

California's Los Angeles and Disneyland/Orange County



Los Angeles and Orange County - Images by Lee Foster

by Lee Foster

No California urban scene surpasses Los Angeles and Orange County when sheer enthusiasm and brash exuberance are at issue.

The Los Angeles region is a scene of worlds within worlds, ranging from the sun and surf worshippers at Venice Beach to the robust Little Saigon enclave of Vietnamese ex-patriots in Westminster, Orange County.

Los Angeles, or LA as it is commonly called, boasts an unusual diversity of cultures and lifestyles within its neighborhoods. It is a melange of movie sets, oil wells, neon strips, sprawling suburbs, and broad boulevards.

Wilshire Boulevard winds through Beverly Hills, home of movie stars and the site of eclectic boutiques. Hollywood and Sunset Boulevards pulsate in a neon glow, with nightclubs, bars, and restaurants. The lush, sprawling campus of UCLA lies in Westwood, a community with a college town feeling. Venice Beach is famous for its promenade where muscle builders, volleyball players, inline skaters, and strollers come to enjoy the sun and each other. Downtown, the Civic Center and futuristic

ARCO plaza area blooms with skyscrapers. Little Tokyo and Chinatown are only minutes away. All these elements make LA special.

Steady sunshine and a salubrious climate lend a relaxed flavor to the otherwise fast-paced life on the freeways. Weather is mild, even in winter, and the 14 inches of annual rainfall occurs mostly from November to March. A tinge of smog and the threat of congestion are the down side of life in LA. A clogged freeway between 7-9 a.m. or 4-6 p.m. is a democratizing experience, not discriminating on the basis of race, color, creed, or national origin. All the commuters among the 12.8 million in the metro area proceed at the same pace. You can be arrested on an LA freeway for going too slowly, just as you can be restricted from surfing at Malibu if there are too many boards competing for waves in the water.

Getting to Los Angeles

Airborne visitors fly into Los Angeles International (LAX), the major airport, or the smaller airports at Burbank , Long Beach , Ontario , and Orange County. The John Wayne airport in Orange County is closest to Disneyland. LA International (LAX) is on the western side of the metro region, near the ocean, at Century and Sepulveda boulevards, close to Inglewood.

If driving to the region, you'll probably arrive via Highway 101 or Interstate 5, running north-south, or Interstate 10 from the east. Highway 1 offers a leisurely, scenic alternative route along the coast if you are driving to LA from San Francisco.

Anyone who comes to the region without the intention of using a car should be lauded, but getting around on public transportation can be challenging. Transfers between airports, especially, can be accomplished by vans or buses. The bus and light rail system to be familiar with is the Metropolitan Transit Authority, which has done much to organize self-guided tours of the city. It is possible to use public transit, but the distances and delays can be considerable. However, the downtown area, outlined below, can be toured with a good pair of walking shoes. For visiting outlying regions, a car is more efficient than most bus arrangements. Los Angeles as a metro region encompasses a large area, with some parts, such as Hollywood , completely surrounded by the 467-square mile city of Los Angeles. To an outsider

these political boundaries seem puzzling. They originated in the early 20th century, largely over squabbles about water rights.

Distances between metro points can be great, but freeways link the sprawling communities for easy access. However, freeway driving here requires considerable skill. To negotiate the road safely, acquire a good map or GPS device and plan your route in advance. Street signs are oversized, which helps, and computerized billboards over some freeways flash ominous warnings if there is a snarl up ahead. Experienced drivers in the area all have their favorite “alternative” shortcuts.

One bright spot in the transportation picture is the Metro Rail, a 300-mile project. Metro Rail’s Blue Line connects Downtown to Long Beach. A Red Line and Green Line add more routes, allowing for speedy travel from the center out to such locations as Los Angeles airport or Redondo Beach . The Red Line, for example, can take you from downtown Los Angeles to the intersection of Hollywood and Vine in Hollywood.

In downtown there is a Trailways/Greyhound facility and an Amtrak depot, headquartered at the Union Station, Los Angeles and Alameda Streets, near the pueblo area. This lovely art-deco structure, last of the great rail passenger palaces, should be enjoyed on a downtown walking tour.

Los Angeles History

The town began in 1781 when 11 Spanish families settled there under Mexican Governor Felipe de Neve. A Spanish expedition of 1769 had pronounced the area fit for settlement. Governor de Neve founded an entity called El Pueblo de la Reina de Los Angeles (the village of Our Lady, Queen of the Angels). After Mexico won its independence from Spain in the 19th century, Los Angeles and Monterey were the main communities in the present state of California.

Today, more than 230 years after the founding, it is still possible to stroll around the original town square due to an ambitious restoration project which reclaimed and set aside 44 acres as a State Historic Park.

The Pueblo area is bounded by Alameda , Acacia, Spring, and Macy Streets. To

orient yourself, when at the site, stop in at the visitor center in Sepulveda House, on the west side of Olvera Street.

The ambiance of the pueblo area consists of a pleasing square, with an ornate bandstand, surrounded by the historic buildings. Off the square is the bustling Olvera Street , which approximates a Mexican market. There are several good Mexican restaurants on Olvera Street.

The square itself was the center of life here in the early 19th century. You'll find a statue honoring Felipe de Neve and a huge Moreton Bay fig tree lending shade.

Around the square and on Olvera, some interesting structures to see are the Firehouse, Masonic Hall, Church, and Avila Adobe. The firehouse is full of antique firefighting equipment. Masonic Hall displays trade goods brought by ships around the Horn. The Church was completed by Franciscans in 1822 and is still in use, making it the oldest church in the central city area. The Avila Adobe, the oldest structure in the city, has collections of artifacts that approximate what life was like here in the 1840's, the brief period when California was a Mexican pioneering frontier. Another architectural gem is the Pico House, 500 N. Main Street, once an elegant hotel, built by Pio Pico, the last Mexican governor of California.

After looking at these revered old structures, browse the handicraft and clothing shops on Olvera Street, with their bazaar flavor, and perhaps stop for lunch or a Mexican beer to salute the origins of Los Angeles. If you are visiting during December, the Christmas Las Posadas festivities here are colorful.

Geographically isolated by the mountains and sea, Los Angeles grew slowly until the completion of the first transcontinental railroad line in 1869. The magic of California, initially inspired by tales of the 1849 Gold Rush, soon brought a steady flow of settlers, adventurers, and travelers to Los Angeles. In the 20th century, growth has been made possible only because of the importation of water from the Owens Valley and later from the Colorado River. Petroleum, discovered first at Signal Hill in Long Beach, also stimulated migration to Southern California. Citrus ranching gave the region to the southeast of LA the name Orange County.

Los Angeles Main Attractions

A suggested itinerary of LA must be necessarily selective. More than in other cities, moreover, the traveler must have an idea of what he or she is looking for. LA does not obviously present itself, in a geographic sense, as other cities do. However, if you know what you are seeking, LA can exhibit great depth.

Begin with a vigorous walking tour of the downtown area. Start at 4th Street and Grand Avenue, which will put you in view of the black monolithic ARCO Towers and the cylindrical Westin Bonaventure Hotel. The high-rises here are prime office space in LA. Supporting the area are attractive landscapes, numerous shops, and some fine restaurants. These buildings are the “downtown” that Los Angeles lacked visually in the past, due to height restrictions imposed because of the earthquake hazard. Advancing building design made the former 12-story height limit obsolete.

Walk north on Grand three blocks to the Music Center Complex, the cultural heart of the city. Three major performing arts buildings are grouped around a fountains-and-pool plaza. Inquire what will occur, during your visit, at these entities: the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Ahmanson Theatre, and Mark Taper Forum. The Joffrey Ballet or the Los Angeles Philharmonic may well be performing.

Looking east from the Music Center, you will witness a landscaped mall with the pyramid-topped City Hall at the end. Walk to City Hall through the subtropical foliage of the area, noting the prominent presence of bird of paradise blossoms, the official city flower. Along the mall are a cluster of federal, state, and city government buildings, actually the largest such complex of government administrative buildings outside of Washington, D.C.

When you reach City Hall, turn south on Broadway and walk to the corner. On your right is the Times Mirror Building, home of the dominant newspaper of the region. Walk left three blocks and you will be in the Little Tokyo Japantown area of Los Angeles. This is an interesting place to browse and rest, with a stop perhaps at the Japanese Garden in the New Otani Hotel or at another garden in the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center, on San Pedro Street, south of 2nd Street. Be sure also to see the Japanese Village Plaza, an intriguing cluster of shops and

restaurants. One attraction here is the Japanese American National Museum. Immediately east is one of LA's unusual museums, the Geffen Contemporary, with its focus on modern art.

Then walk back to City Hall and north on Main Street, which will take you to the pueblo area and Olvera Street, discussed above, and well worth an hour or two of looking. On the way you pass the Los Angeles Children's Museum, a child's delight because of its hands-on experiences. While at Olvera Street, take a few minutes to walk east to the Union Station, the railroad art deco treasure noted earlier.

One final element remaining to be discovered in this downtown excursion is Chinatown. If you begin to feel the walk is too much, inquire at the pueblo about the route of the local buses, which take visitors around the downtown area. Then, by bus or on foot, proceed northwest from the pueblo area on Broadway. The main Chinatown area lies between Alpine and College, interesting for its shops, architecture, and many restaurants.

Aside from the downtown area, the other LA subject of greatest interest to many travelers is the world of movie and TV production. As a fitting introduction to a major aspect of Los Angeles, you might want to tour a movie or TV studio. A large percentage of all U.S. movies are created in the LA metro area. The region is also a leading TV- and radio-show production site. Several types of tours are possible.

Universal Studios offers the ultimate tour of a movie set. On location, you experience some special effects of the movie trade, such as the heat and flames of the movie "Backdraft" or the scary reptiles of "Jurassic Park."

Tours of television studios can be arranged, but tickets to some shows should be arranged well in advance. To receive a ticket to your favorite show, contact the Convention and Visitors Bureau noted at the end of this article for details.

In Hollywood, on Hollywood Boulevard, you might want to visit Mann's Chinese Theatre. Star gazers can search for the footprints and signatures of their favorite movie celebrities immortalized in cement. Commercial van tours going past homes of the stars can be arranged. The drive along Sunset Boulevard is a thrill for many movie fans.

Travelers can take the Red Line light rail from Downtown Los Angeles to Hollywood and Vine.

Beyond the downtown and the movie-TV industry, some within-Los Angeles places to visit are the Farmer's Market, the nearby Hancock Park with its Page Museum, and other major parks, Griffith and Exposition.

Farmer's Market, at 3rd Street and Fairfax, is famous for fresh produce, exotic foods, and international restaurants. Originally a small marketplace with 18 farmers during the Depression, Farmer's Market now covers 20 acres with colorful stalls.

Nearby are the famous tar pits of La Brea, at Wilshire Boulevard and Curson Avenue, where prehistoric animals and plants became entrapped. Their skeletal remains are displayed in the adjacent George C. Page Museum of La Brea Discoveries, 5801 Wilshire Blvd. You'll see numerous ice-age wolves, horses, elephants, and saber tooth cats on display.

Griffith Park, a 4,107-acre cultural and recreational center, includes the Los Angeles Zoo. Like the San Diego Wild Animal Park, this zoo replaces bars, cement, and cages with low walls and moats.

Perched on a promontory with a panoramic view of the city, the Griffith Observatory features a planetarium and exhibit halls. Also at Griffith Park, you'll find the Greek Theatre, a stage for drama, music, and dance events, and a nature museum with an exotic fern collection.

Griffith Park also hosts the Autry National Center, formed in 2003 by the merger of the Autry Museum of Western Heritage with the Southwest Museum of the American Indian and the Women of the West Museum. The entity began decades ago to show the collections and interpretive passion of the cowboy crooner, Gene Autry.

Exposition Park in southwest Los Angeles offers sunken gardens blooming with thousands of roses, a California Science Center with many hands-on, high-tech exhibits for kids, and a Natural History Museum with worldwide habitats of plant species.

This article can only report a small sample of what to do in LA. If you first consider

what interests you, then see what Los Angeles offers, the resources of the city are immense. If you enjoy listening to concerts, for example, the music played at the Hollywood Bowl alone over a year's cycle are mind-boggling. Add to that all the music offered at UCLA and USC, the two major campuses, and you have a plethora of choices, but these are only a small percentage of musical activities, geared to all tastes, playing in Los Angeles.

Nearby from LA: Disneyland, Orange County, and Around LA

The major excursions near the city can include trips to Disneyland and Laguna Beach in Orange County, Catalina Island and the Los Angeles beaches along the coast, and the Norton Simon Museum or Huntington Library in the San Gabriel Valley.

Once an agricultural center crowded with orange groves, Orange County is now the amusement park capital of California, with Disneyland the first and most famous theme park. Walt Disney's lands of make-believe continue to attract and enchant adults as well as children. Disneyland is at 1313 Harbor Boulevard, accessible in Anaheim from Interstate 5. The park is open daily. There are one-day Unlimited Passport tickets as well as multi-day tickets, depending on your needs. Lodging is possible at the Disneyland Hotel or at several national chain hotels nearby.

You enter Disneyland through a nostalgic railroad station suggesting 19th century comforts. For the first time visitor, the tram ride all around the park can orient and assist in formulating a plan about how time should be spent among the theme areas, which include Main Street USA, Tomorrowland, Frontierland, Fantasyland, Adventureland, Critter Country, New Orleans Square, Mickey's Toontown, and California Adventure.

Another theme park minutes away is Knott's Berry Farm, offering nostalgia, rides, shows, and music as well as the famous berry pies that were the original attraction. Just as Disneyland has its Disney characters, Knott's has Snoopy and Charlie Brown. Knott's Berry Farm is at 8039 Beach Boulevard in Buena Park.

The strip of coast running along the west side of Los Angeles also offers many pleasures.

Along Orange County's coast, visit the art colony of Laguna Beach, especially during one of the town's art festivals. The large Sawdust Festival occurs in July and August.

For a day of sun and surf, try the beaches at Santa Catalina Island, a major resort. Catalina is a 21-by-8-mile island, 22 miles offshore. You get there by taking a boat trip from Long Beach or from the LA harbor at San Pedro. It is also possible to fly, but taking the boat is part of the fun. Once on the island, you should take one of the local glass-bottom boat trips to see the exotic fishes. Tours of the inland part of this Wrigley-owned island are possible, including backpacking and camping. The Avalon Ballroom was a popular big-band broadcasting site in the radio era.

The western beach side of the Los Angeles metro area, besides being relatively smog-free, has much to entice the traveler. Long Beach has appealing seaside biking and walking paths. Moving north, the busy San Pedro harbor of LA includes an attractive shopping and restaurant area called Port O'Call.

The beach towns northwest of LA offer excellent swimming, surfing, and people-watching opportunities. Leo Carillo Park is an inviting place to camp. In the hills above Pacific Palisades you'll find a state park dedicated to the renowned humorist, Will Rogers, at 14253 Sunset Boulevard.

For the appreciator of art, the site to visit on the west side of Los Angeles is the Getty Center, perched high on a hill, with the architecture of the building itself competing with the artifacts housed therein for your attention.

There are two more major art museums in the area east of Los Angeles .

In the Rose Bowl city of Pasadena, the Norton Simon Museum of Art houses one of the most important art collections in the west, including Indian and Southeast Asian sculpture, medieval tapestries, paintings by European masters, and a particularly strong collection of Impressionist and modern paintings. The Norton Simon Museum is at 411 W. Colorado Boulevard.

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, in San Marino, are

located on the 200-acre estate of tycoon H. E. Huntington, willed to the public. The library contains half a million volumes of rare books, including a Gutenberg Bible, a First Folio of Shakespeare's plays, and Benjamin Franklin's hand-written autobiography. The estate includes acres of formal gardens and an excellent collection of British art from the 18th century. The Huntington is at 1151 Oxford Road.

If you determine in advance what would interest you and do some preliminary research, Los Angeles and Orange County can deliver a satisfying travel experience for all ages.

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Los Angeles and Orange County: If You Go

Two helpful travel planning websites for the region are www.discoverlosangeles.com and www.anaheimoc.org.