

LOS ANGELES

There's more to L.A. than plastic fantastic and Hollywood glitz. Dig beneath the surface and there's a city with plenty of soul, reports **Luciano Di Gregorio**.

WHY GO?

Its long-standing reputation as New York's pretentiously plastic cousin has done little to stop the throngs of tourists keen to take in the spectacle that is life in the City of Angels. And that is because the assessment holds little truth. With sprawling beaches and better weather than the Big Apple or nearby San Francisco, crowds descend on the city all year round in the hope of being infected with Los Angeles' revered verve and zest for life. Dig beneath the glitz and glamour of its manicured streets and myriad of cosmetic surgery suites to find a culturally charged collection of little cities within a massive urban sprawl of creativity, artistic ingenuity and social progressiveness.

WHAT TO DO

Hiring a car in Los Angeles is a must. It is, in some respects, also a condemnation. The traffic is often abominable, but exploring the city any other way is nigh on impossible.

Begin your day with a famous pastry at Bricks and Scones on North Larchmont Boulevard before heading west to Santa Monica. Most people experience an odd sense of déjà vu on their first visit: they have no doubt seen countless images of the famous Santa Monica pier in Hollywood blockbusters and classic film noir. Take a leisurely stroll up the pier and try your hand at a game or two before taking a ride on the Ferris wheel for sweeping views of Santa Monica. The beach will soon beckon, particularly in the hot weather. Soak in the sun and frigid waters of the Pacific before brushing off the sand and walking back to civilisation, admiring the million dollar homes along the way.

It's time to splurge on nearby 3rd Street Promenade. With just about every fashion label known to man, your wallet will take a battering. It's worth it. Let yourself go in the boutiques and knick-knack stores before taking the top off that convertible and cruising north past UCLA, one of America's most important educational institutions, and over to the Getty Centre. Opened in 1997, the Getty Centre is a

hub of cultural delights with an extensive collection of Western art spanning centuries. The building, set in comely gardens and offering spanning vistas, is an attraction in its own right. However, one famous Los Angeles icon you won't see from here is the gleaming white Hollywood sign, built in the 1920s. To catch a glimpse, drive west through the suburbs in and around Hollywood Reservoir for the best views of this revered symbol of Los Angeles culture.

Glitz and glamour takes on a new meaning at the Hollywood Walk of Fame on nearby Hollywood Boulevard, particularly if you're lucky enough to be in town when a film mogul is having their name etched into the pavement. Admire the tarmac stars and measure the size of your hand against those of your idols. Continuing on the theme of fame and paparazzi, cruise west along the Boulevard and take in the Capitol Records building on Vine Street before heading north for an exhilarating mix of rides and the chance to see your favourite television show being filmed at legendary Universal Studios.

A tour of the studio may have whet your appetite for star spotting and the boutiques of Los Angeles' centre of haute couture, Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills (with its famous 90210 postcode), will have you rubbing shoulders with the likes of Julia Roberts and Leonardo DiCaprio and perhaps fighting over that shawl or suit jacket from Gucci that you just have to have. Beverly Hills' reputation as Plastic Fantastic may be, in part, justified, but seems an imbalanced view of what is actually a beautiful residential suburb. Meander the streets and take in the imposing houses and lush vegetation of the area,

Opposite page (clockwise from top): The 3rd Street Promenade in Santa Monica is a pedestrian-only zone famed for its shopping; The Santa Monica pier is a 100-year-old landmark that has featured in many Hollywood classics; The Capitol Records Building was the world's first circular office block when it was completed in 1956; L.A.'s great weather makes a visit to the beach a must; The Triceratops water fountain sculpture is typical of L.A.'s quirky attitude; The Hollywood Walk of Fame outside the Montalban Theatre is a major tourist draw; The iconic Hollywood sign; The Getty Centre offers a great vista of L.A.





Above: The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) has three branches in the Los Angeles area. The main branch is Downtown and is devoted to art from 1940 onwards.

Right: For a scenic view of L.A. go for a spin along Mulholland Drive, which was made famous by the surrealist David Lynch movie.



before heading Downtown.

Los Angeles' central business district is often unjustly overlooked. Start off at the base of the iconic gleaming U.S. Bank Tower, the tallest building in California, before winding around to Chinatown. Whilst not as extensive as the same district in San Francisco, there are myriad restaurants serving noodles and dumplings. Walk off the carb overload at the Museum of Contemporary Art and then head over for a sunset stroll at Kenneth Hahn state park.

WHERE TO STAY

Avoid the hassle of Downtown and the throngs of Santa Monica and stay at the Marriott Los Angeles Airport. Hunt around and you can pick up a room for as little as \$89 per night. It may not be in the thick of the action, but it is within easy driving distance to just about all the attractions. Alternatively, take a sea-view room at the Cadillac Hotel in Venice Beach for around \$95 per night. The hotel has recently undergone an extensive renovation and, at a stone's throw from the beach, might be just the ticket to the relaxed L.A. life.

WHAT TO EAT AND DRINK

One glance into The Standard Hotel's Rooftop Bar in the Downtown district and you may never leave Los Angeles. With its majestic view over the captivating skyline, you will feel in the thick of the vibrant metropolis. The hotel's 24/7 Restaurant sports chic, cutting edge architecture and a variety of mouth-watering dishes.

TRAVEL INFORMATION

Los Angeles is rightly known for its sunshine and year round balmy climate. January is the coldest month with daily temperatures between 15 and 23°C. August is the hottest month with daily temperatures reaching 26 to 32°C. On average there are only 35 days of rain annually. Currency is the US dollar (US\$1 = €0.73 approximately).

GETTING THERE

EMIRATES flies twice daily nonstop between Dubai and Los Angeles. Visit emirates.com or emirates-holidays.com for further information.

RESOURCES

Plan your trip and read up on Los Angeles attractions and events with a visit to discoverlosangeles.com or latourist.com.

FURTHER READING

WEIRD HOLLYWOOD: YOUR TRAVEL GUIDE TO HOLLYWOOD'S LOCAL LEGENDS AND BEST KEPT SECRETS by Joe Oesterle is great for some insider knowledge. *TOP 10 LOS ANGELES* by Jeffrey Kennedy is a handy guide to have.

FAST FACT

Most California businesses follow a 'business casual' policy, and some tend toward shorts and sneakers with no socks. Ask your business contacts about standards at their company. Los Angeles is, however, the home of Hollywood and image conscious people. If you want to blend in at upmarket restaurants, bring your trendiest clothes and if you plan to go to the theatre or eat at a very exclusive restaurant, bring dress clothes. Otherwise, casual clothing is all you need.

TRIP TIP

Rubbing shoulders with the rich and famous is a part of the lives of all residents in Los Angeles. True Los Angelinos act cool, calm and collected – almost aloof and disinterested – when bumping into their favourite actor or diva. If you're inclined to scream at the top of your lungs or jump up and down on the spot, you will raise the eyebrows of all passers by. Quietly nod and ask for an autograph, though have the sensibility to discern the mood of the 'star' and back off if need be.

MUST DO

The soaring Santa Monica Mountains, which frame the Los Angeles skyline, are not to be missed. Take a casual drive on pretty Mulholland Drive to see some of the most spectacular semi-arid landscapes in all of California. The road was pinned on every Los Angeles map after the release of David Lynch's whacky namesake film. ❖