlooking the beach from Balboa Pier; hiring a bicycle is a popular way to see the island; a pointer to Crystal Cove Beach Cottages; sweet stops along Marine Avenue. (opposite) The Balboa Island boardwalk.



True Glitz

Newport has everything you'd expect from a Californian coastal town — sun-kissed beaches, mega yachts and luxury shopping. And then some things you might not expect, from frozen-banana stalls to John Wayne's prized possession.

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Sitting out on the deck of *Endless Dreams*, a 140-foot luxury charter boat operated by Hornblower Cruises & Events (www.hornblower.com), I take in the view as we begin gently pushing out of Newport Harbour, about 75 kilometres south of Los Angeles. The morning light catches the crests of the small waves and the windows of giant shore-side mansions. I can hear the clinking of glasses and I am a very Orange County brand of happy.

I'm living the two preconceptions that I have about Newport — first, that it's a place of great privilege, and second, that it's a boating paradise. I'm told many times by locals that the first idea is a relatively new construct, promoted by the producers of shows including *The OC* and *The Real*

Housewives of Orange County. I'm also told with equal vehemence that Newport as a boating destination is absolutely true and built into the historical fabric of the place.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Newport started out as a tiny enclave of commercial fishermen and only really became the Newport Beach it is today when the pleasure mariners started coming to town after WWI.

Local commodore David Beek is one of few people living in Newport Beach who can claim to be part of four generations of local lineage — his grandfather Joseph was one of the founders of the area.


Looking past a cluster of small Duffy electric boats — which are cheap to rent here — he points out Balboa Island, an in-harbour land

mass bearing a grid of tightly packed but beautifully kept cottages. “My grandfather started as a property developer in 1919 trying to shift lots on that island,” he says. “Not as easy now as it was then.”

At that time, Balboa Island was nothing more than a mudflat. “The Red Car [a tram system that traversed southern California until the 1960s] used to go all the way down from Los Angeles, and people would come down on it for the weekend and get into a lot of good adult activities.”

It was during the era of prohibition, he explains. “While they were here partying, my grandfather wanted to show them the land on Balboa Island that he was fixing to sell, so he got a contract from the city to run a little rowboat across from the mainland.”

What was then a rowboat is now the Balboa Island Ferry fleet, which



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is still operated by the Beek family. These days Newport is one of California's most popular seaside vacation destinations, and along with golden beaches, coves and, of course, a stunning harbour for boating, it's home to a number of excellent dining and drinking options on dry land.

"Newport Harbour is one of the world's largest small-craft harbours, and one of the best," says Beek. "It hasn't always been like that. It wasn't until the 1980s, when the Silicon Valley [money] came to town."

And with money comes excess. "About 50 per cent of the boats don't go out on the water," Beek says. "Some people just come out here and use their beautiful boats like beach houses. It's a travesty." However, if you do want to use a boat like it should be used, Newport is the place to do it.



(clockwise from above) John Wayne's youngest daughter, Marisa; one of Balboa Island's famous frozen bananas; on board Wayne's former yacht, the *Wild Goose*; the perfect snack on Marine Avenue.

THE COUNTY COWBOY

The *Wild Goose* is a yacht available for hire as well as scheduled cruises around Orange County. But before life as a boat for rent, it was the prized possession of the area's most famous resident, John Wayne.

The actor's career was bookended at Newport Beach. It started when he injured himself bodysurfing, which led him to give up his University of Southern California football scholarship and take a job at a film studio, first in the prop department and later as the biggest star in the world.

Wayne came back to Newport once his film career was winding down, with two divorces, a drinking problem and millions of dollars to show for it.

At 55, Wayne bought the *Wild Goose*, a converted WWII minesweeper, with the hope of keeping his young family (his third) together. "No better way to keep a family together than on a boat," Beek says. "I mean, what else are they going to do but, you know, talk to each other?"

A dockside tour of the *Wild Goose* (US\$25) offers a fascinating peek into the private life of the star, from the grand (his stateroom) to the more personal. Wayne had a seat installed in the bridge so that he could watch the captain work, for example, and the bunk beds still have his children's initials carved into the wood.

"My memories of that boat are some of my favourite," says Wayne's youngest daughter, Marisa. "I'd like to think they were some of his, too. My dad was much more relaxed on that boat — it was his time to get away. We didn't have satellites or computers so it was a time to be himself."



After a few attempts living away from Newport Beach, Marisa has once again returned to life in Orange County, and has a spin studio, Grit Cycle (1731 Santa Ana Ave, Costa Mesa; +1 949 631 4748; www.gritcycle.com) — so named for her father — less than 10 kilometres from John Wayne Airport.

"Every time I came back it felt like [Newport] was growing so much, but I still feel like it has a hometown beach vibe. I still run with my high-school friends. There's no traffic and no high-rises. When I move away, I feel like I'm missing out."

It's not just the *Wild Goose* that forms part of John Wayne's heritage here. Next to the luxurious Balboa Bay Resort (1221 West Coast Hwy; +1 888 445 7153; www.

balboabayresort.com) is the Balboa Bay Club (www.balboabayclub.com), which has been around for more than 60 years, and had Wayne serve on the board of governors.

The club once had a bar, Duke's Place, dedicated to the man himself but it recently underwent renovation and has reopened as Anchors and Oceans bar. Walking the grounds of the BBC, you'll also find an indoor basketball court, lap pool, private lawn and beach as well as several eateries, populated by many well-kempt women in designer trackpants, and even more men in polo shirts with satisfied bellies. I resolve to pay homage to Wayne here with a bourbon in hand, overlooking the harbour and sun setting over the Pacific Ocean. ►



Paddleboarders in Newport Harbour. (opposite) The Disneyland-ish Balboa Island.



ISLAND LIFE

Balboa Island is an idyllic version of small-town America that so resembles Disneyland you might think it was built by Walt himself.

For visitors, the main attraction is Marine Avenue, a strip of independent restaurants, galleries and shops selling a range of products from gifts, handmade candles and books, to the area's famous frozen chocolate bananas (with one shop even boasting an endorsement from the cast of sitcom *Arrested Development*, set in Newport Beach) and hot chocolate. You know, the type of place you find in the first act of most Stephen King novels.

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Marine Avenue is a dawdler's paradise, and the antithesis of Fashion Island, a giant, shining edifice of commercialism that lies less than 10 minutes' drive north of Balboa. The 'island' is actually an open-air mall that rivals anything you'll find in Los Angeles for size and variance of luxury items. It is new and expansive, and actually

quite beautiful, but it might remind you of the first act of a George Orwell novel.

About the same distance south of Balboa Island is a peninsula that is dominated by good old Californian beach culture, with two picturesque piers — the Newport Beach Pier and the Balboa Pier — roughly marking the east and west boundaries of a wonderful stretch of surf-ready waves, clean sand and relaxed dining and drinking options.

There is a real sense of wealth at Newport Beach, which means high-end restaurants, spas and luxury accommodation abound. It is, however, also home to countless no-nonsense recreational mariners, surfers and fishermen, who are all well catered for. That wonderful mix gives travellers a breadth of dining and hotel options more in line with a larger destination.

The Beachcomber at Crystal Cove (15 Crystal Cove; +1 949 376 6900; www.thebeachcombercafe.com) is a good balance of both, offering feet-on-sand imbibing as well as a long cocktail list. As the sun disappears, college students move into one of the nearby dorm-style Crystal Cove Beach Cottages (35 Crystal Cove; +1 800 444 7275; www.crystalcovebeachcottages.com/html), which are spartan but boast million-dollar views for little more than \$100.

Up the hill at Andrea Ristorante, it's a different story. One of the area's fine-dining restaurants, it's part of The Resort at Pelican Hill (22701 South Pelican Hill Rd, Newport Coast; +1 949 467 6800; www.pelicanhill.com), an Italian-themed luxury resort of marble and crystal. It's set within a golf course and offers panoramic views of the Pacific and is as refined as my seven-year barrel-aged Acquerello rice risotto.

It's a classic Newport experience matched with wines, but from my vantage point on the deck I can see a bonfire by the ocean, and a part of me wants to be down eating burgers and drinking beer on the beach. ☺

GETTING THERE Virgin Australia flies directly to Los Angeles from Sydney and Brisbane. To book, visit www.virginaustralia.com or call 13 67 89 (in Australia).



The Beachcomber cafe sits alongside the quaint Crystal Cove Beach Cottages.