



Celebrity playground



California is America's most populated state, where anything goes. **NICK BATEMAN** spent seven days soaking up the rays and atmosphere

THE approach to Los Angeles, from the air, seems to take forever. On the right hand side of the aircraft you can clearly see the Hollywood sign sitting proudly over the city, and as the aircraft banks right it descends into the brown LA haze of smog and sunshine.

The journey to Newport Beach from the airport would normally take just over an hour but we hit the freeway at rush hour, which in LA starts at 2pm and ends whenever.

I was staying at the Hyatt Regency, a pleasant enough resort hotel with a couple of swimming pools and a view of Newport Bay. The food for a resort hotel was outstanding, especially the Surf 'n' Turf.

After a jet lagged ravaged sleep I had breakfast at the Beachcomber Restaurant, which was right on the beach as you would expect. As the waves crashed gently on to the shore I understood why many Americans strolling past were much larger than you would see in the UK – the food portions served here are just too large.

I then went on a Segway tour of Newport – these are curious transport devices that TV judge Piers Morgan said of: "If anyone falls off one of these they are an idiot." He then fell off one and broke three ribs. Once mastered though, they are a great way to get around and great fun.

Newport has some impressive wooden-clad homes that hug the coastline, as well as thousands

of yachts – many of which are often used by sea lions to rest on in the harbour.

There is also a huge shopping centre called Fashion Island which has most of the top designer shops under one roof and with plenty of places to eat, drink and spend money.

Next stop Santa Monica, a beach suburb of LA – around 40 minutes from Newport. Santa Monica is home to the famous Muscle Beach and the world's only solar-powered Ferris wheel, sorry big wheel.

Santa Monica has a famous farmers' market on a Sunday which sells all kind of weird and wonderful produce from around the States as well as stalls that serve lunch or breakfast. A little way down the road are the odd and bizarre stores that line the promenade at Venice Beach.

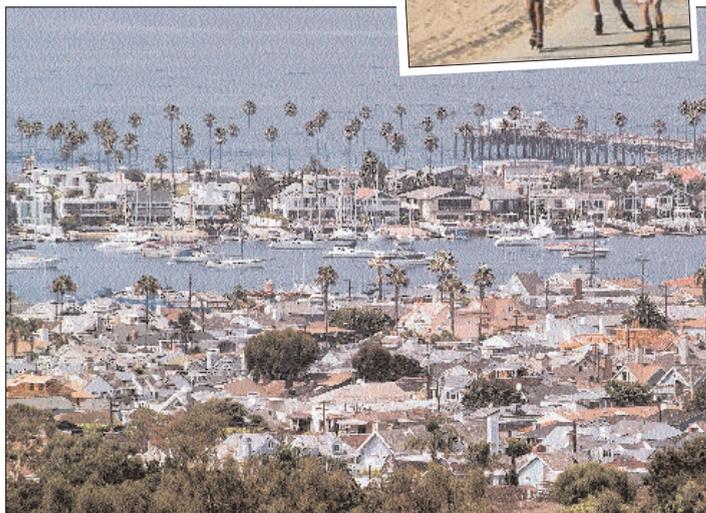
A walk around these stores and the bohemian market stalls both shows the charm and weirdness of this eclectic place. Cool bars, cafés playing loud music and people-watching – it is a great place to have coffee or beer and watch the world go by.

There are no suburban trains in LA because of the earthquake risk, so if you want to go to Hollywood or downtown LA an open top tourist bus, a normal bus or taxi are the only options. But Santa Monica has all that you need to relax, chill and soak up the sun.

Two hours east of LA in the desert is the celebrity town of Palm Springs where most of the Hollywood greats either have weekend homes, or escape to when needing a break from LA.

Palm Springs is very cool, with many hidden bars and boutique hotels that suit everyone's pocket.

Most of the hotels have bikes for hire, which is a great way to explore the place – and it is impossible to get lost in the grid system. If you go on a tacky bus tour of dead, or nearly



dead, Hollywood stars' houses, you can, but Palm Springs is not just a one-trick-pony, celebrity-spotting town.

I do have a secret hotel that I love here, but I stayed somewhere just as enchanting – The Viceroy, hidden off the main drag and next to an old-school Hollywood bar called Melvyn's. Both are well worth a visit, as you never know who you might bump into.

Palm Springs is sunny nearly all the year and you can almost do anything; from desert tours in a Jeep to horse riding, travelling the world's largest rotating aerial tram to sitting by the pool or just hanging out in a cocktail bar.

As the famous Betty Ford Clinic is a few miles away, you could combine your trip to California with more celebrity-spotting at the world's most famous 'drying out' clinic.

Palm Springs is one of the few places I have returned to and will again. The Joshua Tree National Park, the Grand Canyon and Las Vegas are all an easy drive away, although not at the same time, but I would recommend you do see them if you have the time, as the drive is stunning.

'IMPRESSIVE': The harbour and view of Newport Beach. Inset, the bike path at Santa Monica

FACTFILE

■ Seven nights in California with Virgin Holidays, including scheduled flights with Virgin Atlantic from Heathrow direct to LA, three nights at the Hyatt Regency Newport Beach, two nights at The Viceroy Palm Springs and two nights at The Viceroy Santa Monica, including car hire, starts from £1,272. Prices are per person based on two adults travelling and sharing a standard room. Price includes all applicable taxes and fuel surcharges, which are subject to change. Prices are based on departures in August 2011. To book, visit www.virginholidays.co.uk.
■ Tourist Board websites: Visit Newport Beach – www.visitnewportbeach.com/uk; Santa Monica – www.santamonica.com; Palm Springs Desert Resorts – www.palmspringsusa.com.