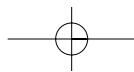
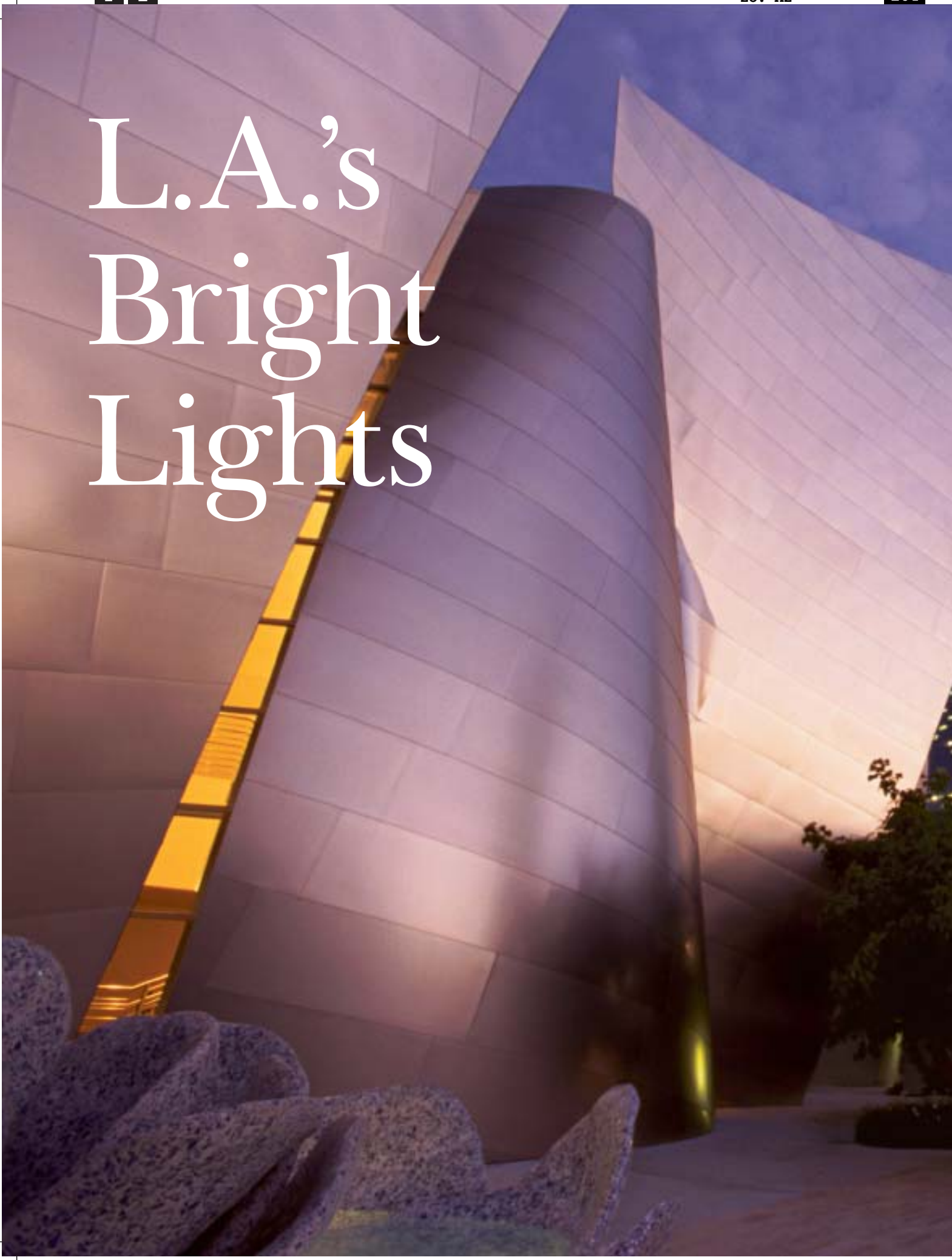
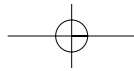


# L.A.'s Bright Lights





# Los Angeles is on the world's cultural itinerary like never before

BY MATTHEW JAFFE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY

DAVID ZAITZ

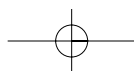
**A** rainy Sunday in Paris would seem an unlikely place to begin a story about Los Angeles, but here goes.

About a year ago, my wife and I ducked into the venerable Café de Flore along Boulevard Saint-Germain for a late lunch. Our server was a handsome young guy in his 20s with flowing hair and a relaxed manner that was in marked contrast to the famously imperious bearing of most Paris waiters. When he brought the check, he asked us where we lived. And so I told him: California. Los Angeles.

His face brightened. “Los Angeles! I want to visit there so much. The sun. All the architecture. Frank Gehry. Hollywood. It all seems very American, so exciting and new there. So different than Paris.”

I bring up this moment not as some Old Europe seal of approval for this most New World of cities but rather to state the obvious: L.A. is not Paris. Nor is it London, New York, or San Francisco. And that's exactly what intrigued this

**The shimmering Walt Disney Concert Hall is the linchpin of L.A.'s revived downtown.**





**Downtown**

Los Angeles has created a downtown worthy of the word. From top, Bunker Hill's grand staircase; rooftop at the Standard, Downtown L.A.; Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels; Walt Disney Concert Hall; and Grand Central Market. At right, Chung King Road.





guy about Los Angeles, what he presumed to be the very bearable L.A.-ness of its being. The less traditional, apparently, the better.

Los Angeles may be the least understood of major world cities, the result of its sprawling geography, an avalanche of stereotypes, and the tendency of otherwise informed people to flaunt their sophistication by dismissing the city—that is, without really understanding it.

With the opening of two innovative downtown landmarks, Jose Rafael Moneo's Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels and Frank Gehry's Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles is on the world's cultural itinerary like never before. These buildings join a decade's worth of projects—including the Staples Center arena downtown, the approximately \$1 billion Getty Center for the arts, and a growing subway and light-rail network—that have helped Los Angeles rebound from the earthquakes and riots of the 1990s. Meanwhile, Hollywood—not the industry but the historic entertainment district—has launched a comeback. Restaurants, new retail projects, and restored theaters are drawing a young, arty crowd to an area that had previously been ceded to starstruck tourists.

If, as it has so often been said, Los Angeles is 19 or 100 or 1,000 suburbs in search of a city, then maybe, at long last, that city has been found.

It's one of those perfect afternoons in Los Angeles—the morning fog has cleared, a light breeze blows off the ocean, and the temperature drifts into the mid-70s. The freeways are moving and the city is wide open, there for the taking.

This is a Sunday to be outside. But downtown, a few thousand people are doing the unthinkable: heading indoors. At the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, the faithful and curious

alike are drawn by the dramatic contemporary design, from delicate, playful angel sconces to fresco-styled tapestries that run the length of the soaring nave, all illuminated by light filtered through alabaster windows.

A block away, along Grand Avenue, the gleaming stainless steel panels of the Walt Disney Concert Hall Complex seem to fade directly into the high blue sky. There are two indoor venues at the complex, which in less than a year has already become one of the world's most recognizable buildings. The crowd arriving for the Los Angeles Philharmonic's performance of musical director Esa-Pekka Salonen's composition "Wing On Wing" is for the most part properly proper, with a fair number of business suits and long gowns, even for the matinee. They will enter a hall of surpassing beauty, with walls of Douglas fir that flow as elegantly as the lines of a fine instrument, a space as soulful in its way as the cathedral's nave.

The other performance space is REDCAT (Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater), an intimate 250-seat venue created for experimental theater and less traditional events, such as today's *Charles Phoenix Variety Show*. Its crowd is partial to a retro hipster look, with all sorts of vintage rayon shirts featuring martini, tiki, and palm-tree motifs.

Phoenix comes onto the stage in a bright turquoise cosmic-cowboy outfit with crystal rhinestones and embroidered roses. He dishes up commentary on a series of vacation photos and movies—other people's vacation photos and movies—that he has found at flea markets, thrift stores, and garage sales. It's part reality television, part variety show, and, with Phoenix preparing an ambrosia salad for the audience to eat at intermission, part performance art and part Tupperware party too.

Phoenix, who is the author of *Southern Californialand*, a look back at the region in the midcentury, is an unabashed advocate for all things L.A. At

least most things. While he considers Walt Disney Concert Hall “a unique, bizarre, break-all-the-rules kind of building,” the cathedral’s sand-blasted cast-concrete walls, designed to evoke the adobe color of California’s original missions, leave him baffled.

“I think it’s supposed to be something super special, but to me it looks like plywood,” Phoenix says. “For 500 years, we’re going to be a city waiting for a giant stucco gun to arrive to cover all that plywood.”

Phoenix gravitates to the survivors of earlier eras along downtown’s historic main drag, Broadway. Gems range from the light-filled atrium and ornamental iron-work of the 1893 Bradbury Building to Clifton’s Brookdale Cafeteria, a themed eatery from the 1930s with columns camouflaged as redwoods, a waterfall, and even a tiny stone chapel.



## “Fantasy environments are a huge part of L.A.”

CHARLES  
PHOENIX

Angeles far removed from its reputation for the gaudy and glitzy.

Gritty but vital, Broadway is a bustling commercial district that belies the long-standing truism that nobody walks in L.A. It is said to be the largest Latino shopping area in the country, and a steady soundtrack pours from the thumping and crackling speakers in front of the street’s many *discotecas*. Clothing-store windows are filled with flouncy quince-

añera dresses, while botanicas display folk remedies and statues of saints. It’s a street where hope and despair readily mix. For some, Broadway is part of an upward journey; for others, this is where they have bottomed out.

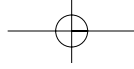
As Los Angeles boomed in the 1920s, Broadway became the focus of urban life here. It’s home to a dozen classic theaters that compose the largest concentration of historic movie palaces in the country. At the United Artists Theatre, which now hosts church services, a mural on one side of the auditorium shows silent-film star Mary Pickford fleeing four demonlike figures said to represent the heads of major studios. The mural on the other side depicts her standing triumphant atop the globe, symbolizing her escape and the founding of her own studio, United Artists. Opened in 1926, the Orpheum Theatre hosted entertainers from Judy Garland to Aretha Franklin; it has been beautifully restored and is now used for musicals and special events. And the Los Angeles Theatre, built as a dreamy escape during the Great Depression, is considered, in a city of grand theaters, the most ornate.

For Phoenix, the theaters are part of a local architectural tradition that the city can tap into rather than searching for answers from other cities. He has little patience with current talk of turning Grand Avenue into a Champs-Élysées or Rockefeller Center for Los Angeles. “Even after all these years,” he says, “many people don’t want to acknowledge that Los Angeles can draw inspiration from itself. They’re quick to say there’s no real history. Well, you know the movies have been around almost 100 years and are a strong influence on the city. Fantasy environments are a huge part of L.A. That’s just the way it is.”

Today, many of the theaters have been converted to less glamorous uses, such as housing swap meets, while others are only open for special events or tours. But numerous vintage buildings—together they make up one of the largest intact districts of Beau-



TOP RIGHT: ARTHUR MOUNT



## Downtown

For more information, contact the L.A. Inc. visitors bureau ([www.seemyla.com](http://www.seemyla.com) or 213/624-7300).

### Attractions

**Broadway.** For information on the Orpheum Theatre, call 213/749-5171. Reservations are required to attend services at the former United Artists Theatre (800/338-3030). Grand Central Market (\$; 317 S. Broadway; 213/624-2378) is a prime spot for a quick bite to eat.

**Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels.** Walk through the bronze doors and you enter a space of serene beauty. Call for hours. 555 W. Temple St.; [www.ola-cathedral.org](http://www.ola-cathedral.org) or 213/680-5200.

**Chinatown's Chung King Road.** Galleries here are generally open Wednesday to Saturday. Galleries are concentrated in the 900 block of Chung King Rd.; [www.chinatownla.com](http://www.chinatownla.com)

**Los Angeles Public Library's Central Library.** Go see the historic murals in the second-floor rotunda. If you're coming from Grand Avenue, take the beautiful Bunker Hill Steps along Hope Street. 10-8 Mon-Thu, 10-6 Fri-Sat, 1-5 Sun. 630 W. Fifth St.; [www.lapl.org](http://www.lapl.org) or 213/228-7000.

### Broadway baby

Movie palaces like the Orpheum are springing back to life.

Fifth St.; [www.lapl.org](http://www.lapl.org) or 213/228-7000.

**Museum of Contemporary Art.** A retrospective of L.A. artist Ed Ruscha begins October 17. Closed Tue-Wed; \$8 (free every Thu). 250 S. Grand Ave.; [www.moca.org](http://www.moca.org) or 213/626-6222.

**Walt Disney Concert Hall Complex.** Home to the Los Angeles Philharmonic and REDCAT. Visit the gardens and Concert Hall Café (\$; call for hours; 213/972-3550). 111 S. Grand; [www.musiccenter.org](http://www.musiccenter.org) or 323/850-2000.

### Dining

**Cicada.** Northern Italian cuisine in a 1920s haberdashery. \$\$\$\$; closed Sun. 617 S. Olive St.; 213/488-9488.

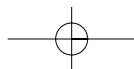
**Patina.** Located at Walt Disney Concert Hall, this is the showcase for Joachim Splichal's L.A. restaurant empire. \$\$\$\$ 141 S. Grand; 213/972-3331.

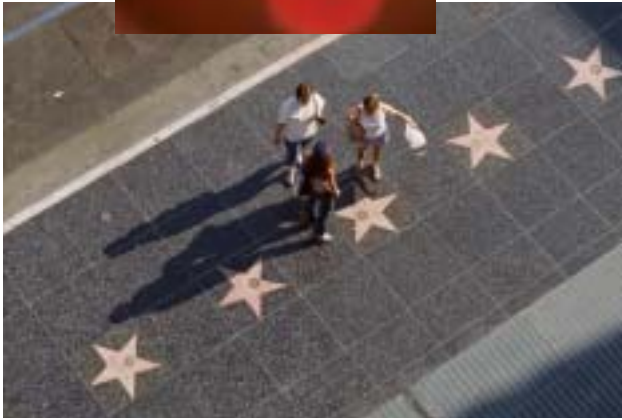
**Traxx.** In Union Station, it has a big-city feel and modern American cuisine. \$\$\$; closed Sun. 800 N. Alameda St.; 213/625-1999.

### Lodging

**Hilton Checkers Los Angeles.** This updated 1927 hotel has a great location. 188 rooms from \$109. 535 S. Grand; [www.checkers-hotel.com](http://www.checkers-hotel.com) or 213/624-0000.

**The Standard, Downtown L.A.** Swank and stylish, if sometimes noisy. 207 rooms from \$99. 550 S. Flower St.; [www.standardhotel.com](http://www.standardhotel.com) or 213/892-8080.





**Hollywood**

The scene swings: from top, the Egyptian Theatre; Paladar Bistro Cubano; elephant at Hollywood + Highland; the Hollywood Walk of Fame; and Lucky Strike Lanes. At right, ArcLight Cinemas' cafe/bar.





Arts structures in the country—are being transformed into loftlike living spaces for people who actually want to live downtown. (Ironically, decades of neglect had their benefits, notes Michael Tansey, now a general partner with the real estate development firm Peterson & Tansey. “These buildings were sitting fallow just waiting for the world to catch up to them,” he says. “There wasn’t a use for the land, so there wasn’t even a reason to tear them down.”) Meanwhile, just to the north, another classic but long-neglected Los Angeles district, L.A.’s Chinatown, has found new life as a center for cutting-edge art.

Still, of all the places where Los Angeles past and present meet, no place blends the two quite so evocatively as the 1917 Grand Central Market, an ever-busy collection of food stands that draws hungry office workers and grocery shoppers alike. My grandparents used to shop here back in the 1950s, and I come to walk the same sawdust-covered floors and soak up an atmosphere that is about as close as you will find in the United States to the great markets of Mexico. There are stacks of mangoes and piles of nopales, baskets of dried chiles and vats of mole paste. Live blue crabs stumble around piles of ice, and fish heads bound for the evening’s stew stare vacantly from glass cases. It’s an amazing scene, real in a way that L.A. supposedly isn’t, a reminder that this city is more than just vivid surfaces, and that in a place famous for caring only about the next new thing, some traditions run deep.

**O**n a foggy morning, I head out from Hollywood with Laura Massino of Architecture Tours L.A. to sample the city’s architectural diversity, from Hollywood-inspired period revivals to works by such modern masters as Frank Lloyd Wright and Rudolph Schindler. Massino, an East Coast

native, has been in L.A. for 18 years, during which time she became intrigued by the city and eventually went on to get a master’s in architectural history.

“You have to look at L.A. as this fragmented place,” she says. “It’s an enormous city that takes a long time to get to know. I get a lot of foreigners on my tours, and they tend to be fascinated by it. To them, L.A. is big and out there, with no constraints. Architects here have always been free to experiment.”

She drives a black 1962 Series 62 Cadillac, a vehicle as horizontal as the city itself. We pass an assortment of buildings that reflect the ongoing revitalization of Hollywood: the restored 1930 Pantages Theatre, the 1922 Grauman’s Egyptian Theatre (now a state-of-the-art film center owned and run by American Cinematheque), and, next to the Egyptian, the Pig’n Whistle, a 1927 restaurant that for decades functioned as a pizzeria and even a clothing store before being returned to its glory days.

Just south of Hollywood Boulevard, on Highland Avenue, the pink-and-white Max Factor Building now houses the new Hollywood Museum. It has a big collection of costumes and props, as well as an assortment of surprises that includes a reassembled bathroom from actor Roddy McDowall’s house. He was notable for his parties, and the bathroom was a virtual museum, with signed photos from stars like Elizabeth Taylor and a Christmas card from Noel Coward.

On the museum’s main floor, you can visit the technicolored rooms where Factor worked his makeup magic, one each for “brownettes,” brunettes, blonds, and redheads. And via an elevator shaft topped by a chandelier from Tony Curtis’s house, you descend past the Eiffel Tower model used in 2001’s *Moulin Rouge* and into a basement where the original jail-cell set from *The Silence of the Lambs* has been reconstructed, proving that cannibalism and cosmetics are not mutually exclusive.

Surreal juxtaposition is a time-honored L.A. tradition, of course, and at the Hollywood + Highland Shopping and Entertainment Center, Assyrian idols meet *American Idol*, creating the unlikely tag team of film pioneer D.W. Griffith and TV host Ryan Seacrest. The center's Babylon Court incorporates giant, rearing elephants atop columns as well as other elements from the set of Griffith's silent-film epic *Intolerance*, which stood for years in Hollywood, while Seacrest has taped *American Idol* finals at the center's Kodak Theatre.

Eventually, Massino and I find ourselves in front of Grauman's Chinese Theatre. It's both the most predictable destination in town and the best, because it delivers exactly what it's supposed to. There's an immediacy and intimacy to seeing the hand- and footprints of screen legends: petroglyphs, Hollywood-style.

Massino's Caddy grabs the crowd's attention, and they look over, trying to figure out just who is inside. The gaggle of celebrity look-alikes

and costumed cartoon characters stop and appraise the car as well. Marilyn Monroe seems unimpressed, while SpongeBob SquarePants points and claps. The Johnny Depp look-alike dressed as *Pirates of the Caribbean's* captain Jack Sparrow nods slowly and salutes us by raising his sword to the brim of his hat.

It just goes to show that some myths die harder than others. L.A. is awash with history and culture. It's one of the country's leading centers for architecture. There's even a subway. But apparently, you are still what you drive. ✨

**"L.A. is big and out there, with no constraints"**

LAURA MASSINO



## Hollywood

Hollywood is about 7 miles from downtown. The Metro Red Line subway (\$3 all-day subway and bus pass; [www.metro.net](http://www.metro.net) or 800/266-6883) takes roughly 20 minutes from L.A.'s Union Station to Hollywood Boulevard and Highland Avenue.

### Attractions

**ArLight Cinemas.** A 21st-century movie palace, it combines the Cinerama Dome with smaller auditoriums and shows first-run films, anniversary editions, and documentaries. It's more expensive than the multiplex but worth it. There's a cafe/bar on-site. Movie tickets from \$11. 6360 Sunset Blvd.; [www.arlightcinemas.com](http://www.arlightcinemas.com) or 323/464-4226.

**Egyptian Theatre.** The original site for Hollywood premieres, the Egyptian is now home to American Cinematheque, a state-of-the-art film center. A 55-minute documentary, *Forever Hollywood* (\$7), shows on weekends. Contact the theater for film schedule (movie tickets from \$9). 6712 Hollywood Blvd.; [www.americancinema.theque.com](http://www.americancinema.theque.com) or 323/466-3456.

**El Capitan Theatre.** Restored to 1920s splendor by the Walt Disney Company, it's a classic movie shrine. Movie tickets from \$11. 6838 Hollywood Blvd.; [www.elcapitan.tickets.com](http://www.elcapitan.tickets.com) or 800/347-6396.

**Grauman's Chinese Theatre.** Most people never get beyond the hand- and footprints, but the main auditorium's hybrid Chinese/deco decor is spectacular too. Call for information on daily

tours (\$10). Movie tickets from \$11. 6925 Hollywood Blvd.; 323/461-3331.

### Hollywood + Highland Shopping and Entertainment Center.

Megacomplex includes shopping, restaurants, and the Kodak Theatre, home to the Academy Awards; theater tours are offered daily (\$15, \$10 ages 4-11). It's great for people-watching, and there's a fun scene at Lucky Strike Lanes (323/467-7776). Northwest corner of Hollywood Blvd. at Highland Ave.; [www.hollywoodandhighland.com](http://www.hollywoodandhighland.com) or 323/960-2331.

**The Hollywood Museum.** Big costume and memorabilia collection in the Max Factor Building. 10-5 Thu-Sun; \$15. 1660 N. Highland; [www.thehollywoodmuseum.com](http://www.thehollywoodmuseum.com) or 323/464-7776.

**Pantages Theatre.** The host of the Academy Awards from 1949 to '59, the theater was renovated in 2000 and is now home to touring Broadway shows. 6233 Hollywood Blvd.; [www.broadwayla.org](http://www.broadwayla.org) or 323/468-1770.

### Dining

**Musso & Frank Grill.** The Hollywood icon is fabled for its martinis and old-school cuisine. \$\$\$\$; closed Sun-Mon. 6667 Hollywood Blvd.; 323/467-7788.

**Paladar Bistro Cubano.** Outstanding Cuban cuisine in a festive, modern setting. \$\$\$\$. 1651 Wilcox Ave.; 323/465-7500.

**Pig'n Whistle.** Old and new Hollywood converge at this beautifully restored spot that becomes a dance club after hours. \$\$\$. 6714 Hollywood Blvd.; 323/463-0000.

**White Lotus.** Fine Euro-Asian cuisine in a most happening setting. \$\$\$\$. Closed Sun-Mon. 1743 N. Cahuenga; 323/463-0060.

### Lodging

**Renaissance Hollywood Hotel.** Part of the Hollywood + Highland center. 637 rooms from \$179. 1755 N. Highland; [www.renaissance.hollywood.com](http://www.renaissance.hollywood.com) or 800/468-3571.

**Roosevelt Hotel.** Packed with history and featuring a vintage Hollywood lobby, the Roosevelt has had major upgrades in recent years. 105 rooms from \$199. 7000 Hollywood Blvd.; [www.hollywoodroosevelt.com](http://www.hollywoodroosevelt.com) or 800/950-7667.

### Cool tours

**Architecture Tours L.A.** Personalized driving tours of landmark city buildings in either a vintage Cadillac or small van. From \$65. [www.architecturetoursla.com](http://www.architecturetoursla.com) or 323/464-7868.

**Los Angeles Conservancy Tours.** The city's leading preservation organization offers weekly and monthly tours, including walking tours of the Broadway Theatre District (you can see the Los Angeles Theatre in June). \$10. [www.laconservancy.org](http://www.laconservancy.org) or 213/623-2489.

**Neon Cruises.** From May through October 23, the Museum of Neon Art conducts weekly three-hour tours to see the city's rich storehouse of neon. \$45. [www.neonmona.org](http://www.neonmona.org) or 213/489-9918.

**Red Line Tours.** Thorough walking tours of Hollywood, historic downtown, and contemporary downtown. \$20. [www.redlinetours.com](http://www.redlinetours.com) or 323/402-1074.