

SEA-WORTHY

Long boardwalks, charming mansions and stretches of deep blue as far as the eye can see... In the first of a two-part series, **Rhea Dhanhoora & Pearl Mathias** find out what makes these quaint beach towns so charming

When you're watching a movie with a scene on a picturesque island, with the afternoon sun shining bright enough for you to laze on the beach, you wouldn't wish for anything more than to be transported there, right? Well, get packing, because there are several beach towns across the globe that are worth a visit, some unheard of, yet alluring in their own little way. We asked the travel and tourism industry to give us some recommendations to add to our travel list.

MUSCAT (OMAN)

■ **Recommended by Ministry of Tourism, Sultanate of Oman** If you're planning to visit Oman, it's a good idea to follow a recommendation from the tourism board itself. Apart from being surrounded by picturesque mountains and a gorgeous desert, Muscat, the port capital of Oman, boasts of beautiful golden sand beaches and a whole range of varied marine life. If your ideal vacation includes soaking up some sun or taking a long walk on the beach, Qurum, Al Shatti, Bandar Al Khayran and Yiti are some of the more prominent ones to pick. If you're feeling a little sporty, you could try your hand at water sports. They've got jet skiing, banana boat riding, kayaking and much more.

■ **Why we want to visit** To check out the remarkable Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, which gleams from the tips of its four minarets and 50m-high gold dome right down to the white marble flooring. The men's prayer hall is especially stunning, with vast Persian carpets and chandeliers the size of dune buggies. If that isn't enough, seafood lovers will definitely relish stand-out dishes including kingfish curry and chunks of gamey fish simmered in a broth of coconut, turmeric, ginger and garlic. The fish is usually scooped out of the sea and freshly grilled.

➤ Muscat is filled with golden sand beaches, surrounded by picturesque mountains



Image credit: Ministry of Tourism, Sultanate of Oman

➤ Engage in water sports on the beach when you're in Muscat



Image credit: Ministry of Tourism, Sultanate of Oman

rooftop dining deck focuses on artisanal foods. Next, walk to the adjacent pedestrian-only Third Street Promenade, with big-name brands, galleries, cinemas and comedy shows.

■ **Why we want to visit** You can witness an incomparable view when you take a spin on the solar-powered Ferris wheel at Pacific Park, with rides and games topping the historic Santa Monica Pier, which we can't wait to see!

HIKKADUWA (WEST COAST OF SRI LANKA, CLOSE TO GALLE)

■ **Recommended by Hikka Tranz by Cinnamon** Going from a hippie town in the '70s to an overdeveloped beach town a little later, the beautiful Hikkaduwa has been exposed to a major cultural shift. Over the past few years, however, this quaint town has risen from the ashes. With hordes of tourists flocking to the less tainted regions down south, Hikkaduwa has managed to regain some of its hippie charm from an earlier time. Compared to the languid resorts further north, this remains refreshingly lively, with plenty of restaurants, bars and shops to tempt you off the beach, as well as a crowd of mostly young and independent travellers who keep things busy. The atmosphere picks up tremendously during a three-day Hikkaduwa Beach Fest in July/August, where a host of international DJs, indulgent locals and foreigners party on the beach together. Besides the sun and

sand, there are also several interesting Buddhist temples around Hikkaduwa, all easy to get to by tuk-tuk or bicycle. "The beach town of Hikkaduwa has a vibrant energy. Check out the street stores selling everything from traditional batiks, sarongs, art and handicrafts to semiprecious jewellery. The town has been frequented by travellers and tourists alike since the 1970s, and has grown from a hippie environment to a zone most travellers love to visit during a trip to Sri Lanka. It could be labelled as a town that is alive while the rest of Sri Lanka is asleep, and has a charm of its own," Rajeeva Rajapakshe, manager at Hikka Tranz by Cinnamon, tells us.

■ **Why we want to visit** If you've ever wondered where the lovely moonstone on your finger ring comes from, head to the Moonstone Mines at Mitiyagoda. Moonstone has been mined in these stifling forests, and the moonstone mines — little more than muddy rabbit holes — are fascinating, as is the process of filtering out the stones, cutting them up, polishing them and getting them ready for sale.



➤ The Santa Monica pier offers an incredible view of the town

Image credit: Visit California

SANTA MONICA (LOS ANGELES COUNTY)

■ **Recommended by Visit California** The urban sprawl of Los Angeles may not appeal to you, but this discomfort will magically disappear as soon as you set foot in Santa Monica. The charming beach community sits just above Venice Beach and below Malibu beach, which boasts of non-photography exclusivity. Although the broad beach and lively pier are great places to experience the city, consider timing your visit to coincide with Santa Monica's outstanding farmers' markets in the town centre, which are frequently honoured as one of the country's best. Here, you can mingle with chefs doing their daily shopping, watch cooking demos or simply relax with a latte and watch people amble past (and maybe spot a celebrity or two). Work up an appetite with a ride on the Marvin Braude Coastal Bike Trail, which runs roughly 22 miles from south Santa Monica to Torrance. Apart from lazing on the beach, another activity that most people look forward to here is some serious shopping. You could start at upmarket Santa Monica Place; its classy

Image credit: Hikka Tranz by Cinnamon



➤ The Hikka Coral Reef boasts of splendid marine life



➤ After more than 423 years, the Galle Fort maintains its stunning appearance

Image credit: Hikka Tranz by Cinnamon