

View from Grant Park, 18" x 36", oil on canvas by Hilda Kilpatrick

VENTURA, CALIFORNIA

Old World Adventure Beyond the Sand and Surf

by Colleen Birch Maile

I couldn't afford the Grand Tour this year, so I spent a weekend in Ventura and came home feeling like a world traveler. The classic California beach town, just 70 miles north of SoCal's swarm, offers savvy visitors plenty of exotic adventures along with the sand and surf. Consider packing these possibilities into a mere 40 hours:

FRIDAY NIGHT: Dinner at The Greek. Lots of places serve good Greek food and the fare at this waterfront eatery certainly doesn't disappoint. In fact, it's exceptional. Aside from perfect calamari, lamb and a generous assortment of vegan-friendly dishes, The Greek's entertainment sets the place apart. Waitstaff training includes instruction in Greek dancing. Patrons get into the act, joining in the basic steps. Servers ably perform with glasses of ouzo or wine balanced upon their foreheads. It's a rollicking good time even before the proprietors' son Aristedes Mikelatos brings an Old World meaning to the term "Table Dance."

His mother Lynn Mikelatos explained that Aris grew up watching native Greek entertainers and was fascinated by a rarely performed routine—a man dancing with a dining table

clenched in his teeth. "They don't even do it in Greece much anymore," she said. "Aris would watch George Alexiades who used to do it at the Greek festivals and from that he basically taught himself. He started by picking up a restaurant high chair and kept going."

Aris now astounds diners by elevating a full-sized table with his teeth and gracefully traipsing around the dance floor. Before he's done, three tables—75 pounds of awkward weight—become his partner. A full wine glass balances carefully at the top. Amid shouts of "opa!" and the audience's rhythmic clapping he doesn't spill a drop.



Traditional Greek table dance

SATURDAY: The Channel Islands. Book passage aboard an Island Packers' boat bound for The Channel Islands National Park—a pristine, uninhabited hideaway just an hour from Ventura Harbor. Along the way you'll likely encounter pods of dolphins numbering in the thousands, as well as blue and/or gray whales depending upon the season. Getting there may be *almost*

| COVER ARTIST, HILDA KILPATRICK



Hilda Kilpatrick, the woman responsible for *A Day at the Beach*, this edition's cover image and the cityscape at left, paints with passion, purpose and innate ability. When she was a child in Trujillo, Peru art "was something to play at, not to be taken seriously," she said. Her advanced studies focused on languages. Then she moved

to California's Central Coast in 1998 and the landscape ignited her creative spark.

Kilpatrick chats effusively about her new hometown, noting its similarities to Trujillo. The Spanish established 18th-century colonies in each. They both stir her appreciation of history. "I like to think that in a way I am archiving the places I paint." Her talent attracts accolades,

awards and recently a grant to further studies of plein-aire technique. "I love to paint outdoors," she noted. The cover image was inspired by an umbrella concession near Ventura's land-mark pier.

A full-time job means Kilpatrick paints mostly on weekends. "I love it so much. I can paint all day without even taking lunch. And I love to eat." Local dining favorites include Nature's Grill, where she goes for "something fast and healthy" and Café Barriloché for authentic South American empanadas. For more about the artist and her work, visit www.hildakilpatrick.com.



Let's Go Surfing, 36" x 48" oil on canvas

half the fun. The real adventure occurs in the park. Hike the hills in search of rare species such as the Channel Island fox or explore the coastal waters and caves via kayak. No prior paddling experience required when you sign up with a veteran guide such as Aquasports' Tony Chapman. He's been leading novices through these waters for more than 20 years and imparts equal doses of confidence and island information.


SATURDAY NIGHT: Dinner with a Mediterranean Flair. Ventura is chock-a-block with eateries. There's something to fit every palate and pocket-book. After a day of sea and sun, consider blowing the budget on an upscale Mediterranean meal. Jonathan's at Peiranos and Tutti's are top picks. Both offer al fresco dining and excellent food.

SUNDAY: Breakfast at Nona's Courtyard Café. Continue the Mediterranean theme at Bella Maggiore, a quaint Italianate pensione in the heart of downtown. Mingle with the inn's guests at breakfast in a courtyard surrounded by vine-covered walls and festooned with vegetation. You may hear tales of an other-worldly resident. Sylvia, abandoned by her married lover in the aftermath of World War II, committed suicide in the hotel—and continues to visit the premises.

SUNDAY AFTERNOON: Tour the Mission and Hit the Beach. Stroll through the compact downtown; take in the historic sites including the Mission San Buenaventura, still functioning as a church 327 years after its founding by Father Junipero Serra. Then head to the beach; take a surf lesson from the likes of *MTV Surf Girl* Mary Osborne (see page 12) or rent one of the yellow umbrellas depicted on our cover, and simply watch the waves. This is a place unfettered by time and space. It remains at once the best of California and a gateway to other worlds. ■



The official name of this town, San Buenaventura, honors Saint Bonaventure, an Italian friar whose name means good fortune. Tradition holds that he got the nickname that's the equivalent of "Lucky" when he was healed from a serious childhood illness by none other than Saint Francis of Assisi. Ventura has always been lucky, too. To discover how it cheated economic disaster in the 1930s visit "communities" at: www.americasbestplaces.com.



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HOMETOWN HINTS



Professional surfer and model Mary Osborne

For Mary Osborne life is a day at the beach and then some. This consummate surfer girl packs a lot of living into life. Best known as the long-board champion from MTV's *Surf Girls*, the professional surfer, surf model, author and Patagonia surf-wear spokesperson travels the world seeking ideal waves and picture-perfect photo

opportunities. When it's time to unpack the bags, she comes home to Ventura.

The diminutive blonde grew up on Ventura's Solimar Beach and followed her three older brothers into the waves when she was just a kid. "I started when I was 12 and by the time I was 13 I'd dropped everything else," she said. More than nostalgia and family ties draw her back to Ventura. Her hometown offers great surfing and a lot more. "I try to surf every day of the year. You can do that here", she said noting that she does own a wardrobe of wetsuits. There are five nice point breaks; the most famous is Ricon. There are nice beach breaks down near Oxnard. I live up in the hills now, about two miles from the beach and it's really beautiful, too. There's a lot more to do than when I was growing up. In the last few years there have been some really neat additions downtown."

When it's time to unwind, Osborne heads to the Watermark, a hip Main Street restaurant and lounge housed in a 1928 bank, built just before the Great Stock Market Crash. Its ornate architectural details have been painstakingly restored. Osborne noted that the atmosphere is a big part of the draw. "It's really the center of the scene right now."

Lesser-known favorites include Taqueria Taptitan. "It's up the avenue," she said, referring to Ventura Avenue. "I love the food and not a lot of people know about it. For a nice dinner in a more out-of-the-way spot I love Café Zach. I've been everywhere—all over the world and Ventura has everything I want." ■



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