

Where the locals go: An insider tour of Santa Barbara with surfer-artist DJ Javier



Artist, designer and surfer DJ Javier in front of the mural he created in Santa Barbara's Funk Zone. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)

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DJ Javier fired up his van to take me on a tour of [Santa Barbara](#), his Santa Barbara. I'd been to the city hundreds of times, but this visit would be different.

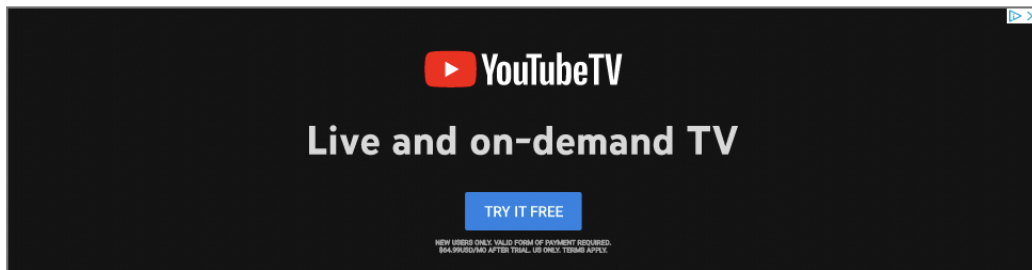
The 28-year-old graphic designer, brand builder and passionate surfer loves his hometown and has chosen to stay here rather than chase fame in L.A. or New York City (though he has created works in both of those cities). He's also creative director at retro sneaker company [SeeVees](#), based in Santa Barbara; works on collabs with everyone from the local modern art museum to gift retailer Huckberry; and paints murals you can see in the city — if you know where to look.



DJ Javier's sketches fill notebooks that he created during downtimes at the start of his art career. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)

“Local people, that’s the community I want to support,” he said during our midsummer tour. Javier and other creatives are making their mark in the city known for its coastal charm. The mission, zoo and State Street reliably draw visitors, but Javier’s vision of the city is charged with an artistic spirit that values collaborations and commitment to community. That’s the Santa Barbara he thinks visitors are missing.

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We met at his studio in the [Funk Zone](#), the former industrial area between the ocean and the 101 Freeway where cafes, galleries, tasting rooms and shops now flourish. Inside, stylized art leaps from the walls — vivid colors with a street art edge, figures that look like Day of the Dead characters overlaid with influences of surfing, tattoo art and his Filipino American upbringing. These images carry an inclusive vibe too.

Javier (who shortened Daniel John to DJ) grew up in a middle-class neighborhood away from downtown in what he now calls his bubble. “I remember the first time I went to downtown Santa Barbara in high school, I thought, ‘Whoa, this is crazy ... I’m in a new place.’ Now I’m on that other side of town planting my little flag.”

He met his wife, Courtney, while the two were volunteering at their church youth group. There he mentored high school kids who still drop by to see him. He had his first child in May, a boy named Duke, named for surf legend Duke Kahanamoku. Javier credits how he developed his brand of self-marketing to his dad's hard work in the U.S. It's the immigrant story, overlaid with skateboarding and surf culture.

His love for Santa Barbara inspired this minitour to under-the-radar places he thinks deserve the spotlight, places where his friends showcase what he sees as the city's emerging vibe. Here's where we went. Add these to your favorite must-see sites in Santa Barbara.

SeaVees



One of the T-shirt designs created by DJ Javier for SeaVees, based in Santa Barbara. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)

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A few blocks from Javier's studio, we stopped at [SeaVees](#). On the front of the building, Javier created a postcard-style mural of a giant blue wave with the words "Wish you were here" underneath. It has become an instant landmark, with people fitting nicely under the wave's break to snap selfies. Inside, other designs by Javier include a midcentury surfer who looks more Bob's Big Boy than Beach Boy.

The store displays the work of local makers too. Manager Mike Del Campo, who also grew up in Santa Barbara and describes himself as a retail-and-design hybrid creative, said of the Funk Zone store: "We've gotten our footing on how to involve the community and how to involve businesses ... mixing art with food and retail."

Info: 24 E. Mason St.; seavees.com. Closed Tuesdays.

Los Angeles Times

El Sitio



The mom-and-pop Mexican food eatery El Sitio. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)

[El Sitio](#) on [De La Vina](#) (there are others in town) is where locals go. There's nothing fancy about this Mexican food counter in a strip mall, but it's buzzing with people, and there's a line even before noon on a midweek day. Burritos, tacos and tortas dominate the eatery's menu (I found a good vegetarian option), where \$10 goes far. The mom and pop who run El Sitio — Jose and Sanjua Gil — are the parents of a close high school buddy, someone Javier admires for his community work. The Gils named the restaurant for the agricultural town in Zacatecas, Mexico, where they grew up.

Info: 2830-C De La Vina St.; elsitiorestaurantsb.com. Open daily.

Los Angeles Times

Haven Barber & Shop/Boom Boom Bike Room



DJ Javier's window mural at Haven Barber & Shop. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)

These side-by-side businesses were about to launch last year when COVID-19 shut things down. Now they're open. Javier designed the mural on the barbershop window of two hands clasped (the T-shirt version says "Standing United") during last summer's protests over the killing of George Floyd. [Haven Barber & Shop](#) is old-school comfy with a couch and plants on one side and barber chairs on the other. T-shirts with Javier's distinctive style are for sale. Closed Sundays and Mondays.

The [Boom Boom Bike Room](#) next door retrofits bikes from the '80s and '90s with new parts. "Who doesn't love a sick bike?" Javier said. Retro bikes line the surf-aqua walls, overseen by Christopher Tottin, who uses "new parts and old parts to keep the soul of the bike alive."

Info: 1924 De La Vina St.; havendlv.com, [@boomboombikeroom](https://www.instagram.com/boomboombikeroom)

Los Angeles Times

Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara



DJ Javier created this inclusive surfer towel in collaboration with the Museum of Contemporary Art, Santa Barbara. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)

[This museum](#) has been around since the '70s and continues to embrace a fresh perspective for change. Earlier this year, chief curator Alexandra Terry asked Javier to design something in collaboration with the museum that reflects his take on Santa Barbara. The result was a beach towel decorated with a row of surfers.

“You see these people, and you see the diversity in their skin tones and the clothing and the hair, and I use super-vibrant colors,” Javier said when the towel went on sale in March. “Just by looking at it, you can peek into this fictional world I’ve created that enters into this idea of diversity. The common thread between all these different people ... they’re all moving together with surfboards.”

The beach towel collab turned out to be a success (\$60, mcasantabarbara.org). Terry has felt the shift in the city too. “I think the difference is now people are staying,” she said. “Individuals like DJ, a younger demographic, have found ways to stay in Santa Barbara ... and they want to start companies.”

Info: 653 Paseo Nuevo; mcasantabarbara.org

Los Angeles Times

George Floyd mural



The George Floyd mural in Santa Barbara. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)

The mural depicting George Floyd and the words “Please, I can’t breathe” painted in purple was created on the fly by Griffin Lounsbury and Chadillac Green, according to [media reports](#). Though the mural wasn’t permitted (Santa Barbara has rules about street-level murals), it hasn’t been removed and is a sobering reminder of what happened in Minneapolis in 2020. Javier appreciates the work and how quickly artists responded to the crisis.

Info: Side of the EOS Lounge, Anacapa and Haley streets

Dune Coffee Roasters

The [coffeehouse](#) is owned by Julia Mayer and Todd Stewart, whom Javier counts as friends. Inside, his “Coffee for All” design is found on mugs (\$15), black totes (\$25), and T-shirts (\$30). The couple started with an espresso machine and now have three sites in the city. Mayer wrote in the Santa Barbara Independent in 2019: “This is the Santa Barbara that I want to contribute to, the one where we take care of each other and look out for each other. I just hope that our community feels taken care of by us.”

Info: 528 Anacapa St., dunecoffee.com. Open daily.