

The Best of Los Angeles

Like Las Vegas, the allure of L.A.—for better or for worse—is undeniable. Los Angelenos know their city will never have the sophisticated style of Paris or the historical riches of London, but they cheerfully lay claim to living in the most entertaining city in the United States, if not the world. It really is warm and sunny most days of the year, movie stars actually do live and dine among the commoners, and you can't swing a cellphone without hitting a roller-blading blonde at the beach.

This part of the L.A. mystique—however exaggerated it may be—truly does exist, and it's not hard to find. In fact, it's fitting that L.A. is home to the world's first amusement park because it regularly feels like one, as the line between fantasy and reality is often obscured. From the unattainable, anachronistic glamour of Beverly Hills to the vibrant street energy of the Venice Boardwalk, each of the city's diverse neighborhoods is like a mini-theme park, offering its own kind of unique adventure. Drive down Sunset Boulevard and you'll see what I mean: The billboards are racier, the fashions trendier, the cars fancier, the bodies sexier, the sun brighter, and the energy higher than any place you've ever been. Darlin', you ain't in Kansas anymore—you're in La-La Land. Let's go play.

1 The Most Unforgettable Travel Experiences

- **Cruising Along the Coast:** Driving along the sunny coastline with the top down and your hair blowing in the warm wind is the quintessential Southern California experience—one that never loses its appeal, even for the locals. Stop and visit whatever interests you: a Malibu cantina, the famous Santa Monica pier, or a South Bay beach—a casual cruise along the shoreline is good for the soul (B.Y.O. Mustang convertible). See chapter 11, “Side Trips from Los Angeles,” for destination ideas.
- **Visiting Venice's Ocean Front Boardwalk:** You haven't visited L.A. properly until you've rented some skates in Venice and embarrassed yourself in front of thousands while taking in the human carnival around you. Nosh on a Jody Maroni's “haute dog,” buy some knockoff sunglasses, and realize how pathetically out of shape you are compared to all the tan and trim locals—all while enjoying the wide beach, blue sea, and assorted performers along the boardwalk. Can't skate? Sissies can rent a bicycle and pedal along the bike path. See p. 175.
- **Basking at the Beach:** This is, after all, L.A.—so get thy buttocks to a beach. Watch a volleyball tournament at Hermosa Beach, take surf lessons at Manhattan Beach, or gawk at the world's vainest weight lifters pumping iron at Venice Beach. Surfers are always spotted at the Malibu beaches, and local families prefer to pitch their umbrellas at Zuma Beach. See chapter 7.

- **Visiting the “Happiest Place on Earth,” the Disneyland Resort:** The resort’s worldwide appeal is evident in the virtual United Nations of revelers traipsing through Adventureland, Fantasyland, Tomorrowland, and Disney’s California Adventure park. And don’t forget to constantly hum the “It’s a Small World” song that’s now stuck in your head. See chapter 8.
- **Dining at Spago (or The Ivy or Koi or Mastro’s):** Far less expensive than a day at Universal Studios or Disneyland, dining at one of L.A.’s über-trendy A-list celebrity haunts is an experience to be filed under “Only in L.A.” Hear dialogue straight out of *The Player* while eating fine food prepared for the world’s pickiest eaters (“I can’t eat *that!* Take it away.”). See chapter 6.
- **Cruising Sunset Boulevard:** It’s a must for first-time visitors because you’ll see a cross section of everything that is L.A.: legendary clubs, studios, and hotels that you’ll instantly recognize from the silver screen and TV shows. The journey ends with a trip to Malibu’s fabled beaches, where those classy *Baywatch* episodes were filmed (how perfect). See p. 171.
- **Touring the Getty Center:** See the result of unlimited funds and very expensive taste at this multifaceted cultural center looming large over the city. The ultramodern facility, more airy and inviting than it looks from below, features a museum housing the impressive art collection of deep-pocketed industrialist J. Paul Getty, a postmodern garden, and breathtaking views of L.A. A sleekly high-tech funicular whisks you from freeway level to this city in the clouds. See p. 162.
- **Spending a Day Downtown:** If you’re looking for a healthy dose of ethnic culture, you’ll find it in Downtown L.A. Take a self-guided tour of the mind-blowing Walt Disney Concert Hall (p. 176) or cutting-edge Museum of Contemporary Art (p. 184), stop in for a snack at the bustling Grand Central Market (p. 253), pick up some inexpensive Mexican handicrafts along colorful and historic Olvera Street, and have dim sum in Chinatown. See chapter 7.
- **Power Shopping:** You’ll see “I’d Rather Be Shopping at Nordstrom” license-plate frames on Lexuses all over L.A., evidence that spending money is a major pastime here. Whether it’s \$5 vintage bowling shirts, \$10,000 Beverly Hills baubles, or anything in between, you’re sure to find it in L.A.’s cornucopia of consumerism. My favorite shopping zones are the eclectic shops along Abbot Kinney Boulevard, the endless ethnic oddities at the Grand Central Market in Downtown L.A., and the ultratrendy stores such as GR2 and Giant Robot along Sawtelle Boulevard in Japantown (p. 250). (Also, check out the sidebar “Where to Find Hollywood’s Hand-Me-Downs” on p. 264.) See chapter 9.
- **Strolling Wilshire Boulevard’s Museum Row:** Natural history meets pop culture meets modern art along Museum Row. La Brea Tar Pits, Petersen Automotive Museum, Craft & Folk Art Museum, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art are all shoulder-to-shoulder in the heart of L.A. The only problem is that it’s too much to see in a day. See chapter 7.
- **Taking a Gourmet Picnic to the Hollywood Bowl:** What better way to spend a typically warm L.A. evening than under the stars with a picnic basket, a bottle of wine, and some world-class entertainment? In addition to being the summer home of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Bowl hosts

visiting performers ranging from chamber music quartets to jazz greats to folk humorists. The imposing white Frank Lloyd Wright–designed band shell always elicits appreciative gasps from first-time Bowl-goers. See p. 282.

- **Taking a Tour of the Walt Disney Concert Hall:** Built with a lot of Disney money but without a trace of goofiness, this stunning accomplishment of art and architecture is the crown jewel of Downtown (you'd have to fly to Spain to see architect Frank Gehry's similar architectural masterpiece, the Guggenheim Museum). The dramatically curvaceous stainless-steel exterior houses one of the most acoustically perfect concert halls in the world. The self-guided audio walking tour narrated by actor John Lithgow is superb. See p. 176.

- **Taking a Studio Tour:** It's why you're vacationing in L.A.—to see where movie magic is being made. Studio tours are an entertaining opportunity to see the actual stage sets for shows such as *ER* and *Desperate Housewives* (sometimes during filming), and you never know who you're going to see emerging from his or her Star Wagon. See the "Studio Tours" section on p. 200.
- **Visiting Santa Catalina Island:** Taking a day trip to Catalina makes for a most adventurous day: a scenic boat ride; oodles of shopping, snorkeling, and scuba diving; golf; hiking trails; waffle cones; sunburns; and DUI-free barhopping. **Tip:** The helicopter taxi is a lot cheaper than you'd expect. See chapter 11.

2 The Best Splurge Hotels

- **Beverly Hills Hotel and Bungalows** (9641 Sunset Blvd., Beverly Hills; ☎ **800/283-8885**): Spending at least 1 night at this Hollywood icon is well worth the heavy hit to your credit card. Take afternoon tea in the famous Polo Lounge next to Ozzy Osbourne, swim laps in the same pool Katharine Hepburn once dove into fully clothed, and eat pancakes in the fabled Fountain Coffee Shop. Ah, yes, The Pink Palace is still the place to relive Hollywood's Golden Age. See p. 87.
- **Chateau Marmont** (8221 Sunset Blvd., West Hollywood; ☎ **800/242-8328**): Modeled after an elegant Loire Valley castle, the 1920s-era Chateau oozes Old Hollywood. Secreted above the Sunset Strip, it has ghosts from the past that include Greta Garbo, Errol Flynn, Natalie Wood, Marlon Brando, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Clark Gable, and Jean Harlow. See p. 93.
- **Sunset Tower Hotel** (8358 Sunset Blvd., West Hollywood; ☎ **800/225-2637**): Elizabeth Taylor, Joan Crawford, John Wayne, Frank Sinatra—they've all been tenants at the storied Sunset Tower Hotel. The Tower has everything you could hope for in a Los Angeles hotel: elegance, impeccable service, beautiful views, Deco-era decor, and the ideal Sunset Strip location. See p. 96.
- **Millennium Biltmore Hotel Los Angeles** (506 S. Grand Ave., Downtown; ☎ **800/245-8673**): Eye-poppingly magnificent, the Biltmore has been hosting royalty, U.S. presidents, and international celebs since 1923. You've seen it in *Chinatown*, *Ghostbusters*, *Bugsy*, and *Beverly Hills Cop*—now see it for real. See p. 106.
- **The Mosaic Hotel Beverly Hills** (125 S. Spalding Dr., Beverly Hills; ☎ **800/463-4466**): You'll want to redecorate your own bedroom by the

time you check out of this gorgeous boutique hotel. Huge rainforest showerheads, Frette linens, Bulgari bath products, Wolfgang Puck refreshments, and piles of pillows all add up to hotel heaven. It's the perfect blend of art, luxury, service, prime location, and value. See p. 95.

- **Shutters on the Beach** (1 Pico Blvd., Santa Monica; ☎ 800/334-9000): If a luxurious oceanfront room at Shutters doesn't add romance to your relationship, it's hard to imagine what will. It's like staying at a really rich friend's East Coast beach house. See p. 79.
- **Casa del Mar** (1910 Ocean Way, Santa Monica; ☎ 800/898-6999): This impeccably restored Renaissance Revival-style hotel is the grande dame of L.A.'s beachfront hotels, ideally situated in the main Santa Monica scene and offering panoramic views of the ocean from every room. Be sure to book the "All About Me" spa package for ultimate indulgence. See p. 74.
- **Huntley Santa Monica Beach** (1111 2nd St., Santa Monica; ☎ 310/394-5454): Tucked away on the edge of a quiet Santa Monica neighborhood is my favorite Santa Monica hotel, one that combines a superb location with excellent service and strikingly stylish

decor. The Huntley's 18th-floor **Penthouse** restaurant, bar, and lounge has the best nightlife scene in Santa Monica. See p. 83.

- **The Ambrose** (1255 20th St., Santa Monica; ☎ 310/315-1555): Take a break from the fast-paced L.A. scene at this stylish 77-room boutique Arts and Crafts hideaway that offers a soothing, peaceful environment—tranquil Japanese garden, koi pond, trickling fountains—and plenty of free perks (including complimentary London taxi shuttle service). See p. 82.
- **Raffles L'Ermitage** (9291 Burton Way, Beverly Hills; ☎ 800/768-9009). The melding of luxury, service, and business perks is incomparable. Extra-large executive work desks, personal cellphones, and complimentary stationery with your personal directional number printed on it are all part of the package. See p. 91.
- **Beach House at Hermosa Beach** (1300 The Strand, Hermosa Beach; ☎ 888/895-4559): Romance-seeking couples will never want to leave this beautiful boutique resort offering plush, luxury-laden studio suites. Book one overlooking the sand and sunbathers for the ultimate beach getaway. See p. 80.

3 The Best Moderately Priced Hotels

- **Casa Malibu** (22752 Pacific Coast Hwy., Malibu; ☎ 800/831-0858): This well-maintained hotel has a terrific beachfront location. Innkeepers don't come any friendlier, and oceanfront Malibu accommodations don't get more affordable. See p. 84.
- **The Hotel California** (1670 Ocean Ave., Santa Monica; ☎ 866/571-0000): You'll like livin' it up at this hacienda-style beachfront motel that charges less than half the price of its

fancy-pants neighbors. You'll dig the hotel's surfer/sun-worshiper ambience, cheery rooms with California-themed decor, and direct access to the sand via a private path. See p. 82.

- **Carlyle Inn** (1119 S. Robertson Blvd.; ☎ 800/322-7595): This hidden gem, cleverly tucked away in the heart of West L.A., offers a pleasing courtyard setting, a dash of Deco-inspired style in the guest rooms, and abundant freebies—including a

generous breakfast spread and weekday wine and hors d'oeuvres. It's a real find for those in search of value-priced comforts. See p. 97.

- **Inn at Playa del Rey** (435 Culver Blvd., Playa del Rey; ☎ 310/574-1920): If you crave the slower pace and personal attention that only a bed-and-breakfast can offer, book a room at this inn, which merges easy airport access with a one-of-a-kind natural setting, thoughtful service, and luxury comforts. The spacious View Suites—complete with a two-sided fireplace that casts a romantic

glow on the king-size bed and the Jacuzzi for two—are the ideal choice for celebrating couples. See p. 81.

- **Figueroa Hotel** (939 S. Figueroa St.; ☎ 800/421-9092): My favorite Downtown lodging is this 1925 building re-created as a stunning Spanish colonial–Gothic palace. The guest rooms have far more style than your average hotel; what's more, this spit-shined corner of Downtown offers easy, car-free Metro Line access to Hollywood and Universal Studios. See p. 104.

4 The Most Unforgettable Dining Experiences

- **Grace** (7360 Beverly Blvd., Los Angeles; ☎ 323/934-4400): The best overall dining experience in Los Angeles. Iron Chef Neal Fraser was trained by America's finest chefs, and it shows (the foie gras served two ways is worth the trip alone). Sophisticated yet unpretentious, Grace is a splurge worth making. See p. 142.
- **Koi** (730 N. La Cienega Blvd., West Hollywood; ☎ 310/659-9449): The combination of soothing feng shui ambiance and superb Asian fusion cuisine has made Koi one of the hottest restaurants in L.A. Hollywood's biggest celebrities—George Clooney, Jennifer Garner, the Osbournes, Demi and Ashton—arrive here nightly to nosh on addictive dishes such as baked crab rolls with edible rice paper and miso-bronzed black cod. See p. 138.
- **Saddle Peak Lodge** (419 Cold Canyon Rd., Calabasas; ☎ 818/222-3888): In L.A., a romantic restaurant is one without cellphone service (that would be in the hills above Malibu). This converted hunting lodge is quite the quixotic setting for a meaty meal for two. Candlelit tables, a crackling fireplace, and a *Wine*

Spectator—award-winning wine list are sure bets for creating *la mood d'amour*. See p. 128.

- **The Little Door** (8164 West 3rd St., Los Angeles; ☎ 323/951-1210): Consistently voted one of L.A.'s most romantic restaurants is this French/Mediterranean charmer hidden behind a little door on 3rd Street. Sit at the shaded patio among the fragrant bougainvillea while sipping champagne and you'd swear you're in Provence. See p. 145.
- **Beacon** (3280 Helms Ave., Culver City; ☎ 310/838-7500): Chef Kazuto Matsusaka serves Spago-quality Asian fusion at a fraction of the price at this humble Culver City hot spot. The warm crispy oysters in lettuce cups, stir-fried mushroom salad, and miso-marinated black cod are fantastic. See p. 135.
- **Mastro's Steakhouse** (246 N. Canon Dr., Beverly Hills; ☎ 310/888-8782): You'll find Fred Flintstone-size slabs of hand-cut USDA beef, oysters the size of your palm, and a big pile of creamy mashed potatoes mixed with sour cream, chives, bacon, and butter. God bless America. See p. 133.

- **Tantra** (3705 W. Sunset Blvd., Silver Lake; ☎ 323/663-8268): Bollywood meets Hollywood at L.A.'s über-trendy Indian restaurant and nightclub. It took a studio design company to create the too-cool ambience, and the food is superb. Lord Ganesha watches over Silver Lake hipsters as they dine, dance, and drink Shiva's Revenges. See p. 154.
- **La Cachette** (10506 Santa Monica Blvd., Century City; ☎ 310/470-4992): Jean François Meteigner, owner and executive chef of this *tres romantique* restaurant, is one of America's most influential French chefs, and his *cuisine naturelle* menu is full of flavor while 90% free of cream and butter. See p. 132.
- **The Hump** (3221 Donald Douglas Loop Rd., Santa Monica; ☎ 310/313-0977): Claim a sushi bar as L.A.'s best—and I think this is the best—and you're sure to start an argument. The chefs at The Hump are deadly serious about their sushi: Flown in daily from Tokyo's Tsukiji and Fukuoka fish markets in oxygen-filled containers, it's so fresh that there's a sign at the entrance warning the faint-of-heart that the meat's still moving. See p. 122.
- **Restaurant Hama** (213 Windward Ave., Venice; ☎ 310/396-8783): It's the always-festive atmosphere that makes everyone feel welcome at this lively Japanese restaurant. Party along with the six cheery sushi chefs as they slice, dice, and drink many rounds of beers and sake. By closing time, everyone's singing along to "Hotel California." See p. 126.
- **Frida** (236 S. Beverly Dr., Beverly Hills; ☎ 310/278-7666): This Mexican restaurant's cuisine is so authentic the executive chef's ancestors are responsible for the recipes (the mole dishes alone are worth the drive over here). Bite into a handmade soft taco brimming with sautéed shrimp bathed in a dark, tangy pasilla-orange sauce, and you'll see what I mean. See p. 137.
- **Providence** (5855 Melrose Ave.; ☎ 323/460-4170): Chef Michael Cimarusti serves the city's best seafood at this sleek, modern newcomer. I didn't even know I liked sea urchin until I tasted Michael's masterpieces. See p. 134.
- **House of Blues Gospel Brunch** (8430 Sunset Blvd., West Hollywood; ☎ 323/848-5100): For more than a decade the HOB has hosted a raucous Sunday brunch that's simmering with high-energy gospel groups and all-you-can-eat Southern home cookin'. It's brunch you can shake your booty to. See p. 148.

5 The Best Things to Do for Free (or Almost)

- **Watching One of Your Favorite TV Sitcoms Being Taped:** Alternately boring and fascinating (the old hurry-up-and-wait syndrome), being in the audience is your chance to wander the soundstage, marvel at the cheesy three-wall sets that look so real on TV, and get an inside look at the bloopers that never make it to broadcast—and are often far more entertaining than the scripted dialogue. See "Live-Audience TV Tapings" on p. 204.
- **Going to the Getty Center:** I already mentioned it above and I'll mention it again here because one of L.A.'s best attractions is absolutely free (JPG don't need yo' money). See p. 162.
- **Paying Your Respects at the Cemetery of the Stars:** Spend some downtime with Humphrey Bogart, Clark Gable, Karen Carpenter, and all their famous pals at L.A.'s most enduring celebrity hangouts. Six public cemeteries showcase the final performances

of Bette Davis, Lucille Ball, Marilyn Monroe, and dozens more famous names. See p. 206.

- **Cruising Mulholland Drive:** Cruise past the homes with million-dollar views, and then pull over at the public viewing pullouts to see the splayed-out city in all its smoggy glory. It's even more romantic at night, when the lights of the city and the valley twinkle below. See p. 199.
- **Free Admission Days to L.A.'s Museums:** If it's free, baby, it's for me. Almost all of L.A.'s art galleries and museums are open free to the

public 1 day of the week or month (or both), and several never charge admission. See p. 177.

- **Evening Jazz Performances:** L.A.'s two major art museums offer free jazz concerts every Thursday and Friday evening. It's the perfect coda to a satisfying day of art appreciation. See p. 273.
- **Hollywood Bowl Rehearsals:** Few people know about the Bowl's morning rehearsals, which are open to the public and absolutely free. Bring coffee and doughnuts and enjoy the best seats in the house. See p. 285.

6 The Best Outdoor Experiences

- **Learning How to Surf:** What could be more fun during your L.A. vacation than learning how to surf on the same breaks that the Beach Boys surfed? Surfing schools such as **Learn to Surf L.A.** in Manhattan Beach will guarantee you'll get up on a long board and be surfing the easy waves in one short lesson. See p. 218.
- **Flying a World War II Fighter Aircraft:** Don your parachute, strap yourself into the 600-horsepower fighter aircraft, and prepare to have your mind blown as you (yes, you) perform aerobatic maneuvers—loops, rolls, lazy-8s—high above the California coastline. There's an aviation company in Carlsbad that gives nonpilots the chance to fly in a 1920s-era biplane ride, and to actually fly—as in control the stick—other toys on the tarmac, including a pair of modern prop-driven dogfighters. It's an experience you'll never forget. See p. 298.

- **Dining by Helicopter:** Impress your sweetie with a helicopter tour of the city that ends with a front-door drop-off to a romantic restaurant. Get that ring ready. See p. 203.
- **Taking a Sunset Margarita Horse Ride:** Whoever thought this one up is a genius: Drive to Sunset Ranch Hollywood Stables in Griffith Park, hop on a big ol' horse, and take a scenic ride through the park to a Mexican restaurant in Burbank. Eat, drink, and be merry; then ride back to the ranch under warm, starry skies. See p. 168.
- **Watching a Polo Match:** Mid-April through early October, polo matches are held on weekends at the Will Rogers Polo Club. Enjoy a leisurely picnic lunch among the wide green fields, mighty oaks, and whitewashed fences. See p. 220.

7 The Best Offbeat Experiences

- **Dining in the Dark** (© 800/710-1270; www.darkdining.com): Only in L.A. would you have the opportunity to experience a three-course

dinner served by sight-impaired wait-staff in pitch blackness. Yes, it's as weird as it seems and an evening you'll never forget. See p. 144.

- **Attending Movie Screenings in a Cemetery:** Pack a picnic basket and head to the Hollywood Forever Cemetery for a summer Saturday evening of classic cinema projected onto the mortuary wall. Arrive early because people are just dying to get here. (6000 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood; www.cinespia.org). See p. 286.
- **Auditioning as a Game Show Contestant:** You too could be the next contestant on *The Price Is Right* or *Wheel of Fortune*. Fame and fortune are just a phone call away, so set up that audition before you arrive in L.A. See p. 205.
- **Going to ArcLight Cinemas** (6360 W. Sunset Blvd., Hollywood; ☎ 323/464-4226): “The World’s Most Private Public Theater” hosts 21-and-over movie screenings where you can sip cocktails while watching first-run flicks. Seats are reserved in advance, ushers keep it quiet, late arrivals are forbidden, and there’s even a lounge serving appetizers. See p. 287.
- **Visiting Roscoe’s House of Chicken ‘n’ Waffles** (1514 N. Gower St., Hollywood; ☎ 323/466-7453): You haven’t seen everything until you’ve seen Southern-fried chicken and waffles on the same plate. Roscoe’s is a Hollywood institution where a polyglot of L.A.’s population comes for chicken-and-cheese omelets and sweet-potato pie. The friendly atmosphere and creative combinations make for a fun, adventuresome, and inexpensive dining experience. See p. 149.
- **Listening to Jon Brion:** Make reservations far in advance to see producer, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist legend Jon Brion play at the Largo supper club (432 N. Fairfax Ave.; ☎ 323/852-1073; www.largo-la.com). His ability to make up songs on the spot from titles shouted from the audience is mind-blowing.
- **Eating Crickets:** If you want to train for a *Survivor* tryout, try several servings of stir-fried Taiwanese spicy crickets, dried Manchurian ants, and Thai-style crispy white sea worms at **Typhoon** (3221 Donald Douglas Loop Rd., Santa Monica; ☎ 310/390-6565). See p. 122.