

Just Back from Los Angeles...

Contributed by Administrator
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Editor Jennifer Paull recently spent a long weekend in Los Angeles, lured west by the tempting reports of terrific new sights and places to eat. She took the plunge back into car culture and zipped through the city from the Hollywood Hills to Malibu's shoreline.

Why L.A.?

I was curious to see some of the city's new sights and scenes, from the reopened Griffith Observatory to the latest stores on Melrose Avenue. I'd also heard mouthwatering tales about a handful of new restaurants, like Osteria Mozza -- house-made mozzarella makes for extra incentive.

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What was your favorite part of the trip?

Exploring Griffith Observatory was a truly outstanding experience. The restored art deco building is a knockout and it's wrapped by terraces that lure you outside to look at the cityscape. The planetarium has a new dome, star projector, and comfortable seats (no more wooden head rests!). It's also nice that the planetarium show has live narration, not a pre-recorded spiel.

The observatory staff is impressively knowledgeable and enthusiastic. They tipped me off to an upcoming rare meteor shower that would be visible from Southern California -- and a few nights later, I got up at 4 a.m. to see it. Breathtaking!

By the way, I did see evidence of the severe fires that reached Griffith Park in summer 2007, but the Observatory and its grounds are unscathed.

What surprised you?

The fact that you can see so much through the Griffith Observatory telescopes was a happy surprise, since I'd assumed that L.A.'s light pollution would bleach out the night sky. But after twilight I looked through the massive rooftop Zeiss telescope and had a great view of Jupiter and three of its moons. The observatory is open until 10 p.m., so you can spend several after-dark hours up there. Very romantic, I might add.

What was the best new place to eat?

I'd heard raves about Osteria Mozza, the latest restaurant from Nancy Silverton and Mario Batali, and it mostly lived up to the hype. Anything with that meltingly fresh mozzarella and burrata cheese is well worth ordering. The rich pastas and grilled lamb were perfectly done; the one letdown was the bland slab of pork. Still, I found myself yearning for the Osteria's neighboring sibling restaurant, the Pizzeria Mozza. Once you've had one of their brick-oven pizzas, you're hooked.

Another favorite was Hans Röckenwagner's new 3 Square Café + Bakery on Abbot Kinney Boulevard in Venice. It's a perfect, low-key place for breakfast. The menu signals the chef's German/Angelino background; you can choose between huevos rancheros and a fantastic, puffy German apple pancake with crème fraîche.

Were there other newcomers that impressed you?

I was very curious to see the new outpost of Moss, a high-design housewares store. (And I'm not talking fancy-department-store style -- Moss really is in a class by itself.) The space on Melrose Avenue is cool but it's more of a gallery than a shop. There were a few dramatic pieces of limited-edition furniture, like Tord Boontje's laser-cut steel bench that evokes a tangle of branches and flowers. But unlike the original New York location, the store offers very few small goods or pieces that don't cost a fortune.

What advice do you have for someone going to L.A.?

The need to do some advance planning really hit home. Think about what you want to see several weeks before your trip, then figure out what you might need to arrange ahead of time. For instance, I had to plan far in advance to visit certain sights, like the Getty Villa in Malibu and the Griffith Observatory, since they have reservations policies and fill up quickly.

L.A. may be laid-back in many ways but if you try to wing it, you can sometimes end up frustrated or stuck in a certain part of town. On a day-to-day level, this means thinking ahead about which side of town to visit (east side or west side) and which freeways would be easiest to use. On my trip, spontaneity turned out to be best in small doses.

---Jennifer Paull