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Beach bums on wheels

Great way to see California's surf and sand is on a bike

By LORI KNOWLES

There are few spots in the U.S. that can make a teenager's eyes pop wider than the beach scene in Los Angeles. From its California skaters and surfer girls to its basketball courts and bike parks, the enormous strand of white sand along the Gold Coast from Santa Monica to Venice and beyond sees a lot of outrageous, trend-starting action.

One of the most interactive ways to experience it first hand is on a bike -- available for rent at beachside kiosks by Legends Beach Bike Tours and Rentals. For about \$35 per person, you can rent practically any type of bike on the market, or upgrade to an eye-opening guided bike tour.

Our tour was led by company owner Richard Chacker, a self-described SoCal (Southern California) beach bum and ex-hippie who, after years of beachside debauchery, turned his beach hangout into a lucrative business.

A typical tour starts at the enormous Santa Monica Pier, which juts into the ocean so far it has space for a ferris wheel and carousel.

Chacker points north toward Malibu to the beach beyond where Pamela Anderson and David Hasselhof shook their booties on Baywatch.

38-KM OF PATH

The cycling tour then heads south. There's 38 km of path total -- Chacker says it's the longest continuous paved trail in America -- leading from Santa Monica, past Venice, Manhattan and Hermosa Beaches all the way down to Torrance Beach. The most popular stretch is the 11 km between Santa Monica and Marina Del Rey -- the birthplace of many a hot trend.

"This is where surfing got its start in America," says Chacker. The modern version of lifeguarding and beach volleyball started on this stretch of beach, too -- there are dozens of sand courts full of buff players at all times of the day. And it's in the parking lots behind Santa Monica Beach that inline skating began. The home of Dogtown and Z Boys and their skateboard culture is not far from the pier.

Just south of the Santa Monica Pier is Muscle Beach, which from 1934 to 1958 was as big in America as surfing and skating are now. It was the start of the fitness craze and the infamous hangout of bodybuilders like Joe Gold (of Gold's Gym) and Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Santa Monica is also the home of more than 85 art galleries. Says Chacker: "Locals consider Santa Monica to be the cultural centre of L.A."

Inland slightly from Venice Beach are the meandering canals that inspired this location's name back in 1820.

VENICE OF AMERICA

It's worth hopping off the bike and strolling along the canals, if only to peek at the bohemian houses that line the shores, with their little docks, kayaks and paddle boats parked out front.

They say Julia Roberts lives here somewhere, along with many other celebs.

For details on bike rentals along L.A.'s Gold Coast or the Legends Beach Bike Tour, visit perryscafe.com.



One of the most interactive ways to experience California first hand is on a bike. (Clipart.com)