

California: First we take Manhattan...

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Asian restaurant Little Sister has great food but be wary of the X-rated music. Photo / Supplied

Got a spare few hours before flying out of LAX? Try this hub of food and fun, writes Jesse Mulligan.

By Jesse Mulligan

Manhattan Beach is the two-word answer to the question almost every Kiwi asks at the end of their trip to LA: How am I going to spend the 12 hours between checking out of my hotel and boarding my plane home?

The closest city to LAX with any touristic merit, Manhattan Beach may also be the best walkable eating district in Los Angeles. There are at least a dozen first-class eateries within five minutes of the famous Manhattan Beach pier. Between meals you can shop, play beach volleyball or do what I did - prepare for your flight with a treatment and massage at the award-winning **Trilogy Spa** (just make sure you book in advance).

Here's where I ate during my day at Manhattan Beach:

First up, breakfast biscuits on the sunny patio at **Shade Hotel**. Something like a naughty scone, "biscuits" are a uniquely American delight - these ones served with black truffle sauce and candied bacon. Ask nicely, says the hotel owner, and they may even look after your luggage for you while you explore. A rapidly growing local business, **Paradise Bowls** blitzes exotic acai and pitaya fruits with other dairy-free treats to the consistency of frozen yoghurt, then tops them with healthful condiments like banana, granola and honey.

They're a perfect antidote to all that fried stuff you've been eating Stateside.

Pitched high on the beachfront with floor to ceilings windows, **The Strand House** offers the best view in town. I had the tuna sashimi (officially hamachi crudo), which the locals treat as pretty much a compulsory order - it dissolves in your mouth and comes with avocado and a tart tomato seed vinaigrette.

If you've been staying somewhere touristy, you'll be craving decent craft beer by the end of your trip. Manhattan Beach has the goods, with dozens of beers on tap at **Simmzy's** and **Rockefeller MB**, including local brew **Smog City**. The blue cheese fries are legendary at Simmzy's and you won't find a better burger, while Rockefeller's does a mean flatbread, and a spicy bowl of green beans with almonds that will ruin you for mediocre side dishes, forever.



Fishing with Dynamite is the place for fresh seafood. Photo / Supplied

In terms of name restaurants, the three big hitters are all on Manhattan Ave, within spitting distance of each other. **Little Sister** is a favourite of legendary LA restaurant critic Jonathan Gold - wine-friendly Asian food with a twist. I loved the caramelised pork shanks with red vinegar glaze, persimmon and crushed peanut. The place is friendly, yet super hip - note parental guidance may be required if they're cranking the gangster rap mofos.

Across the road is one of Kiwi superchef Josh Emmett's favourite places to eat in LA. **Manhattan Beach Post** is soulful, fun and full of personality - if you book a table you'll get some "post" when you arrive: an envelope with your name on it with wine and food menus inside.

The big dishes at MB Post are great, but I fell in love with the little ones - bacon and cheddar biscuits with maple, or the world's best Brussels sprouts - roasted with Emmental cheese, sage and hazelnuts.

Tables are shared, with punters lining up along leaners and chatting to each other as they eat.

The chef at MB Post has worked in some big-name restaurants around the US but like most of the people I met here, he tells me he's fallen in love with Manhattan Beach and doesn't plan to move again.

In fact, he's just opened up a second restaurant next door, **Fishing With Dynamite**, where you can eat fresh shellfish (including, when I was there, New Zealand oysters). There's something special about eating seafood in a coastal town, and if you can make room in your eating itinerary for one of FWD's "Mothershucker" platters, it'll be one of your happiest memories.

Opinions differ as to when exactly Manhattan Beach was "discovered" as a foodie destination, but undeniably one of the catalysts was colourful local businessman Mike Zislis opening the bustling **Rock 'n' Fish**. The Navy Grog cocktail and red oak grilled globe artichoke are both local specialties - avoid the former if you're worried about being too tipsy for the plane. If you're lucky Mike will be there when you drop in, to regale you with stories about his business partners, KISS.

Sound like enough to keep you going? Think of 12 hours in Manhattan Beach as your mood acclimatisation on the way back to New Zealand. Visit once and you'll never leave it off your itinerary again.

CHECKLIST

Getting there: **Air New Zealand** flies twice daily to Los Angeles from Auckland, increasing to three daily services from December-March. From the airport, it's easy to grab a cheap cab to Manhattan Beach with **Uber** or catch the **Ocean Express bus** from most big airport hotels.