



# Perfect Beach Cities & Towns

in the U.S.

by CATHLEEN MCCARDHY

Nothing beats a perfect day on a beautiful beach, unless it's a beautiful beach within walking distance of a great town. If you love to shop, boutiques with waves crashing just beyond view, eat a meal with a salty breeze in your face, or take a sharp left from a bustling arts district and find yourself toe-

deep in sand, getting out on endless blue — well, you're not alone. Cities and towns have been springing up around that coastal magic for centuries, and you can find one to suit every mood and sensibility. This country has lots of beaches — more than 86,000 miles of shoreline, not including the

Great Lakes — with a variation from the palm sand of the Hawaiian isles to the craggy shores of Maine. Coastal cities have seen not much in the way of change. But a sweet beach at town with personality? That's worth a top. >

An aerial photograph of Miami, Florida, showing a dense cluster of high-rise buildings along the coast. The water is a deep blue-green, and the sky is filled with soft, white clouds. The buildings vary in height and color, with some featuring distinctive architectural details like orange-tinted tops. A road and some greenery are visible between the buildings and the water.

## SOUTH BEACH Miami, Florida

Colorful Deco buildings of Miami's South Beach make the perfect backdrop for the mad street life of Lincoln Road and Ocean Drive, where music booms from tricked-out rides and beautiful bodies stroll surfside, most only minimally covered. Parts of South Beach are not what you'd call family-friendly, but you know just what you're getting at first dizzy glance of this city: a multicultural, high-octane brew with strong Latino overtones. No wonder Art Basel and flamboyantly driven, creative characters like J.Lo, Madonna and Versace were drawn to the Cuban rhythm of this place. Within easy walk of all that rich culture is a superb beach, ranging from Lummus to Collins parks, a 10-block spread of wide, white-sand beaches bordered by cabanas-for-rent and bike path a couple miles long.

**BEST AFTER DARKS:** Sunset cocktails at Smith & Wollensky; dinner at Joe's Stone Crab; dancing at Bongo's Cuban Café, Miami's hottest salsa club.

**BEST BROWSING:** Funky, hipster-filled galleries of Wynwood Arts District and the home decor shops and eateries of the Design District. >



## OAK STREET BEACH Chicago, Illinois

"Beach" might not be the first word that comes to mind when you think of the Windy City, but along with its famous jazz clubs, world-class restaurants, museums and sports teams, Chicago has a lovely beach — that's right — complete with palm trees. Located just north of the tree-lined shopping and dining mecca of The Magnificent Mile, Oak Street and North Avenue beaches are where the third most-populous city in the U.S. meets the deep blue of Lake Michigan. At Oak Street Beach, you'll find a wide, sandy beach with concrete borders where sunbathers, cyclists and volleyball players gather whenever the sun comes out. An insider secret, the beaches along Chicago's shores are a prime spot for people watching and is the perfect way to escape bustling urbanity for a quick hit of natural beauty.

**BEST EATS:** Oak Street Beach Food and Drink for fish tacos and beach views, Castaways Bar and Grill at North Avenue Beach for live music and frozen drinks.

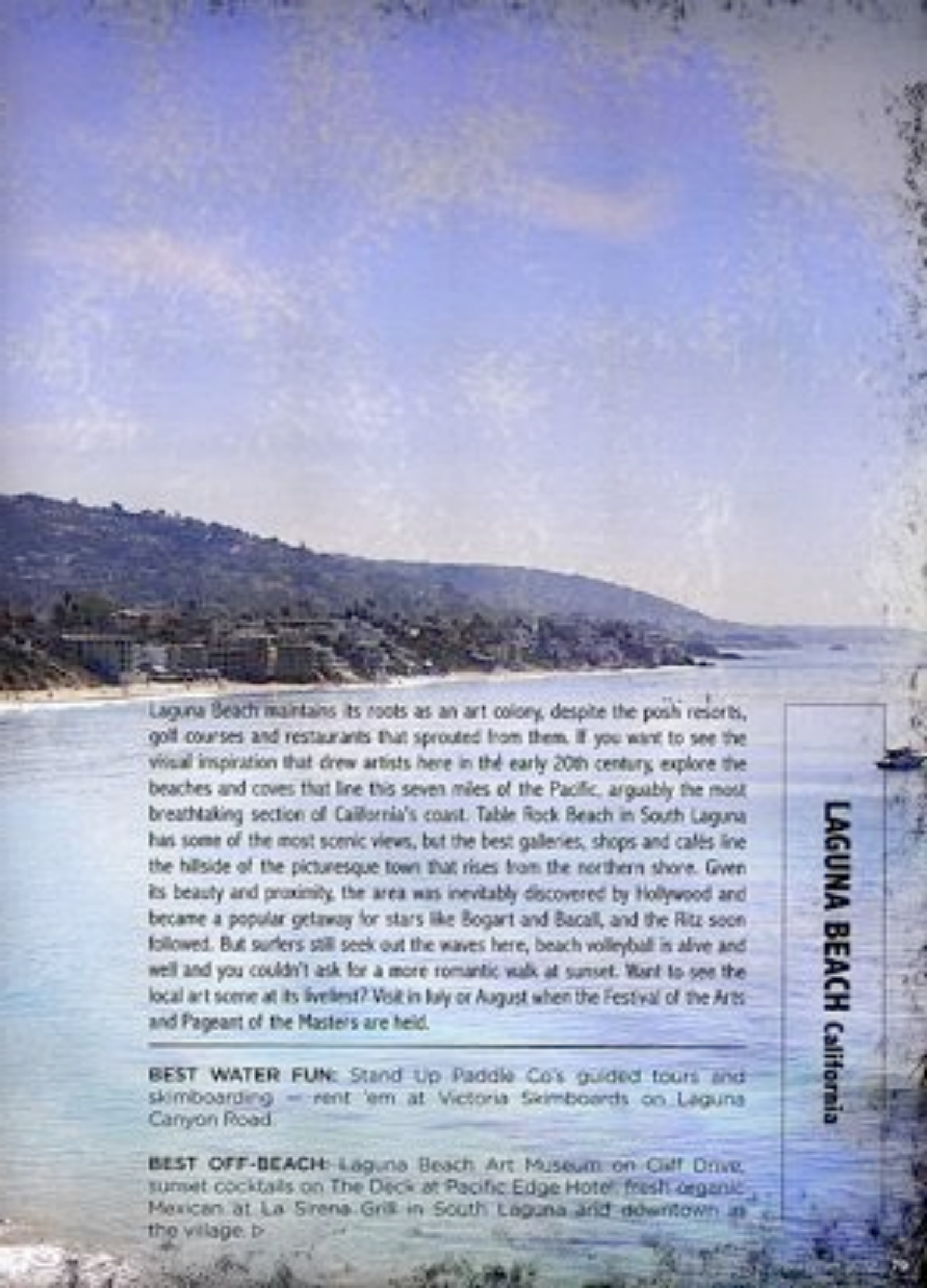
**BEST NEARBY HOTELS:** The Drake, pricey but elegant Deco-era hotel, and the Ian Schrager-designed PUBLIC Hotel in the heart of the Gold Coast.

Honolulu's retro glamour takes on a gentled polish at the heart of Waikiki, where '50s-style Hawaii Five-O morphs into the tropical Fifth Avenue of Kalanikaʻe Avenue. Prada, Ferragamo and Chanel mingle with surf shops and ABC stores (the islands' quirky answer to 7-Eleven), and a newly revitalized hotel district hugs the shore. You can watch surfers catch waves from your balcony or wander over to Waikiki Beach Walk, a new \$460-million project that's turning this part of town into a shopping/dining mecca with a hopping Saturday night strip. Out of all U.S. cities, *Travel & Leisure* readers voted Honolulu #1 for romance and relaxation and #2 for weather and action/adventure — a potent combination in any urban getaway.

**BEST EATS:** Doraku Sushi for Hawaiian-Japanese fusion; and the weekend farmers market at Kapiolani Community College for everything from lavender scones to abalone on the half shell.

**BEST OUTDOOR ADVENTURES:** Learning to surf or stand-up paddle from local freemans at the Hawaiian Fire Surf School; kayaking at Kaula Bay. >





Laguna Beach maintains its roots as an art colony, despite the posh resorts, golf courses and restaurants that sprouted from them. If you want to see the visual inspiration that drew artists here in the early 20th century, explore the beaches and coves that line this seven miles of the Pacific, arguably the most breathtaking section of California's coast. Table Rock Beach in South Laguna has some of the most scenic views, but the best galleries, shops and cafes line the hillside of the picturesque town that rises from the northern shore. Given its beauty and proximity, the area was inevitably discovered by Hollywood and became a popular getaway for stars like Bogart and Bacall, and the Ritz soon followed. But surfers still seek out the waves here, beach volleyball is alive and well and you couldn't ask for a more romantic walk at sunset. Want to see the local art scene at its liveliest? Visit in July or August when the Festival of the Arts and Pageant of the Masters are held.

---

**BEST WATER FUN:** Stand Up Paddle Co.'s guided tours and skimboarding — rent 'em at Victoria Skimboards on Laguna Canyon Road.

**BEST OFF-BEACH:** Laguna Beach Art Museum on Cliff Drive, sunset cocktails on The Deck at Pacific Edge Hotel, fresh organic Mexican at La Sirena Grill in South Laguna and downtown at the village. >



## MYRTLE BEACH South Carolina

Sixty miles of wide sand beaches, shopping and restaurants along the Grand Strand attract snowbirds during mild winters, while hordes of college students come on spring and summer breaks for the theme parks and club scene. Myrtle Beach is a golfer's paradise, with more than 100 manicured courses. As of 2010, it now boasts a snazzy new, mile-long boardwalk stretching from the quiet dunes of the south pier into the heart of the action. Families gravitate to the calm surf and G-rated beaches near the city, while fishermen and kayakers favor the 300-acre wooded state park at the south end. Nearly 15 million people come to Myrtle Beach in the summer alone, and a wall of high-rise hotels and condos line downtown beaches to accommodate them. Summers are long and steamy in this part of the South, making the ocean breezes and almost daily thunderstorms a welcome relief.

---

**BEST GOLF COURSES FOR THE \$\$:** Blackmoor, Gary Player's Grand Strand signature built on the historic Longwood Plantation, and MBN South Creek for challenge and wetland wilderness.

**BEST FAMILY FUN:** Giant seaside ferris wheel at Family Kingdom and Dolly Parton's Dixie Stampede rodeo/dinner theatre.



If you want to find Ivy Leaguers and elusive stars kicking back beachside (in faded Nantucket reds if they're insiders), take a ferry to the Gray Lady. It's about 30 miles farther out than politico-luxe Martha's Vineyard, but the isolation is part of the charm. Ferries drop you at the bottom of Main Street, steps from great bars that have been around forever like Straight Wharf. Whalers made fortunes on Nantucket in *Moby Dick* days and left behind a cobbled town visually frozen at about 1840, but buzzing with nightlife on summer weekends. The island is small enough to rent a bike in town and follow paved trails to Cisco Beach on the south shore, where the waves are high and the sand is silky, and on to the western tip of the island to sip a Madaket Mystery at Millie's and watch the sunset fire up over a silver sea. By August, if you don't have dinner reservations, expect a long but well-rewarded wait. Chefs here know just what to do with the local fishermen's catch of the day.

---

**BEST RESTAURANTS:** Black-Eyed Susan's for bistro-style brunch, Galley Beach at Cliffside Beach Club for seaside dining, Company of the Cauldron for romantic fixed-price Continental cuisine.

**BEST RAINY-DAY DIVERSIONS:** Newly renovated Nantucket Shipwreck and Lifesaving Museum and Current Vinage for vintage togs and rare wines. **p**



An hour south of Half Moon Bay, beyond the heart-stopping cliffside drive known as Devil's Slide, Santa Cruz appears with all the rugged drama of Monterey and a nostalgic boardwalk some reminiscent of the East Coast. There's a Deco-era wooden roller coaster, a Victorian carousel with 142-pipe organ and a stage where bands play live on Friday evenings. Beyond the carnival din, a series of beaches give new meaning to natural beauty: Twin Lakes State Beach leads to the bird sanctuary of Schwann Lagoon and Natural Bridges State Beach has surf-carved stone arches, tidal pools and hiding trails that lead to a eucalyptus grove where a colony of monarch butterflies clusters. If you prefer your natural beauty in human form, check out the surfers at Boney Doon.

---

**INSIDER EATS:** El Palomar for tacos and margaritas, Crow's Nest for romantic seafood dinner overlooking the yacht harbor, The Red for cocktails or late-night bites.

**OUTDOOR ADVENTURE:** Spotting whales, otters and sea lions on Venture Quest paddling tours and cycling through redwood groves at Wilder Ranch State Park. •