

PEERLESS AMUSEMENT PARKS

THE SANTA MONICA PIER AND AMERICA'S
FIRST AMUSEMENT PARKS



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Photography by Mitch Riley

The biggest attraction for many vacations is location. Whether it's New York City, Los Angeles, Santa Cruz, Chicago, or Southern Texas, they all have one thing in common: water. Natural oceans, bays, lakes, and gulfs are attractions in and of themselves. You can swim, enjoy the sun, or take part in jet-skiing, boating and surfing. In the past, people even went to the waters to improve their health. So, it's not surprising that some of the first amusement parks in the United States were built right over the water.

As a child, every time I went to visit my grandmother in New York, she would take us to the beach where we would quickly dip our feet in the seaweed-filled water, get sand in our bathing suits and run to the boardwalk for ice cream, Skee-ball, and games. I know I wasn't the only one. Almost everyone has had that experience as children, both kids today as well as their parents and grandparents.

Boardwalks, piers and seaside attractions are part of our national culture and history. Coney Island's amusement parks arrived on the scene as early as 1895. Charles Looff, the designer of Coney Island's first carousel, found he had hit upon a great idea. He brought his beautiful creations to vacation spots all over the country. Most notably, he developed carousels, roller coasters, dancing halls and other attractions on the California shores. He and his son built attractions and helped develop piers and boardwalks around the country. These places are now preserved as historical landmarks. In 1916, he built the Santa Monica Pleasure Pier. At the end of the pier you can view archival pictures of the Santa Monica Pier, in various stages of repair and popularity.

Boardwalks and pleasure piers depend on a common sense of nostalgia to attract their guests. They may no longer hold the most technologically advanced rides, but are still popular and can attract thousands on a busy weekend. Currently more than 3 million people visit the Santa Monica Pier each year. Instead of technology, piers depend on classic rides and games to appeal to visitors. This nostalgia is so strong that larger corporate venues mimic these original amusement parks, evident with Disney's California

Adventure's relatively new Paradise Pier. Mitch Albom wrote a testament to the nostalgia of pleasure piers when he based his bestseller, "The Five People You Meet In Heaven" on a maintenance man at the fictional Ruby Pier. American pleasure piers hold a special significance in our national culture. The cherished status of these parks is what attracts visitors from all over the country and the world to the Santa Monica Pier. And attract, it does.

Walking down the pier on a beautiful weekend is like trying to shop the day after Thanksgiving. As you're welcomed onto the pier by the famous sign at the end of Route 66, you have to be patient as you follow the crowd and the cars down to the screams of delight and the roar of the waves. You'll probably walk right past Looff's original building, the Hippodrome, with his hand-carved carousel and Wurlitzer inside. But the local artisans will stand out – the caricature artists, the clay sculptors, watercolor calligraphers, and talented finger painters (I'm serious. Their tiny masterpieces are gorgeous.).

Before reaching the end of the pier, the Playland Arcade throngs with people. With hundreds of video games packed back-to-back, the arcade is a popular attraction. It hearkens back to the old days of video parlours of the early 1980s. I mean, they still have the original Dance Dance Revolution in addition to the new Extreme Dance Dance Revolution. But, seriously, in addition to more modern games, classic arcade games like Pac-Man, Ms. Pac-Man, Galaga, and Centipede (roller ball and all), stand throughout the Playland. Ten air-hockey tables are played almost constantly, unmistakable by the rampant clicking of plastic pucks knocking back and forth. And, of course, as should be the case with every respectable beachside attraction, Skee-ball lines an entire wall.

As the smell of funnel cakes, hot dogs, ice cream, and churros combat the smell of the ocean spray, you come upon Pacific Park. With shouting children, the roar of roller coasters, calls of midway games, the bells of the Ferris wheel, and the screams of thrill seekers, there is no doubt that you have entered a timeless attraction. Sure, in the "olden days" the roller coasters were wooden and the Ferris wheel wasn't solar powered as it is today, but the Santa

Monica Pleasure Pier of the early 1900s probably wasn't very different. There are a few more rides made of steel now, but the pier of the past still held the crowd of excited visitors, the carousel and Ferris wheel, and the sun and the surf crashing on the beach that it does today. And the best part? Entry into this historical delight is absolutely free. The rides and parking cost extra, but just strolling the pier and soaking it all in doesn't cost a penny.

If, however, you have a few bucks to spend, you can buy some tickets and enjoy yourself at this classic park, smaller and



homier than the giants of the amusement park world. At \$2.25 a ticket, and two tickets per ride, it's possible to spend almost as much as you would at a corporate competitor. However, there are perks to being at a smaller venue. For instance, I got to ride the West Coaster, a one-and-a-half minute relatively tame coaster overlooking the ocean, twice in a row without exiting. That's never happened to me at a "big" park, even when there was no one in line behind me!

Most of the rides on the pier are themed for the ocean, either nautically designed or planned to take advantage of their on-the-water location. In line for the ticket booth, a swinging boat called the Sea Dragon swings what seems like mere feet above your head, passengers screaming. It doesn't hold you upside-down, like some swinging ship rides, but swings in a 180 degree arc. Towering over the coaster, the nine-story tall solar-powered Pacific Wheel stands out along the seashore. It's one of the most famous sights in the Los Angeles

area. It may not be the scariest ride, but with that kind of view over the ocean, it's not something you'll soon forget. Opened just last year, the Pacific Plunge is a 45-foot-tall tower that gives riders a sense of weightlessness and holds them looking far into the watery distance.

The Santa Monica Pier would not be complete without the requisite classic kid-friendly amusement park rides. The Sig Alert is the Santa Monica version of bumper cars. (For those of you who don't live in Los Angeles, a sig alert is a traffic jam. No, I don't know why they don't just say "traffic jam".) Inkie's Scrambler and Inkie's Li'l Scrambler are... scramblers. Inkie's Scrambler fits adults as well as kids, and it spins at eleven revolutions per minute, while the Li'l Scrambler's spins more slowly and just fits the kids. There are more kid versions of rides on the pier, including Ship Ahoy, a smaller version of the Sea Dragon, and the Frog Hopper, an 18-foot-tall version of the Pacific Plunge. And what amusement park would be complete without circling Red Baron biplanes and a Crazy Submarine (which ironically spin around side-to-side above the ocean). There's also the Pirate's Pier Mini Golf. For only \$3, you can play those nine holes all day. That is a bargain. And with shipwrecks, palm trees, cannons, and trunks full of treasure, it's entertaining for everyone. But beware. According to a sign, no swashbucklers allowed. If the club swings too high, you may get a broken knee, and there's deck scrubbing for those who move their ball illegally.

The Santa Monica Pier is a refreshing break from your intensive, all-day, expensive theme parks. You can walk in and out without hand stamps, turnstiles, trams, or having to remember some cartoon





Timeline

- 1909 - Santa Monica Municipal Pier Opens
- 1916 - Charles Looff begins his own pleasure pier
- 1930s - Severe weather, Blue Streak Coaster torn down, Ballroom closes
- 1953 - Looff's Pleasure Pier taken over by the City of Santa Monica and leased out
- 1970s - Santa Monica City Council orders both piers demolished
Save Our Pier Forever campaign begins,
City creates Pier Restoration Corporation
- 1975 - Looff's Hippodrome building and carousel made L.A. county historical landmark
- 1988 - Santa Monica City Council starts Santa Monica Pier Development Program to build new concrete substructure
- 1996 - May 25, Current Pacific Park Opens

character designation of where you parked. You don't have to deal with \$10 "value meals" or expensive admission prices. You don't have to spend days there just to ride everything. If things get too crowded and noisy, you can just turn around and look into the calm, blue ocean, and after all the hustle

and bustle, you can walk down a flight of stairs, spread a towel on the sand and relax to the sounds of the waves. Amazingly, people have been doing just that at the Santa Monica Pier for about a hundred years.

For more information about the Santa Monica Pier and Pacific Park, visit http://www.pacpark.com/general_info.asp

