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Los Angeles

Myth becomes reality in the town Bill Hicks described as 'perfect for lizards.'

THERE IS A STRONG SENSE OF DEJA VU when visiting LA. It begins during the long, slow approach into LAX, with a glimpse of the Hollywood sign standing bleached-teeth white against the sun-browned hills and continues with the cracked, crumbling concrete of the freeways.

That the City of Angeles elicits such a response, even in someone who hasn't visited for many years, is of course, a great part of its attraction. Every one of us has driven its streets, drunk in its bars, watched its sunsets countless times while comfortably ensconced in a red velour seat, in the local multiplex. So how does it appear in genuine 3D?

First stop on this multi-leg trip, a new package offered by Virgin Atlantic, is Newport Beach, which, even if it is not a name familiar to you, will almost certainly be to your teenage kids, having been the setting for TV show *The O.C.* It has come a long way from the swampy lagoon first named in 1871. Forbes now ranks it the richest city in the USA and it certainly shows on our tour of the biggest and brashest houses in the environs. Being Los Angeles, of course, we can't walk, but are mounted on Segways which, once the initial embarrassment has worn off, are genuinely fun to wheel around the almost deserted streets.

Newport Beach's other attraction - indeed it could be said to be America's number one diversion - is shopping, of which there is plenty at Fashion Island which is no mere mall but described as an open-air lifestyle centre. Built in the Italianate style, it features the most upmarket of anchor stores,



THE DETAILS

Virgin Holidays
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Neiman Marcus, or Needless Mark-up as it is often mockingly referred to here.

Contrast is provided by our next location, Santa Monica. Segways are swapped for Schwinn cycles hired at the local wooden pier, which incorporates a charmingly old-fashioned funfair and we head to nearby Venice Beach. Santa Monica is appealingly down-at-heel, retaining some of the 70s hippie vibe in the line of stalls set up on the boardwalk, offering everything from tarot readings and healing crystals to driftwood sculptures and hip-hop CDs. Lunch is best eaten at The Lobster, which naturally specialises in produce pulled from the ocean it overlooks. The beach that fronts it will of course be familiar to any aficionados of David Hasselhoff's greatest oeuvre, *Baywatch*.

It is definitely worth upping the ante on the transfer to the last leg of the trip. A black stretch limousine, with Led Zep cranked up to the max on the freeway, is suddenly rock 'n' roll rather than transport fit only for a Blackpool hen night.

Palm Springs is a further contrast to both Newport Beach and Santa Monica. A cou-

ple of hours inland, it is blessed with an appealing microclimate, which, combined with its proximity to the draconian studios which demanded its stars remain in constant contact, made it a favourite getaway during Hollywood's golden age. The Rat Pack hung out in Palm Springs when they weren't making movies or gambling in Las Vegas and Elvis and Priscilla spent their honeymoon here.

It still retains a gentle, relaxed air, helped immeasurably by the mountains which form a breathtaking backdrop and natural counterpoint to the neatly-ordered and manicured suburban streets. It is well worth joining a Desert Adventures Jeep Tour of the surrounding canyons and famous San Andreas Fault. A few hours being blasted in their open-topped, doorless jeeps and you'll welcome a treatment at one of Palm Spring's numerous spa hotels.

The backdrops all seem familiar but this three-stop tour has revealed the people and places behind the scenes and made Los Angeles a reality rather than a mere movie set. HENRY BIGGS