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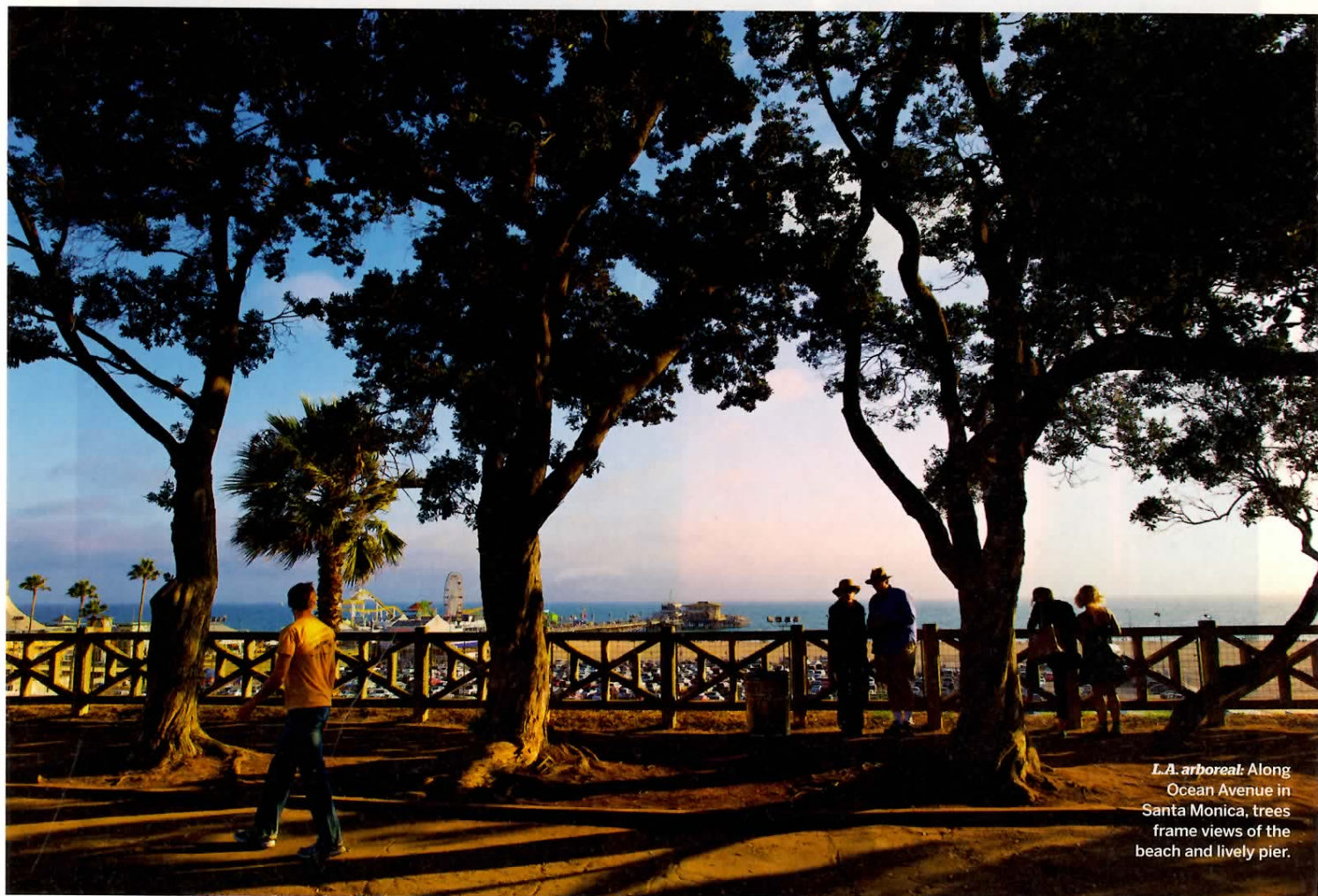
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SMART TRAVELER

[TRAVEL AT ITS BEST]



L.A. arboreal: Along Ocean Avenue in Santa Monica, trees frame views of the beach and lively pier.

Surprise: An Urban Road Trip

Explore the back roads and ocean drives of Los Angeles and beyond | *By* JOHN ROSENTHAL

LOS ANGELES is far too sprawling a metropolis to visit like a traditional city, and its notorious traffic can make even short distances seem oceans apart. (Remember “Carmageddon”? Last July, a planned weekend shut-down of a ten-mile stretch of the 405—L.A.’s busiest freeway—made international news.) But travelers needn’t be intimidated by the gridlock. The trick is to rethink your approach.

Treat L.A. and other spread-out cities (see “More Urban Trails,” page 28) not as hub-and-spoke itineraries but, rather, as

road trips you can take without ever leaving the metro areas. After all, places like L.A. evolve endlessly, so you too should always be on the move. (In the lyrics of singer/songwriter Michelle Shocked, you can travel 500 miles “and never leave L.A.”)

On this freewheeling tour of L.A. County, open a window onto the everyday charms that residents cherish—secret beaches, neighborhood farmers markets, hidden hiking trails, canyon wine bars, and roads locals actually enjoy driving. Best of all? You’ll spend most of your time *out* of the car.

VIKKI HART/GETTY IMAGES (ALLIGATOR);
MICHAŁ CZERMONIKA (PIER)



A day in the life: El Matador feels like a private beach (left); wine lovers come together at Sip Malibu's casual bar (below); the Huntington's cactus garden dates to 1907 (bottom).



BY THE BOARDWALK

Ocean breezes push city smog past **Santa Monica** and **Venice**, making these beachy towns among L.A.'s most walkable. In Venice, stroll its namesake canals, then cruise the boardwalk. Skate punks and cyclists stream past street artists, musclemen, and shops hawking Baja ponchos, ice cream, and body piercings. At the **Hotel Erwin**, a beachfront mainstay, a graffiti-sprayed wall lends street cred.

A few blocks inland, **Abbot Kinney Boulevard** offers a sampling of America's food truck revolution. A movable feast of rolling kitchens competes for space the first Friday of the month; brick-and-mortar restaurants, shops, and galleries capture the overflow. Look for the **Nom Nom** truck for Vietnamese lemongrass chicken tacos and succulent *bánh mì* sandwiches.

About three miles north, Santa Monica counters with groomed beaches and manicured lawns. Activity gravitates to the **Santa Monica Pier**. The small but spirited

amusement park offers a rollicking roller coaster and a solar-powered Ferris wheel with knockout views of the ocean. At the **farmers market** on Arizona Avenue, held Wednesdays and Saturdays, locals and visitors snack on blistered almonds alongside top chefs such as Wolfgang Puck.

ROCK STARS

As you head northwest on the Pacific Coast Highway into **Malibu**, the view turns bold and rugged, as the palisades of the Santa Monica Mountains dead-end at the ocean. Stop at the **Getty Villa** to bone up on Greek and Roman antiquities, or sift through the broad, golden sands at popular **Zuma Beach**. About seven miles farther north, gorgeous giant rock formations hide secluded **El Matador State Beach**. Consider tucking away for the night on **Billionaires' Beach** at the unassuming, 21-room **Casa Malibu Inn on the Beach**, near the homes of software mogul Larry Ellison and record producer David Geffen.

WILD, WILD WEST

Buckle up for the ride up Kanan Dume Road, a steep, curvaceous artery framed by precarious hilltop boulders. (Be glad it rarely snows here, and don't do this drive in the rain.) Four miles up, you'll pass a parking lot. The **Backbone Trail**, the spine of the Santa Monicas, extends roughly 30 miles in both directions. For an invigorating 1.5-mile hike, head downhill from the lot to shady Newton Canyon Falls.

After another five miles on Kanan Dume, the Old West suddenly surfaces. Horse-crossing signs and paddocks

remind drivers that this is equestrian terrain. It's also superb wine country. Taste the terroir at Cielo vineyard's wine bar, **Sip Malibu**, where you can sample a glass of Purple Haze (a red blend) on the patio or under wagon-wheel chandeliers. Next door, the convivial **Rustic Canyon General Store and Grill** draws weekend motorcyclists for corn dogs, half-pound burgers, and mugs of beer.

HILL COUNTRY

Follow Mulholland Highway about 15 miles to Mulholland



MICHAL CZERWONKA (ALL PHOTOS) MAP: INTERNATIONAL MAPPING

Drive. Turn right, then take a left onto Topanga Canyon Boulevard into the **San Fernando Valley**. Skid east seven miles along Ventura Boulevard, then south on Hayvenhurst Avenue to meet back up with Mulholland Drive. This portion of Mulholland is the knife-edge ridge cleaving the valley from the L.A. basin, delivering magnificent views on both sides. Cross over the maligned 405 Freeway, turning off at Benedict Canyon Drive for the descent into **Beverly Hills**. Along the twisting side roads, palaces rise on stilts.

From the base of Benedict Canyon, Beverly Hills' toniest boutiques beckon a mile or so down legendary **Rodeo Drive**. But if you turn left, **Sunset Strip** struts east past the Beverly Hills Hotel and the Viper Room. Three blocks beyond House of Blues, Sunset veers to the right; to the left is the **Chateau Marmont**, every bit as A-list as its countless celebrity guests.

HOLLYWOOD REMAKE

Despite tourist attractions like **Grauman's Chinese Theater** and its **Walk of Fame**, parts of **Hollywood** had turned seedy over the years. But in 2010, the hotel premieres of the posh **W** and the ornate (some say overdone) **Redbury** launched a comeback. Notable restaurants have since revived the famous intersection of Hollywood and Vine. The retro-glam **Wood and Vine** serves scallops and Sazeracs in the 1923 building where Charlie Chaplin had his original offices, and diners order steak tartare from tufted Queen Anne chairs at the au courant **Lexington Social House**.

In July, Cirque du Soleil's *Iris* took up residence at the **Kodak Theatre**—except, of course, on Oscar night. The first Academy Awards, in 1929, took place across the way at the **Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel**. With comfy couches and alluring fire pits, its **Tropicana Bar** surrounds a pool designed by British artist David Hockney.

MELTING POTS

Head south on Western Avenue, where L.A.'s geographic variety yields to an amazing cultural diversity. This former Mexican barrio is now the heart of **Koreatown**, but it also hosts Thai, Vietnamese, and Armenian eateries. At **Mu Dung San**, pig out on all-you-can-eat Korean barbecue (the pork belly is a must).

A couple of miles east, a critical mass of new restaurants and clubs has created the kind of lively street life downtown long lacked. That's especially true in **Little Tokyo**, which is far more than a Japanese burg. The **Spice Table**, a recent addition, wows jaded Angelenos with authentic



Vietnamese and Singaporean eats. The **Lazy Ox Canteen** spans global cuisine too (Iberian ham, Monterey Bay abalone).

RUN FOR THE ROSES

More often called the 110, Arroyo Seco Parkway harkens back to an era when folks drove motorcars for pleasure, with short on- and off-ramps and thrilling turns to test driving skills. The freeway

ends in **Pasadena**, ten miles from L.A., a onetime bedroom community that now hums with activity along Colorado Boulevard. Since 1907, the Spanish-style **Langham Huntington Hotel** has delivered Old World luxury at the foot of the San Gabriel Mountains. Among American bistros and Brazilian *churrascarias*, the **Tibet Nepal House** and **Himalayan Café** infuse the dining scene with a heady blend of cardamom, saffron, and chive-like *jimbu*.

Pasadena takes the national spotlight each January as the host of the Rose Bowl and Rose Parade. Year-round highlights include the **Norton Simon Museum**, a trove of European paintings. Nearby, the **Huntington** features an impressive library and botanical gardens, with a century-old collection of cacti and other succulents. Pasadena is also a prime starting gate for **Santa Anita Park**, eight miles east, one of horse racing's prettiest tracks and the haunt of famed Seabiscuit—just another legend to achieve his dreams in L.A. County. ■

MORE URBAN TRAILS

Take the local route in these sprawling cities

Big, congested cities might seem daunting to drive, and it's true that public transit remains the smartest way to navigate hectic downtowns. But having your own wheels also gives you the license to go off-grid. Avoid backtracking by treating these cities' sprawl as you would a rural route, moving on each day.

CHICAGO

From the Loop, follow the first few miles of Route 66 west along Adams Street. Lunch in Greektown, then go west to Oak Park's Frank Lloyd Wright wonderland. His Robie House stands on the South Side's University of Chicago campus, not far from the Obamas' Kenwood fortress. Take Lake Shore Drive north, then pick up the Ridge Street diagonal through West Rogers Park's Indo-Pakistani enclave and on to affluent Evanston.

ATLANTA

Start at the Sweet Auburn Historic District, the unofficial home of the civil rights movement. (Martin Luther King, Jr., preached here at Ebenezer Baptist Church.) Take Freedom Parkway or Ponce de León Avenue east to bustling zones like Decatur, Little Five Points, and Virginia Highland. Overnight in Midtown, then take Peachtree Street to Buckhead's chic shops and the Atlanta History Center.

MIAMI

Pick up resort wear in walkable Coral Gables and Coconut Grove. Then venture northeast to Little Havana to sip Cuban coffee and watch old-timers play dominoes in Maximo Gomez Park. Continue north to the burgeoning Design District and Little Haiti. Across the Julia Tuttle Causeway, the art deco masterpieces of hard-partying South Beach are to the right. Recuperate from any excesses in the laid-back resorts of Miami Beach and North Dade.



MICHAŁ CZEPIŃSKI (WOMAN); MURAT TANIR/GETTY IMAGES (BUILDINGS)