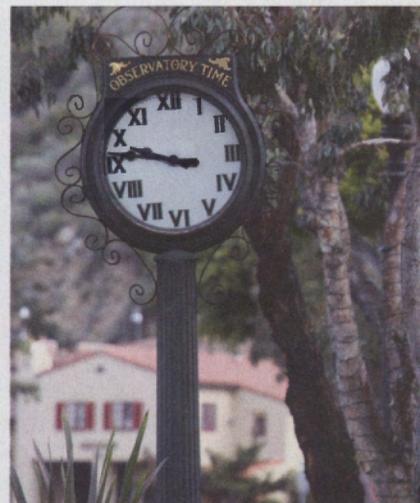


South Coast



(Left to right) Mission San Juan Capistrano; the slips at Dana Point Harbor; and downtown Laguna Beach.

Colorful cities on or near the coast include artistic Laguna Beach, historic San Juan Capistrano and nautical Dana Point.

Four of the county's most historic cities are nestled into its southern corner: Laguna Beach, Dana Point and San Clemente, all a seaside drive along Coast Highway, and nearby San Juan Capistrano. Whether for shopping, dining, history or just tantalizing poetic beauty, these small burghs have spectacular offerings.

LAGUNA BEACH

It's fitting that you pass the Laguna College of Art + Design as you enter Orange County's original art colony along Laguna Canyon Road. Admire the sculptures! In fact, it is easy to spend a day along the thoroughfare before ever entering the city proper, especially during the summer, when it hosts three art festivals—**Festival of Arts**, **Art-A-Fair** and the **Sawdust Art Festival**—and the renowned "living tableaux" presentation, **Pageant of the Masters**. The acclaimed **Laguna Playhouse** offers both comedic and profound fare year-round.

Laguna Canyon Road becomes Broadway, then comes to a T at Main Beach and Coast Highway. The decision: Turn left toward downtown, or right toward Laguna Art Museum; you'll find boutiques, restaurants and galleries in both directions.

Laguna Art Museum continues as a leader in its presentation of modern and contemporary art, mostly by California painters, and often exploring pop culture. It also displays art from Laguna's past; don't be surprised to see lots of seascapes.

Steps away are coastal vistas at Heisler Park and a stretch of Coast Highway called North Gallery Row, where you'll find Hobrecht Sports Gallery (350 N. Coast Hwy., 949.945.3283) and Adam Neeley Fine Art Jewelry (353 N. Coast Hwy., 949.715.0953). The neighborhoods above are dotted with historical cottages. On a steep hillside is the Hortense Miller Garden (by appointment, 22511 Allview Terrace, 949.497.3311, Ext. 426).

Main Beach gets action year-round. There are volleyball and basketball courts, a playground and a boardwalk popular with walkers and joggers, and one more major attraction: The beach is just across the street from scores of the distinctive shops and galleries that give the city its distinctive aura.

Get deeper into the action in the downtown heart of Laguna, also known to locals as the Village. Here the must-sees include the sculpture garden at Dawson Cole Fine Art Gallery (326 Glenneyre St., 888.972.5543) and Left Turn Jewelry (305 Forest Ave., 866.954.5338). South along Coast Highway are dining options including **Katsuya by Starck**, **K'ya Bistro Bar** at the Casa del Camino and posh **Studio** at the Montage.

Moulton Meadows Park, four minutes skyward from Coast Highway up Nyes Place, offers a 360-degree panorama of the deep blue Pacific and South County's rugged hills.

DANA POINT

Richard Henry Dana, the seaman who wrote 1840's *Two Years Before the Mast*, described the area now named for him as "the only romantic spot" on the California coast, noting its "grandeur" and "solemnity." The grandeur is still there, but you won't find much solemnity along Harbor Drive, now bustling with boaters, diners, shoppers and those headed to see the tall clipper ships in port.

In addition to its sand and shore, **Doheny State Beach** offers five acres of lawn. Families picnic, couples rent bicycles. An interpretive center focuses on the underwater Doheny State Marine Life Refuge. The beach hosts events including Lobsterfest in June, a surf competition in July and outrigger racing in August. Busiest day of the year? Fourth of July, with fireworks launched from a barge.

Make your way along Harbor Drive to the tide pools at the end of the harbor's rocky ledge. Public benches are a stone's throw from seals basking in the sun on sea-logged boulders; take in both the quiet beauty of the harbor and the roar of the surf against the rocks.

Dana Point Harbor offers 2,500 slips for vessels of all sizes, three yacht clubs, a fishing pier and **Dana Wharf Sportfishing**, which also offers whale-watching trips. The **Ocean Institute** displays the Pilgrim, a full-sized replica of the square-rigged brig on which Dana sailed, docked adjacent to the fishing pier. Wharf highlights include the White Pelican for Native American jewelry (34475 Golden Lantern St., 949.240.1991) and the **Harbor Grill** seafooder, known for its oysters.

North of town are luxury hotels featuring superior dining: **Stonehill Tavern** at the St. Regis, and **Raya** at the Ritz-Carlton.

SAN JUAN CAPISTRANO

There's no beach in this burg, but there's plenty of history, style and charm. And there is simply no passing up a visit to **Mission San Juan Capistrano**. The mission is often credited with being the birthplace of Orange County. It was founded by Father Junipero Serra in 1776, the same year America was born. It took nine years to build its Great Stone Church, completed in 1806; it took just a minute for an earthquake to destroy it six years later, killing 40 people.

The priests left the ruins for the world to see, a dramatic benchmark of the struggle to build California. The dome atop the nearby rail station was made with stones from the ruins. Priests still celebrate Mass in the Serra Chapel; the original adobe walls shelter a magnificent Baroque altarpiece decorated with 52 carved gold-leaf angels. The 10-acre site is filled with walkways, gardens, fountains and exhibits. Mission events include the renowned festival marking the return of the swallows and Swallows' Day Parade in March.

Just across the train tracks is the Los Rios Historic District. A stroll along Los Rios Street is a most pleasant experience; 31 homes, the earliest dating to 1794, look as they did in centuries past. Near the train station is the O'Neill Museum (31831 Los Rios St., 949.493.8444), home to the San Juan Capistrano Historical Society. The **Ramos House Café**, in an 1881 board-and-batten house, offers an unforgettable breakfast.

Camino Capistrano is lined with shops and restaurants. One of South County's most popular taverns is the colorful Swallow's Inn

(31786 Camino Capistrano, 949.493.3188). For a different kind of nightlife, consider the nearby Camino Real Playhouse (31776 El Camino Real, 949.489.8082). San Juan Capistrano Regional Library (31495 El Camino Real, 949.493.1752) is a postmodern masterpiece by architect Michael Graves.

San Juan Capistrano is the county's equestrian center; luxurious residences, many with their own stables, surround the city. Eight miles east is Ronald W. Caspers Wilderness Park (33401 Ortega Hwy., San Juan Capistrano, 949.923.2210).

SAN CLEMENTE

La Casa Pacifica, President Richard Nixon's "Western White House," has long since been broken up into million-dollar homes by a private developer. But one grand, historic home you can see is Casa Romantica (415 Avenida Granada, 949.498.2139), once the residence of the city's founder, oil entrepreneur Ole Hanson. It's on a hillside overlooking San Clemente Pier and is now the Cultural Center and Gardens, with galleries and a popular veranda.

From the pier, the sun sets across the blue water between Catalina Island and the Dana Point bluffs—just look past the constant stream of surfers. Metrolink and Amtrak trains run alongside the beach and stop right at the pier. The best shopping and dining is on Avenida del Mar, lined with antique stores and galleries, and El Camino Real, where you'll find the wine-country cuisine of **Vine**.

Talega Golf Club, in the hills above the city, has a popular championship layout designed with input from Masters champion Fred Couples. **Sundried Tomato** is among the draws at Talega Village Center. 📍

For **bold** items, see listing in the **where** guide. For a map of these neighborhoods, see page 71.



GREAT FIND DATE NIGHT REDUX

Consider an artisan cheese and charcuterie plate, spicy lobster roll or chopped short-rib burger; start with a specialty cocktail or finish with Godiva chocolate cheesecake. Just ring a waiter with the call button at every seat at the new 21-screen **Cinépolis Luxury Cinemas** in Laguna Niguel. Buy your tickets in advance online or view trailers of current movies at the self-service touch screen before selecting the perfect seat at the luxury box office. With plush leather electric reclining seats complete with footrest and swivel table, the intimate auditoriums provide a bastion of comfort and indulgence that takes dinner and a movie to a whole new level. 32401 Golden Lantern, Laguna Niguel, 949.487.1900. cinepolisusa.com