

# Jammin' in L.A.

## A little planning can route you around traffic and to the cool shops and sights

By JUDITH EVANS

St. Louis Post-Dispatch

**L**OS ANGELES — If you plan well and have a little luck, you can see the world in Los Angeles. If not, all you'll see is a world of traffic. More likely, you'll experience some of both.

Tourists might think "Hollywood" when they begin to plan a vacation — and Hollywood is worth a day of sightseeing — but Los Angeles also is home to world-class museums, ethnic restaurants, interesting shops and farmers markets that make a winter-weary traveler green with envy.

With so many attractions, you may be tempted to try to do too much. But traffic can jam up seemingly at any time, any place, so the best thing a tourist can do is relax and go with the flow. If you must be somewhere at a specific time, leave early; if you end up with time to kill, chances are you'll find an interesting shop or restaurant to explore.

### L.A. epicenter

A good place to start your trip is Hollywood and Highland, the neighborhood centered on Hollywood Boulevard and Highland Avenue. This epicenter of Los Angeles mythology was sleazy and a bit scary just a few years ago. Thanks to several big-bucks developments, it has remade itself into a combination entertainment venue, upscale mall and tourist attraction.

You can drop some serious money at a boutique or gawk for free at the costumed characters posing for photos outside Grauman's Chinese Theatre. (If you snap a picture, they expect a tip, of course).

Many stars have homes nearby, and vendors selling maps are all

around. You're on your own as to the maps' accuracy.

Instead of buying a map, I hopped into one of Skyline Tours' open-air vans. The tour took us through Hollywood and Beverly Hills, with a stop at a scenic overlook on Mullholland Drive. Looking down, we could see LA spread before us.

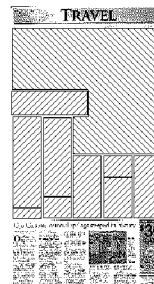
The tour highlights dozens of homes, including one of several owned by Ron Howard, as well as the home where Michael Jackson died. That house is clearly visible from the street, but many were shielded by hedges and privacy fences. Nevertheless, it was fun to get a sense of where — and how — Hollywood stars live.

### Seeing stars

Once you've spied on celebrities' homes, you might want to get a closer look at the people. Sure, you could try to find the real deal, or you could go for the next best thing and visit Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum.

The wax depictions are pretty realistic, but the real fun is watching visitors interact with the figures. Props are available to make photographs more fun. You can jump on a camel next to Lawrence of Arabia, hop into the chair next to Captain Kirk or buddy up to Jennifer Lopez.

For a chance to see real stars and to get some exercise, head to Runyon Canyon Park, high in the **Santa Monica** Mountains. The park is crisscrossed with sandy and packed-dirt trails — some fairly level, some almost vertical — that will bring you to some of the best views around. On the rare clear day, you can see the ocean. Even on a hazy day, you'll get a good view of



the Hollywood sign. Below, the city spreads to the horizon.

Regular visitors say that the canyon is a favorite of celebrities walking their dogs. I saw plenty of dogs, but no celebrities.

I ascended into the Santa Monica Mountains again to visit the Getty Center (a companion museum to its older sibling, the Getty Villa in Malibu). The views vie for attention with the art — and the art is amazing. The collection features modern sculpture, and European and American paintings, drawings, decorative arts and illuminated manuscripts.

### Seeing more stars

We headed into the mountains one last time to visit the Griffith Park Observatory, which is on the southern slope of Mount Hollywood. Even if you've never been there, the Greek-style building will look familiar — it's a popular setting for movies, most notably the 1955 James Dean classic "Rebel Without a Cause."

While the observatory looks much as it did when it opened in 1935, it recently was expanded and meticulously renovated. Workers lifted the concrete structure off its foundation and evacuated underneath, making way for an underground addition of nearly 40,000 square feet of public space.

You can browse the exhibits and catch a star show in the planetarium; if you visit after dark, you can climb to the top of the observatory and look through its telescope.

Down at sea level, I spent a day in the neighboring beach towns of Santa Monica and Venice. Instead of eating breakfast, I started at a farmers market held from 8:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. each Wednesday at Arizona Avenue and Second Street in Santa Monica.

Santa Monica also is known for its Third Street Promenade, a pedestrian-only stretch lined with restaurants and shops, and its wooden pier, complete with a vintage carousel, a Ferris wheel and a trapeze school.

After exploring the pier, I set out for Venice on South Bay Bicycle Trail, a coastal path that stretches 22 miles, from Will Rogers Beach in the north to Torrance Beach in the south. You'll find bike rental shops along the way, so pick a good starting (and ending) point. Prices range from about \$10 an hour to about \$25 for a full day, including a helmet.

### A whole other world

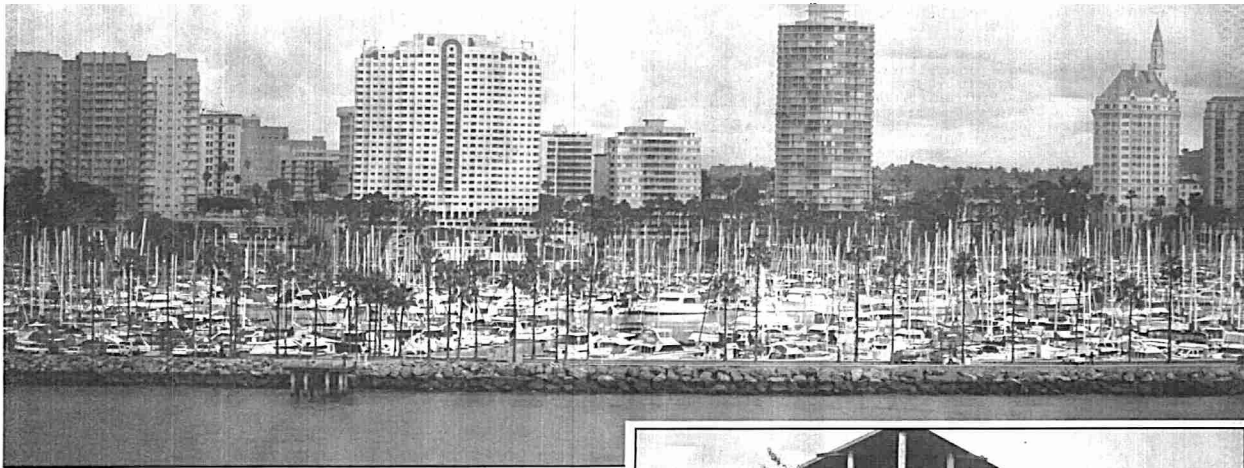
Venice Beach is about two miles from Santa Monica, but it's a whole other world — or at least another decade. Sitar music and the scent of patchouli waft along the boardwalk. "Kush" doctors legally dispense medical marijuana — the smell of that wafts here and there, too. You can get a tattoo or a piercing, haggle with sidewalk vendors for art or jewelry, grab a slice of pizza and listen to the street musicians, including a classic pianist.

If you venture a few blocks from the boardwalk to Abbot Kinney Boulevard, you'll find yet another scene. This is a great shopping street with unique clothing stores, furniture stores, accessories shops, restaurants and bars.

Perhaps the most famous farmers market in Los Angeles is not so much a place to buy fruits and vegetables (although you can do that) as an outdoor restaurant venue and souvenir emporium. Go hungry if you visit the Farmers Market at Fairfax Avenue and Third Street: temptations include bakeries, candy shops and restaurants of almost every description. Next door is the Grove, a new and exceedingly upscale mall.

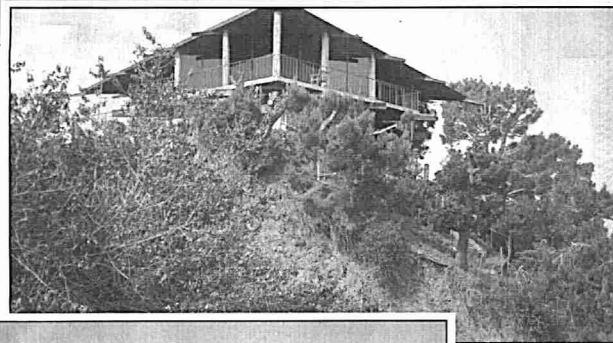
We ended our trip in Long Beach. The city's biggest tourist attraction is the Queen Mary, now a hotel and banquet/wedding venue berthed just offshore.

Another view of sea life is on display at the Aquarium of the Pacific. Outdoors, you can catch a sea lion show or pet a (small) shark. Indoor exhibits showcase various undersea habitats.



The deck of the Queen Mary affords a great view of Long Beach, Calif.

JUDITH EVANS/St. Louis Post-Dispatch



**ABOVE:** According to Ted Schmidt, a guide for Skyline Tours, this house perched high above Hollywood in Los Angeles belongs to film director Ron Howard.



**LEFT:** Even on a cool February afternoon, the beach in Santa Monica, Calif., attracts a few sun-seekers.

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