

## Chapter 1

# Discovering the Best of Los Angeles

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ The best itineraries
  - ▶ The best hotels
  - ▶ The best restaurants
  - ▶ The best attractions
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*“This town is our town / It is so glamorous / Bet you’d live here if you could / And be one of us”*

—The Go-Go’s, “This Town”

**W**e love L.A. — we really, really do, but that’s because we know how best to find and experience its admittedly subtle charms. Yeah, it’s got smog (though increasingly less), and yes, it’s got traffic (alas, more than ever), and yes, much of the distinctive architecture has been torn down thanks to an utter disinterest in preservation. And yes, it’s far-flung, and public transportation stinks, so you absolutely have to buck that aforementioned heavy traffic to get anywhere to enjoy anything.

But. Here’s a place where you can surf and ski on the same day. Here’s a place where your sightseeing is enhanced by cloudless skies. Here’s a place where movie-star footprints are enshrined, and the Getty family gave a great deal of money to amass one of the finest art collections in the world. Here’s a place where you can enjoy the L.A. Philharmonic (and other internationally known artists) out in the fragrant night air at the gorgeous Hollywood Bowl and in the new, state-of-the-art, visually delirious Disney Hall. Here’s a place where just a 1-mile stretch of Hollywood Boulevard peacefully holds Thai, Mexican, Romanian, Armenian, Vietnamese, and Persian restaurants, all of them with some of the most wonderful food you’ve ever tasted, for bargain prices. Here’s a place where weirdness and eccentricity are embraced — and of course, if you can turn it into a sitcom, so much the better. Here’s a

place where you can grocery shop right next to the actors who star in those very sitcoms, just like they were regular folks. Here's a place where you can take a ride in a spinning teacup.

To appreciate L.A. you need to look past the snarling traffic and the smog and the freeway signs and catch the city on one of those gin-clear days when you have an ideal view of the mountains. You'll catch yourself outside on a breezy morning, enjoying the sun in short sleeves and sipping some coffee, and you'll think to yourself, "It's January?" Those days usually win people over.

But all is not lost if you don't happen upon L.A. during perfect weather. Following is a list of our favorite itineraries, attractions, and experiences that should endear you to Los Angeles, smog and all.

## The Best Itineraries

- ✓ **Best way to see Los Angeles in a day:** Drive **Sunset Boulevard** from start to finish. That most identifiable of Los Angeles streets takes you from the heart of Downtown, right next to the oldest extant street in the city, all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Along the way, you will see a little bit of everything that defines Los Angeles, from what the city council wants you to think to what residents know is the truth, for good and for bad. Even if you have a week here, take this drive. We've provided a gossipy, scandal-ridden tour on p. 176.
- ✓ **Best way to see L.A. without moving:** Park yourself on a towel on a hot summer day on a **Santa Monica** or **Venice beach**. It's not a true picture of Los Angeles, but we will join forces with the tourism commission on this one, and let it go. Bikini babes, surfer boys, some oddballs, miles of ocean blue, the nearby kook-filled Venice boardwalk, and family-filled Santa Monica pier — isn't it what you came here for? You could justly wonder why we would make you do anything else. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Best way to prove New York City doesn't have a monopoly on culture:** Hit any one of our Big Three museums: the **Los Angeles County Museum of Art** (p. 166) offers an encyclopedic museum collection that rivals New York's Metropolitan, and so has something for everyone, from antiquities to masters to Asian art to modern art and more. It's also in a shamefully ugly complex. That's why locals tend to steer people to the **Getty** (p. 165), which is housed in Los Angeles' version of an urban setting, which is to say way up on a hillside, preventing anyone from walking there, and offering views to make grown men weep. The collection is kind of boring, though few will admit that out loud, but it did cost a lot and that makes it very L.A. The downtown **Museum of Contemporary Art** (p. 167) manages to combine the best of both — a nifty, modern piece of architecture (its façade just turned up in a car commercial) with a sterling collection.

## The Best Hotels

- ✔ **Best cheap hotel on the beach: The Cadillac Hotel** (p. 92) is currently undergoing a renovation to raise it from the depths of hostel-budget-land, so by the time you read this, the word “cheap” may no longer be strictly accurate. But it is just about as close to the beach as you can get, and the renovations will make stays in its basic-but-fine rooms that much nicer.
- ✔ **Best soft-focus-B&B-type hotel:** L.A. doesn’t have much in the way of charming B&B places, the sort that show up in *Victorian* magazine, but both the steps-from-the-beach **Venice Beach House** (p. 107) and the up-the-hill-from-the-sea **Channel Road Inn** (p. 93) are magazine-layout-ready. Both are housed in lovingly restored Craftsman homes, and both offer the kind of personal service and attention to detail that those of us who prefer character over design crave. And both have very L.A.-specific, seriously pretty settings.
- ✔ **Best hotel for old Hollywood romance:** Mystery, scandal, and more lurk around the **Chateau Marmont** (p. 93), an old behemoth castle of a hotel, best known as the place where John Belushi died, but almost equally well known as the place any number of stars stay when they come to town, or even live. We think this gorgeous, slightly peeling old place just reeks of romance and intrigue.
- ✔ **Best romantic hotel: The Hotel Bel Air** (p. 99), with its gardens and ponds and swans and its luxurious guest rooms, some with fireplaces and patios and all with 400-thread-count sheets, is the best place in the city for an assignation or any other romantic intrigue you want to cook up. Too bad none of us can afford it.
- ✔ **Best Downtown hotels:** For the best classic old L.A. hotel, there’s the Beaux Arts and Deco wonder that is the **Biltmore** (p. 103), where presidents stay or at least speak when they are in town. For the best classic old hotel that is more affordable, there is the Moroccan-and-Turkish-themed **Hotel Figueroa** (p. 99), where the owners are working hard to do it justice with newly done rooms. For a great weekend rate, it’s hard to beat the \$99 you can get at the **Checkers** (p. 97). And for the hippest crowd in L.A., try the **Standard** (p. 106).
- ✔ **Best hotels in Beverly Hills: The Maison 140** (p. 102) is sexy and sybaritic, whereas the **Beverly Hills Reeves** (p. 88) isn’t, but the latter has clean rooms for such shockingly low prices at times that even a budget traveler can have the cachet of saying “I’m staying in Beverly Hills.”

## The Best Restaurants

- ✔ **Best high-end restaurant:** Opinion is sharply divided here among Mark Peel’s defining work at **Campanile** (certainly the loveliest restaurant of the three: p. 124), the restaurant-empire-spawning

**Patina** (p. 138), and the French innovation creations at **Bastide** (p. 120). We've listed them in (more or less) escalating order of price, but please don't let that be your only deciding factor. All four are excellent and will demonstrate why Los Angeles cannot be overlooked when discussing foodie destinations.

- ✔ **Best reason to rejoice that L.A. is a melting pot:** Because it means the city teems with interesting hole-in-the-wall ethnic joints, that's why. Here are our favorites: The roast chicken at **Zankou** (p. 144) would be enough to bring us here regularly, but when combined with its garlic paste, we know what we would request for our last meal. The sampler platter at **Caroussel** (p. 127) is our favorite introduction to Armenian food (and our favorite way to overeat), whereas **Sanamluang Café** (p. 141) is the Thai restaurant we love the most. Can't decide? Go to the **Grand Central Market** (p. 130) in Downtown, where the food might not be the absolute best, but because it's laid out stall after stall in a semichaotic scene like no other in L.A., and the choices range from Thai to Japanese to Deli to Mexican and more that we've forgotten, the experience makes up for it.
- ✔ **Best sushi:** Apart from tired jokes about granola and sprouts, sushi is probably the food most closely identified with Los Angeles, if only because it seems so *dainty*. And silly. You can try some of the finest around, if you are willing to pay for it, at Matsuhisa (p. 137) and its somewhat cheaper sibling, Nobu, but frankly, we find the raw fish at **Sushi Gen** (p. 143) just about as good and considerably more affordable.
- ✔ **Best Mexican:** Of course, if you ask the locals, they will tell you that L.A.'s defining cuisine — the thing that gets us the most homesick when out of town — is Mexican. You will also start fights over what this means, exactly. For what most of us probably mean, and you too, when you think of Mexican food, which is to say the very specific, Southern California Mexican style, try the old school (we mean it — they've been around forever) **El Cholo** (p. 129). But if you want to know what real Mexicans think of when they think of what their mother made back home, then go to **Border Grill** (p. 122), where the chefs known as the Two Hot Tamales will show you what the real thing is. Or try yet another variation, the Yucatan-style, fast-food-doesn't-do-it-justice tacos and the like at **Yuca's Hut** (p. 144).
- ✔ **Best late-night hang:** You can't beat **Canter's Deli** (p. 126) for a scene. Old rockers, young rockers, Jewish grandmas, college kids on a budget, hipsters, and nobodies, they all come to Canter's, and a lot of them do it in the wee hours of the morning. Sometimes they play music in the Kibbitz Room, too.
- ✔ **Best cafe:** We hate to give any more press to **Clementine's** (p. 128) because it's hard enough to get a table there, but the lovely sandwiches, salads, and entrees that are always prepared with a strict eye to the season, plus the baked goods, are so delectable we have

to tell you about it. But let us sit at your table if it's full when we all get there, okay?

- ✔ **Best “Now THIS is L.A.” restaurant: Philippe’s** (p. 139) has been around longer than just about any other restaurant, and deservedly so, with the still-divine French dip sandwiches they claim to have invented in the first place, the sawdust on the floors, and the long tables you have to share with strangers from the entire broad Los Angeles spectrum. And the 9¢ cup of coffee. You have to eat here at least once or you’ve missed out on the heart of L.A.

## *The Best Attractions*

- ✔ **Best must-do:** Do you even have to be told to see **Disneyland** (Chapters 17–19)? Really? You’ve never been and weren’t planning on going? Shame on you. Would you go to Rome and skip the Vatican?
- ✔ **Best way to guarantee getting within 6 feet of a star:** Go to **Forest Lawn, Hollywood Forever, or Westwood Memorial Park** (Chapter 13). Oh, did you want the star to be breathing? Sorry. Well, if you still want to see the resting places of the likes of Valentino, Marilyn Monroe, or Andy Gibb, you can.
- ✔ **Best touristy thing to do:** Go see the **stars on the Hollywood sidewalk**, see the **footprints at Grauman’s**, and look up at the **Hollywood sign** (Chapter 11). Apart from the beach, why else did you come here? And once you’ve done it, wasn’t it just a bit cooler than you thought it might be?
- ✔ **Best building to say things like “Wow” about:** **The Walt Disney Concert Hall** (p. 210) gleams and billows and looks different from every angle. By rights, this will become Los Angeles’ Eiffel Tower, its Sydney Opera House, its Big Ben.
- ✔ **Best museum for L.A.:** **The Museum of Television & Radio** (p. 193) celebrates, well, television and radio. Those things (along with the flicks, of course) built this town. Going here means a great excuse to watch TV, including all sorts of rare and remarkable moments in media.
- ✔ **Best weirdest and most wonderful museum:** **The Museum of Jurassic Technology** (p. 192) is so great and so hard to explain that at least one person wrote a book about it (and came to no conclusion whatsoever). The focus is on the Lower Jurassic, but don’t expect dinosaurs. It’s small and strange, arty and informative, claustrophobic for some, utter heaven for others.
- ✔ **Best museum for our troubled times:** Kidding aside, there are lessons that we all need to learn at the **Museum of Tolerance** (p. 193).