

## HUNTINGTON BEACH PIER

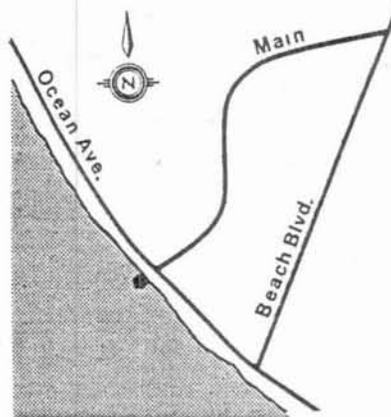
Huntington. Every surfer in Southern California knows it. Summer and winter the craggy old pier witnesses them, the sub-teenagers watching and waiting, thrashing into position to catch their first waves, and the veterans riding the crest, sometimes even cutting through the barnacle-crusting pilings and shooting out the other side.

There's something faintly medieval about the 1,800-foot pier. Its tall concrete pilings, the color and texture of wet sand, fan out to support the central platform and a pair of outsets holding the little snack shops—battered like watchtowers. Just beyond them a futuristic lifeguard tower looms over everything, its windows slanting outward to the overhanging roof so that the lounging lifeguard is on display, sneakers and all.

The pier is an extension of Main Street, and that's what it feels like, drawing strollers and fishermen at all hours. The Tackle Box, the Captain's Galley, where you can get chowder and hamburgers, and Neptune's Locker, with beer and sandwiches and a color TV next to the window with its panoramic view, and stools made from pieces of old light poles, are all three run by Ella Christensen, 70, who's been here almost continually since 1951.

She opens the Tackle Box at 6:00 A.M. and closes Neptune at 1:00 A.M. "What you want to poison yourself with them things for?" she says to a young man buying a pack of cigarettes. Some call her the Queen of the Pier: she's hired a couple of generations of local kids to sell bait and flip hamburgers, knows everybody, and keeps proceedings on an even keel out here.

In the storms of January-March '83, the End Cafe and the end of the pier itself were badly battered by the big waves, and had to be torn out and rebuilt. During



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the height of the final storm the beachfront was jammed with despairing watchers as the pier's deck began to break away.

But unlike officials in most other coastal cities, when the city's insurance man purchased a \$2.5 million policy for the pier, he took it upon himself to spend \$3,500 on special wave damage coverage. In view of the estimated \$260,000 needed to repair the pier, it was a real bargain.

It wasn't the first time the pier's been damaged, of course. A pier has stood on this spot since 1903, when the infant town was named Pacific City in hopes that it would become the western equivalent of Atlantic City. In 1930 a 500-foot wooden extension added to it was built four feet lower by mistake—the inclined section connected the two parts is clearly evident, about two-thirds of the way out—and this difference in elevation apparently made the pier more vulnerable to heavy seas.

The 1933 earthquake popped the two sections apart. The gap was patched over again, but in September '39 a tropical hurricane sweeping up the coast smashed the end of the pier, which held a heavy six-sided sunroom. At the height of the storm, giant green swells rolled over the end, breaking out the sunroom's windows, and by nightfall the whole end was torn away, including the two outermost T's you see today.

Repaired once more, the pier's status changed abruptly on December 7, 1941, the morning that Pearl Harbor was bombed. Fearing that an invasion by the Japanese was imminent, the Army occupied "Huntington" for the duration of the war, installing an Army radio station, radar and a searchlight, and machine gun emplacements on the outer end standing ready to repel the invader.

Huntington's flat, sandy bottom has made for good surfing since the beginning. At the foot of the pier on a chunk of lava, a bronze bust of Duke Kahanamoku, his broad Polynesian nose kept polished bright by affectionate hands, salutes his contribution to the place and the sport. A champion swimmer and later a four-time Olympic winner, the twenty-year-old Hawaiian helped introduce surfing here when he visited Southern California in 1911 on his way to the 1912 Olympics. He and his fellow Hawaiian, George Freeth, surfed several local beaches.

Huntington resident Bud Higgins, a former captain of lifeguards here, got interested in surfing during the '20s, when he and a friend who'd seen the surfing in Hawaii decided to design and build their own boards.

Of solid redwood, the boards were ten feet long and weighed around 135 pounds. "All the kids on the beach learned to surf on those boards," Higgins said. "They were the only ones around." Periodically the boards got waterlogged and had to be dried out and re-varnished. And they were dangerous when they got away from the surfer—head injuries were not uncommon. In contrast, today's

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fiberglassed boards weigh around ten pounds; and most surfers use a "kook cord" tethering the board to an ankle or wrist to keep from having to chase it.

The first West Coast Surfing Championships were held here in 1959, becoming the U.S. Surfing Championships in 1968. A yearly Huck Finn—Becky Thatcher Day is held on the pier itself in July, a kids' contest with prizes for costumes and the best catches. With rollerskate rentals, the inevitable video arcade, biking, and K-runs periodically held on the beach path from Newport Beach, there's always plenty to do.

At night the Golden Bear, just across Pacific Coast Highway, holds concerts with such name rock, folk and blues musicians as Richie Havens, Joe Turner and Tower of Power. At the foot of the pier there's a ticket office for other Southern California entertainment, and a pizza place with a couple of outside tables. And a block down the highway is a shiny silver Amtrak car filled with railroad mementos, the Chew Chew Cafe.

Upcoast several drilling platforms tap the tidelands oil pool. Oil was discovered here in 1920, when Bolsa Chica #1 came in, and the practice of whip-stocking, or slant drilling, also originated here in 1932, with hundreds of wells driven at an angle under the ocean's bottom for more than a mile to tap the submarine oil. You can see the grasshopper-shaped pumps working all along the westward bluff: more of them are scattered around town, pumping away in back yards and empty lots.

From the end of the pier you can see Catalina dead ahead, when it's clear enough. One clear summer Sunday morning, dozens of surfers plunged into the surf wearing flower leis, paddled out one-handed with bunches of flowers carefully balanced in front of them on their boards.

They gathered in a great ring off the end of the pier, a hundred or so rocking on their boards and holding hands, surrounding a brilliant mass of floating flowers. One of the surfers circled inside the ring on his board, keeping the flowers together, while up on the pier another cluster of people gathered around the minister who was conducting the memorial service for his father.

At sunset they're still coming and going—families with sleepy kids, taking them home after a day's fishing, replaced by others just coming out, bouncing and bright-eyed. Lovers and after-dinner strollers in the fading light... the big flared lamps come on, pale greenish at first and making everyone look ghastly for a few moments. A half-grown boy leans far out, legs locked around the railing, his hand line wrapped onto a flattened soft drink can, jerking it with little calculated twitches. And down below a few diehard surfers are still at it, riding their boards by pier-light.