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Kayaking and cat therapy on a Santa Barbara getaway by train



The view from a business-class seat aboard the Pacific Surfliner. (Terry Gardner)

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Like everyone else, I was desperate to go somewhere after being cooped up over the summer. I wanted to know how travel felt from behind a mask. How would I react if a stranger sneezed on me? I chose Santa Barbara because I wouldn't have to go far for a trial run. And I chose to take Amtrak because I hate traffic and love train travel, or at least I did eons ago when Corona was just a beer.

I found plenty of low-risk things to do on my much-needed break, such as kayaking and biking, and even squeezed in time to cozy up with kittens at a rescue shelter. Before you consider taking this or any trip, note that the CDC and state of California want us to stay close to home and observe a nighttime curfew.

The train

I booked the [Pacific Surfliner](#) to Santa Barbara. [Amtrak's COVID-19 measures](#), including more frequent and thorough cleaning, made me feel it was a safer way to travel — especially because Amtrak was limiting capacity to 50%. [Amtrak's app](#) put my tickets in my phone, making contactless travel easy.

As I boarded the train, Captain Fear shouted in my head: Are you crazy? Would other passengers wear masks? Might COVID-19 be seated next to me? I was reassured when I saw a hand-sanitizing station at the bottom of the stairs as I boarded. When I saw a second one at the top of stairs, I thought “hallelujah.” (You’ll find four hand sanitizers in each car and two disinfecting wipe containers on the lower levels of each car.)

At \$40, my one-way business-class ticket was a bargain. My one fearful moment came when I walked past two men who weren’t wearing masks talking across the aisle. One guffawed and sprayed my arm with his breath. I quickly slathered it with hand sanitizer so I wouldn’t freak out. Then an Amtrak employee asked both men to raise their masks, which also reassured me.

For the return trip, I splurged and booked a \$113 [superliner roomette](#) on the Coast Starlight. My roomette was cramped, and the air conditioning didn’t work — and temperatures were in the 80s. The bed and the table were OK, but the bathroom was down the hall.



View of sunset on the return trip aboard the Coast Starlight. (Terry Gardner)

I was more disturbed by the lack of hand sanitizer in the roomette or near the stairway. Although Amtrak confirmed by email that hand-sanitizing stations are available on all trains, I didn't see any in the sleeper car. When I asked the steward in the dining car about hand-sanitizing stations, he seemed surprised I was looking for one and offered me the sink. Oh, how I missed my business-class seat.

The bed

The Hotel Californian is a short walk from the Amtrak station. I liked its [COVID-19 prevention cleaning protocols](#) and proximity to the [Funk Zone](#). The 121-room luxury hotel spans three buildings, one of which has a rooftop pool. As I stood in a short, social distanced line to check in, I used the sleek, black hand sanitizing station beside me.

I loved the hotel interiors that blended Moroccan decor with 1920s Hollywood glamour. My room, called Sestina King, was spacious, with a king bed and partial ocean view from the balcony. After months of being stuck at home, it was nice to feel spoiled.

I saved money with the midweek [Get Out & Play package](#) that included breakfast at [Goat Tree](#), one of the hotel's restaurants, and free overnight parking. Breakfast rocked; I loved the protein frittata. Californians can save an additional 10% with the Play Local discount.

The meal

Dinner was at [Loquita](#), a restaurant that had patio seating long before COVID-19 made me prefer eating outdoors. Loquita is known for authentic hot and cold [Spanish tapas](#), seasonal paella and gin and tonics. I tried the Costa Blanca, which uses kaffir lime-infused gin. My friend had La Reina, which combines Empress gin with sherry, lavender and tonic. My share for dinner — chorizo and chicken paella and a medley of cauliflower in tomato juice, manchego cheese foam and serrano chiles — was about \$58, not including tax and tip. I had churros for dessert, and the leftovers were awesome dipped in my latte the next day.

The find

Even though I was away from my cats for just one night, I felt the need to go to [Cat Therapy](#), where you can pay \$20 to play with kittens and cats for an hour (masks required). There's no pressure

to adopt at this no-kill shelter, and you help socialize the rescued felines.

Another find: I was thrilled to find a set of five designer [cotton face masks](#) for \$25 at [Johnny Was Montecito](#) (Johnny Was has L.A. locations too). The shop is just a few doors from [Tre Lune](#), where I feasted on pasta on in its patio.

Lesson learned

Santa Barbara took [CDC COVID-19 prevention](#) seriously. I saw more people properly masked here than in other parts of Southern California, where some wear their mask as a chin strap.

I binged on biking, kayaking, walking and shopping in my day and a half trip. I spent about \$1,043, including \$152 for Amtrak tickets; \$603 for a hotel room, including breakfast and resort fee; \$113 for meals; and \$175 for activities (including renting an electric bike and taking a guided kayak tour).

If you go

I could have saved more on my hotel stay and stayed longer with [Visit Santa Barbara's 3rd Night Free deal](#) (you pay for two nights, third night is free). Here are resources for the trip I did:

[Amtrak](#); (800) 872-7245; [Pacific Surfliner](#) discounts

[Hotel Californian](#), 36 State St., Santa Barbara; (805) 882-0100.

[Nine handicapped accessible rooms](#), including one suite.

Queen/king from \$459 a night.

[Loquita](#), 202 State St., Santa Barbara; |(805) 880-3380

[Johnny Was Montecito](#), 1159 Coast Village Road, Santa Barbara;

(805) 979-2820

[Wheel Fun Rentals of Santa Barbara](#), 29 State St., Santa Barbara;

(805) 966-2282

[Cat Therapy](#), 1213 State St., Suite L, Santa Barbara; (805) 560-

1996

[Visit Santa Barbara](#), 500 E. Montecito St., Santa Barbara; (805)

966-9222