

TRAVEL

AND RECREATION

ROAD TRIP

Cruise the coast

San Diego County's
Old Highway 101 is still
the classic beach drive

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY
WOODS WHEATCROFT

I stop into Lou's Records along Old Highway 101 in Encinitas, seeking my soundtrack for a drive along the best stretch of the original coast route between San Diego and Los Angeles.

Lou's is an old-fashioned indie record shop, a throwback on a throwback road that is to the beach what Route 66 is to the American Southwest. I go with a CD by the Thrills, an Irish band that one reviewer described as the "Beach Boys on stout," although U2 on fish tacos may be more like it: The band spent a few months living on the beach in San Diego, where they fell—and fell hard—for California.

You will, too, when you take a drive down Old 101 between Oceanside and Torrey Pines State Reserve, where long lines of breakers roll onto shore and



It's a sweet ride on Old Highway 101 through downtown Encinitas.

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distinctive beach towns are strung together over 20 miles. Old 101 is a haven for California beach culture and the days when travel wasn't about getting from Point A to Point B but about rolling down the windows and taking in all the points between.

"When I drive 101, I can feel, for a little while, that things haven't changed very much," says Chris Ahrens, editor for the spirituality-themed *Risen* magazine and an area resident for 39 years. "When I pull into Leucadia and see that line of eucalyptus, there's a real feeling of connectedness to the past."

Classic coffee, seaside chic

Dating back to 1928, Oceanside's 101 Cafe is another tangible reminder of the road's long history. John Daley, the restaurant's co-owner and chairman of the Highway 101 Association, says the cafe is the highway's oldest anywhere along Old 101's full run from Mexico to Washington's Olympic Peninsula. He reels off the names of a few of its previous incarnations: Graham's Drive-In, Jimmy's Coffeeshop, Randy's Coffeeshop. "I figured we needed to rename it when people started calling me Randy," he says.

We head south in Daley's PT Cruiser. It's a great drive, always changing in mood and character. With chic home-decor stores and galleries, the highway is no museum piece, but it's the arcana that Daley most loves: vintage gas stations, historic auto courts, bridges from the 1930s.

Torrey Pines State Reserve is home to Old 101's most impressive artifact, an intact 1920s stretch now on the National Register of Historic Places. We walk a section of the old road and explore the 1923 Torrey Pines Lodge (now a visitor center) before taking in the panorama looking north across the wetlands of the reserve's Peñasquitos Marsh.



Despite such great views, Old 101 did have one prominent detractor. Raymond Chandler described it as "one of the dullest drives in the state... The road north is as monotonous as a sailor's chantey. You go through a town, down a hill, along a stretch of beach, through a town, down a hill, along a stretch of beach."

Which is precisely the point.

A road to fall in love on

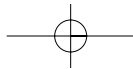
I find that I'm irresistibly drawn to the pervasive beach vibe, and the next morning I head to Leucadia. Kona coffee jolts me awake on the front deck of Le Petit Calypso, whose tropical roadhouse decor splashes color into a morning still cloaked in fog. A procession of humanity rolls down the highway: packs of spandexed cyclists pedal-

ing with the intensity of a Tour de France peloton, herds of Harleys, and an armada of beach-bound El Caminos with longboards jutting out from their beds.

A couple of doors down, the Longboard Grotto is a classic surf shop with a huge collection of boards, both new and vintage. Each has its own brief, handwritten description. An ancient, 11½-foot-long wooden board with blue and white chipped paint is lauded as "An early example of American folk art. Back then, if you really wanted to surf, you'd make it yourself."

"Back then" is the feeling you get in the heart of Encinitas, a few miles south. With the ocean a breeze away, a 1920s-style city sign arcing over the highway, and landmarks like the 1928 Spanish revival La Paloma Theatre, Encinitas combines

Bamboo 2U & Tikis Too in Leucadia; Oceanside's 101 Cafe.



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Solana Beach's Cedros Design District specializes in chic but casual shopping.

a vintage small-town feel with the eternal verities of the beach: a kind of Maui-meets-Main Street mien.

Earlier this year, the city's section of 101 was one of five roads to be awarded the Great American Main Street Award from the National Trust for Historic Preservation. "We're still a great Southern California beach town," says Peder Norby, executive director of the Downtown Encinitas Main Street Association, "and Highway 101 is an unchanged reminder of that culture."

Even with the Thrills playing constantly, I have another tune running through my head. The day before, John Daley had played a 1964 album by the Super Stocks called *Surf Route 101*. It's a bouncy, Beach Boys-style evocation of the highway's glories, with no shortage of blondes, brunettes, woodys, or deuce coupes.

"This is a road where all sorts of people fell in love or heard a song that stuck with them forever," says Daley. "The highway was part of their first taste of maturity and freedom, those days when they could just get in the car and drive." ✨

The best of 101

Thanks to the Highway 101 Association, signs now mark the historic route. For more information, visit the association's website (www.drive-the101.com) or contact the San Diego North Convention & Visitors Bureau (www.sandiegonoorth.com or 800/848-3336).

- 1 California Surf Museum.** Vintage boards and surfing history. 10–4 Thu–Mon; free. 223 N. Coast Hwy., Oceanside; 760/721-6876.
- 2 101 Cafe.** Classic road food, from burgers to floats. \$. 631 S. Coast Hwy., Oceanside; 760/722-5220.
- 3 Hilton Garden Inn Carlsbad Beach.** Just across 101 from the beach in Carlsbad. 161 rooms from \$129. 6450 Carlsbad Blvd., Carlsbad; www.hiltoncarlsbad.com or 760/476-0800.
- 4 Bamboo 2U & Tikis Too.** Hawaiian-style furnishings. 1240 N. Coast Hwy., Leucadia; 760/943-6284.
- 5 Le Petit Calypso.** Great breakfasts; seafood specialties at dinner. \$\$\$; breakfast, lunch, and dinner daily. 1002 N. Coast Hwy., Leucadia; 760/944-8252.
- 6 The Longboard Grotto.** Cool stuff for wannabes and serious surfers alike. 978 N. Coast Hwy., Leucadia; 760/634-1920.
- 7 Lou's Records.** Pick up a soundtrack for your 101 drive. 434 N. Coast Hwy., Encinitas; 888/568-7732.
- 8 Nofufi Garden Gallery.** Gardens with sculptures and fountains. 90-C N. Coast Hwy., Encinitas; 760/635-0556.
- 9 Meritage Restaurant & Bar.** Creative takes on American regional cuisine. \$\$\$; lunch and dinner daily. 897 S. Coast Hwy., Encinitas; 760/634-3350.



10 Self-Realization Fellowship Hermitage and Meditation Gardens. The lotus flower entry gate to these gardens is among 101's most distinctive landmarks. Closed Mon. 215 K St., Encinitas; www.yogananda-srf.org or 760/753-2888.

11 Cedros Design District. Galleries, specialty stores, and home-decor shops along 2½ hip blocks that parallel 101. One block east of Old 101 on Cedros Ave. between Lomas Santa Fe Dr. and Via de la Valle, Solana Beach; 858/755-0444.

12 Del Mar Plaza. Appealing, upscale retail collection. Camino del Mar at 15th St., Del Mar; 858/792-1555.

13 L'Auberge Del Mar Resort and Spa. Beachy elegance in the heart of Del Mar. 120 rooms from \$205. 1540 Camino del Mar, Del Mar; www.laubergedelmar.com or 800/245-9757.

14 Torrey Pines State Reserve. Check out the visitor center, a onetime lodge for highway travelers, and walk a stretch of the original blacktop. \$6 parking. 12600 N. Torrey Pines Rd. (entrance off Old 101 south of Carmel Valley Rd.); 858/755-2063.

