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FEET ACCOMPLI

By DAVID LANDSEL

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ONE of the reasons it is so easy for visitors to make broad generalizations about Los Angeles is because they never get out of their cars. Imagine, if you will, spending a week driving around Manhattan. You'd sail up and down the avenues, fight your way down cross streets, struggle to find inexpensive parking and no doubt waste a lot of energy doing battle with your fellow drivers.

PHOTOS: 50 States, California

More than likely, you'd leave overwhelmed, exhausted and pretty much hating New York.

Just because Los Angeles has been more traditionally geared towards drivers does not mean that it is any different. Sailing down Santa Monica Boulevard, you cannot hope to truly understand what Los Angeles is all about. You can only see it from your car window. You are not in Los Angeles. You are merely passing through.

This lack of spatial understanding is perhaps what makes Los Angeles such a formidable foe in people's minds. Of course, it doesn't matter that the truth is out there; that it is just 16 miles or so from Downtown to the Pacific Ocean, a distance that compares almost exactly with Battery Park to The Cloisters. Manhattan, tip to tip. That can be done. Many have.

That hurdle overcome, everyone will start moaning about how spread out everything is, except we have entire boroughs with similar density. Take Staten Island. Okay, maybe don't. Take Queens, which overall has double LA's density, but in many places is quite similar.

Now, imagine walking across Queens on a pleasant day. If you plan your route correctly, this is barely a hardship - particularly on the northern end of the borough, where there are plenty of good restaurants and some fun bars and some interesting sights along the way. Not a bad way to kill a Sunday.

Armed with this perspective - along with the knowledge that Los Angeles' MTA has been in overdrive expanding its public transportation offerings over the years to include miles of light rail, subway and express bus service - I

have been thinking lately that it's high time to rethink how I see and explore the city. I have been thinking this because after ten years of driving around, what more could I possibly learn about our nation's second largest (and, perhaps, most insane) town, without switching things up?

A NEW ANGLE

By now, I've had enough experience on foot - both down in the flats and up in the hills - to know that in

the city famous for its lack of community, community secretly busts out all over, wherever you allow it to do so. The first step toward this is getting out of your damn car, which in this town is like telling King Arthur's Men to go into battle without armor.

Once on foot, you stumble into often-charming (if somewhat awkward) manifestations of camaraderie between the car-less, whether they are car-less by choice or necessity. The same people who will honk their horns, make obscene gestures and wish a plague on all of your houses when inside their roving sheet metal fortresses will say things like "hello" and "good morning," when they pass you on foot, whether you're walking dogs down the street where you live, or hiking Mount Hollywood at sunrise.

I suspected that spending a day on foot would allow me to experience more than just glimpses of this kinder, gentler Los Angeles. Even if it didn't, I knew I'd be well entertained. It's Los Angeles. If you're bored, you simply aren't paying attention.

Since two is better than one (and in some people's minds, a lot less suspicious) I enlisted my colleague, fellow traveler Jason Cochran, for the experiment. Out of everyone that expressed interest, I knew he was the one least likely to ditch me when his feet started to hurt.

We set a date - a Thursday; a time - 7 o'clock in the morning; and a place -- the corner of Santa Monica and Ocean. As in, Pacific.

AND SO IT BEGINS

From the 16th floor of the Renaissance Hotel in Hollywood, you can see Los Angeles, end-to-end. Towering over the Kodak Theatre (home of this Sunday's Academy Awards ceremony) and the rapidly changing, world-famous Boulevard, the hotel offers one of the better views in the city.

I could see Santa Monica, the mini-city that sprang up along Wilshire Boulevard in the Westwood area; the Houston-esque, punishing symmetry of Century City; the linear skyline of Wilshire Boulevard and then, the Downtown that lots of people pretended wasn't there for years -- a mythical, man-made mountain jutting out of nowhere. Whether or not you ever go there, its appearance leaves no room for doubt: This is one of the biggest, baddest skylines anywhere.

It takes a split second to turn your head from the Pacific Ocean to Downtown, which reminds me of that scene very early on in the magnificent "Chinatown." Screenwriter Robert Towne wasn't just making stuff up when he had the former Mayor reminding City Council members that "today you can walk out that door, turn right, hop on a streetcar and in twenty-five minutes end up smack in the Pacific Ocean."

If a street car could cover that much ground in 25 minutes, how long could it take to walk?

The route I had chosen promised no more than 16.5 miles on foot. I could have done it in less, but at that point, we would basically be walking down the 10 Freeway, which could get old, real quick. The point wasn't just to get across the city. That, both Jason and I had done many times. Today, we were going to get to know it, roll around in it. Driving out to Santa Monica at sunrise, I was reminded that it takes a long time to get there. It's quite possible that this was going to turn out to be the worst idea ever.

EVERYTHING STARTS OUT REAL EASY. . .

The first thing you notice when you strike on foot is how relaxing the city is when you're not fighting everyone else on the road. Here, you see that the city's reputation for being laid back-which seems like a cruel lie at rush hour - is in part, well-deserved.

Of course, we're not actually in Los Angeles for the first couple of miles; rather, we are in Santa Monica. Many visitors are actually unaware there's a difference between the two. There is - Santa Monica is a suburb that happens to have beachfront property, without which it would likely be about as glamorous as White Plains.

At 7:15 in the morning, the sun is shining and the sky's clear - not necessarily a given, down by the Pacific. We whistle through Santa Monica. The famous Third Street Promenade is just a shopping mall without a roof; Santa Monica Boulevard quickly digresses into suburban nothingness.

We opt for side routes instead: First, leafy Arizona, with its office buildings and apartments, then Broadway, for more of the same. The offices belong to sexy companies like Google, Yahoo! and Playboy. People are out on the street, walking their dogs, waiting for buses, heading to their offices with briefcases. It's like being in a park; everything's so relaxed. We greet passers-by, particularly the dog walkers. Nearly everyone smiles and says good morning back - most of them appear to mean it.

We hardly notice the fact that the streets are increasingly clogged with cars. (That could have been us - right now, we're feeling lucky.) Just over an hour later, we've reentered Los Angeles at Bundy Drive, the famous street running up through Brentwood. (Scandal alert: Nicole Brown Simpson and Ron Goldman were not murdered by O.J. Simpson at No. 873, back in the 1990s.)

Down here, Bundy is anything but exclusive, particularly where it crosses Santa Monica Boulevard, which at this point serves as somewhat of a back office to nicer neighborhoods up the hill.

Further up is glamorous Sunset Boulevard; even the bustling Wilshire corridor offers a more dense, pedestrian-friendly experience. Down on the flats, along Santa Monica, it's all strip malls, gas stations and even some razor wire. This is the Los Angeles your mother warned you about. Day laborers chat with ladies driving white, barge-like SUVs in front of a paint store, people looking to save a buck line up for their coffee at the 7-Eleven instead of the Starbucks across the street. A well-dressed kid of 25 or so (is he crazy, or just friendly?) bids us a good day as he passes by. Is that a Christian bookstore on that corner, near the Persian something or other and the El Pollo Loco?

Ugly, maybe, but at this slower pace, you begin to realize just how much Los Angeles can pack on to one block, even if the physical makeup of it can be exasperatingly random and utilitarian. The wave of morning commute energy propels us along past the car washes, the old movie theaters, the retirees on foot, the iPod-wearing twentysomethings and the *abuelas* waiting for their buses, right up to the furious 405 Freeway, which is of course, at this time of day, just another parking lot.

Crossing underneath, I notice for the first time that the underpass features some rather uninspired public art - random patterns of some kind. Emerging into the sunlight to see a billboard advertising "the world's most expensive perfume," it appears as if we have changed planets.

Suddenly, we're on a segment of the boulevard that has benefited from the years-long effort to make it more human. Here, it's almost like a park, with traffic far removed from the pedestrians, local access roads and parking spaces creating a buffer, along with lots of trees and plenty of grass and bushes. Our plan to escape onto quieter side streets now seems pointless.

We cross Veteran Avenue. One of those quintessentially LA corners with no rhyme or reason whatsoever, it hosts a Council of Jewish Women thrift store, a Porsche dealership, a Jack in the Box franchise and a windowless, one-story office building. We can see the front lawn of the massive Mormon Temple, which sits forbiddingly behind what seems like at least a mile of cast iron fencing.

At this point, we're basically in Century City, that cluster of glass and steel comprising one of the more well-known edge cities in the country. Sticking to the north side of Santa Monica, however, you see how effective the boulevard is as a divider. Here, we're outside looking in. On this side of things it's much more peaceful, more organic. Also, the pastry is better over here.

As bakeries go, Clementine is pretty much exemplary. Located ground level in the old Fox Apartments building on Ensley Avenue, just off the boulevard, it is well put together, friendly and knows its business well. Consequently, it can be impossible to park within a half-mile of the place around lunch time. This is not a problem we face today. We stroll right in and order sandwiches: Liverwurst, which comes on house-made white bread with thick-cut bacon, plus a breakfast bagel with egg and cheese, since it's only 10:25 in the morning.

We sip iced tea and ginger limeade outside under the orange awning, patting ourselves on the back for getting here so quickly. Crossing over to the Century City side of Santa Monica, we're almost in Beverly Hills, except that we spot what looks like a farmer's market setting up on one of the sterile plazas that seemed like such a great idea back in the 1970s.

Today, the plaza is being livened up significantly with what turns out to be a rather large market - it's a weekly event, a guy tells us as he tends to a mess of Creole sausages sputtering on a smoky portable grill. "Try some," he urges, shaving off small pieces of dense, orange-red all-beef. It's good. Where from? A friend of his in Wisconsin makes it, he confides. I immediately shell out \$5 for one, forgetting that I had just eaten.

As we begin to make the rounds of the market, we see that many people are setting up for what will probably turn out to be a big lunch time crowd. Some guy with a clipboard who looks like a manager waves at us. "Thanks," he says, "for stopping by. Welcome."

There's plenty of produce, but the market feels more like a giant food court. Hummus to Hawaiian chicken; Peruvian, Colombian, various *licuados*, *jugos y aguas frescas*, which apparently are not all one and the same.

A berry farmer is creating a beautiful display, positioning the strawberries just-so. He could definitely find work in Japan. A guy dressed as Abraham Lincoln turns out to be attached to a rose grower out in Santa Maria. He's handing out coupons for a dollar off, just across the way from someone who is selling what looks like cobbler. Is it?

"It's called Delight," says the guy behind the counter, who turns out to be Lanier Edwards, the baker. Edwards is admiring Lucky the dachshund, whom he figures "is just about the most famous person around here."

Delight, Edwards explains, "is what cobbler wants to be when it grows up." This turns out to be a very effective sales pitch, because I immediately snap up a container of the peach. The crust is thick with chopped pecans. It's like traveling to Georgia, except without having to actually go there, which you have to figure is worth a lot more than five bucks.

Back on Santa Monica Boulevard, we're only a short walk away - ten minutes, or so - from the Peninsula Hotel, which sits behind a thicket of greenery, steps from busy Santa Monica and Wilshire intersection. Still out on the sidewalk, I snap a picture of the property, just to document that we'd made it this far, and long before noon. Bad move: Hotel security immediately begins to stalk us.

And that's how we knew we had arrived in Beverly Hills.

HILLS. BEVERLY, THAT IS

So what if it's one of the most uptight cities in the United States - I've always liked Beverly Hills, because it is a place to see local people out of their cars. And why not - the densely developed downtown area is about as pedestrian-friendly as an American downtown gets, with plenty to see, both on the shopping front and on the people front. There's also plenty of convenient and affordable municipal parking. It's a planners dream, or will be, if the city ever unclenches long enough to put residential on top of everything, which it probably won't.

My like of seeing local people out of their cars does not end at my desire for more walkable and attractive cityscapes - really, I just want to get a closer look at them. Or, in today's case, eavesdrop on their conversations.

We're walking down Brighton Way, heading for Rodeo, when I catch, out of the corner of my eye, an attractive woman in red cowboy boots and schoolmarm glasses exiting what looks like a salon. She's clutching a book by Dr. Wayne W. Dyer, an expert "in the field of self-development." Dr. Dyer is best

known for titles such as "Your Erroneous Zones" and "Your Sacred Self: Making the Decision to Be Free."

Our cowboy-boot-wearing self-development enthusiast and her pal fall in behind us; the pal is full of good news over her catering business, which is keeping her busy with parties, apparently for the likes of Barry Diller and Hugh Jackman. One of the contracts, as it happens, is for a whopping \$48,000.

"I should have asked for \$50,000," she says, which leads to a lively discussion about the differences between clients who haggle on price and those who don't.

Miss Cowboy Boots, who also appears to be possibly in catering, confesses that cheapskate clients make her want to give less than 100 percent, though she admits that this is "rather unspiritual of her." (What would Dr. Dyer do, one wonders?)

The caterer and Boots head to their cars. We turn right on Rodeo Drive. The economy the way it is right now, Rodeo has at least a couple of empty storefronts, and plenty of shops without shoppers in them. Still, it appears to be in no threat of being toppled as one of the most glamorous streets in the country; the sidewalks are still peppered with the sort of Eurotrash that clog up Fifth Avenue in New York every spring. Not possessing the kind of money you can apparently make catering parties for Hugh Jackman, we opt for a less expensive indulgence: Drinks at the Montage hotel, just around the corner.

Perhaps the buzziest hotel in Los Angeles at the moment, the Montage is a Mission-style affair, fronting on Canon Drive, just off Wilshire Boulevard. The city cousin to the very expensive - and worth paying for - Laguna Beach resort of the same name, the Montage feels as fresh as the Peninsula does not, one of those "if you're here, we're happy to have you and will do whatever we can to make your stay comfortable" kind of hotels that don't spend a lot of time making assumptions about what their guests are supposed to look like.

This explains why two people who have just backpacked in from the Pacific Ocean receive a gracious welcome in the hotel's elegant Parq Bar.

The bartender - Israel - turns out to have grown up in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, which he's swapped for Venice Beach these days. He mixes an expert martini and an even better Old Fashioned, and over the strains of Sinatra, we chat about the differences between the New York and Los Angeles. Israel thinks it's cool, what we're doing, and cheerfully picks up the tab for one of our drinks, offering us bottles of Fiji water for the road.

THIRD LUNCH IS THE CHARM

The problem with Los Angeles, at least when you're trying to get across it on foot, is that it is shaped funny. From Beverly Hills, were we to try and take in West Hollywood (another separate city) and Hollywood (a neighborhood in Los Angeles often mistaken for a separate city), we'd add at least five miles to our itinerary. I was determined to end up downtown, and because of this, we'd have to make a hard right at Beverly Hills - from there, downtown is about ten miles as the crow flies, straight down Wilshire. We'd miss out on a lot. (I've always wanted to walk down Sunset from Downtown to West Hollywood, for instance. That would have to wait.)

Knowing this stretch of Wilshire well enough to be aware that a little bit of it goes a long way, a slight detour seemed to be in order. The one that would add the least mileage (and provide the most inspiration, at least when it came to the matter of eating) was the always entertaining Farmers Market, famously found at the corner of Third and Fairfax.

To get here, we opt for a combination of Beverly Hills residential (the uninspired but pristine Clifton Way) and Los Angeles commercial (busy, if slightly tatty Third Street, running east from the Beverly Center Mall.)

Nothing along Third Street is all that surprising, though it does have its share of restaurants with sidewalk

seating. A short kid with a Polaroid camera asks us to take his picture with a rather unenthusiastic man sporting a full head of dreadlocks. We see pricey boutiques sitting next to auto body shops. A young guy - just moved here from New Jersey, he says (as if his accent isn't a dead giveaway), is going door to door hawking special ticket packages for hockey games at the Staples Center.

At Fairfax, we find the Farmers Market in full swing. The fact that we've eaten plenty already doesn't stop us from visiting my favorite lunch spot in the entire complex, the Loteria Grill, one of the better places for Mexican food in Los Angeles that is not in a Mexican neighborhood.

We order chilaquiles and eggs, along with tall, frosty glasses of cinnamon-tinged, creamy horchata and refreshing, sour-sweet agua de Jamaica, or hibiscus juice, settling in to rest our by now quite tired feet.

At this point, we're about halfway done, which means that celebratory ice cream from Bennett's and apple fritters from Bob's (none better - not even in the Midwest) are in order. Overloaded on sugar, we browse the most scandalous titles we can find at the on-site Taschen bookstore (housed, amusingly, in the rather phallic clock tower on the north side of the market), before continuing on.

To get out of the Farmers Market heading east, we walk through The Grove. Located right next door, this is one those shopping centers that's also supposed to be entertainment, which explains why the fountains in the main square dance to canned music, Las Vegas-style. The Grove is one of the more disturbing places in the city, a teaser of a type of lifestyle that is thin on the ground in these parts.

Multi-story shops are centered along a charming, pedestrian-friendly street with a trolley that runs right down the middle. Sidewalk cafes look out onto the square. Everyone's walking. It looks like a real city, except it has its back turned to the town that surrounds it, along with tight security to keep the more undesirable elements out, even though we notice a guy rifling through the garbage for empties, proving that you can only do so much to keep reality out of your fantasy life.

ARE WE THERE YET?

The further east you go in Los Angeles, the older things get, which stands to reason - what is now considered downtown is actually on the eastern fringes of modern Los Angeles. (This also helps to explain why, for years, Westsiders rarely went there. It was too damn far away.)

As we leave the Farmers Market area and head into the residential neighborhoods north of the famous Miracle Mile, we jump back in time by at least a decade. These days, the Miracle Mile isn't such a miracle. Rather, it is a traffic-packed, highway-like stretch of Wilshire with important but not necessarily slightly-from-the-outside museums, some new apartments and the ghosts of an era when this was the place to shop and do business.

The side streets, packed with whimsical, only-in-LA architecture, are pleasing enough. But it isn't until we enter the Hancock Park district that things get really impressive. At this point, we're in what was once one of the most exclusive neighborhoods in the Southland, a place of mansions and shaded streets. (Scandal Alert #2! This is where R&B singer Chris Brown deeply regrets whatever happened between him and pop sensation Rihanna last week.) In fact, as a pedestrian, you can barely catch a glimpse of many of the homes, unless you start peeking through hedges. It's as if we've suddenly wound up in Westchester County.

You can only ogle so many Tudor-style homes you'll never be able to afford before it starts to become oppressive, so, right at the top of Crenshaw Boulevard, we hook into Wilshire, shortly before it becomes the artery of the city's famous Koreatown.

Once (and still, by some) known as Wilshire Center, the area is one of the busiest in the city, and certainly, at least along Wilshire Boulevard, one of the most densely populated, so much so, that when we get to the corner of Western Avenue, which marks the end of the Purple Line subway, it feels like any civilized city you can think of - a swirl of activity, people on foot, on bicycles, hopping on and off the subway and on and off the sleek, futuristic red Rapid Buses that ply so many of the main arteries in town

these days.

An old office building across from the blue-green and very deco Wiltern Theatre has been converted into luxury apartments; a plaza out front is now sidewalk seating. There's a Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf on the corner, as there is on so many corners in the city. Jason figures that the Coffee Bean is like the Stuckey's, or Shoney's, of our walk, if our walk was a drive across country. They are handy, I will admit that, particularly as they do an excellent selection of iced teas on a daily basis. We sip Japanese Cherry Green and watch everyone hurrying wherever it is they're going.

At this point, it is getting harder to stand up after sitting down, but we press on, and I realize that realize that Los Angeles is turning out to be just like any other major city I've ever walked in: No matter how tired we get, the city keeps pushing us along. Being distracted from your aches and pains can be almost as effective a cure as getting rid of them entirely, it turns out.

This strange energy is what propels us through Koreatown, a thriving area that physically appears to be like the downtown of any major American city, except that the mix of people on the ground says we are in Asia, or at least somewhere close. (It's like Honolulu, really, except colder.) Along the way, subway stations are now becoming epicenters of mixed-use development, proving that the naysayers were wrong. Build it, even in Los Angeles, and they will come. Not in droves, maybe, but this is a definite beginning. Nobody ever said this city has to be New York - one is plenty, thanks - but to at least have more options means that at some point, this city is going to be much better than New York, where you will always have the option to live in an apartment above a subway station, but never the opportunity to shack up in a canyon or on top of a mountain.

As daylight begins to taper off, the historic apartment buildings - many painted in various shades of white or off-white - over near MacArthur Park come into view, a colorful sunset turning them all a pleasing shade of pink.

In an effort to get as many pictures as possible before dark, we hustle past a Korean department store, the elegant Bullock's department store building now belonging to a law school, past crowds of people entertaining themselves in scruffy Lafayette Park.

We crest the hill, now almost running, past the Hayworth Theater, where the awning lights are just switching on, past the guy who thinks it's great we're taking pictures of these old, beautiful buildings, and then, just as the sun sets, there we are, standing on the right side of Park View Street, the downtown skyline jutting out through the trees, behind the massive sign for the Westlake Theatre which, of course, has not been a theater for years.

Now close to collapsing, we decide that it's time to make use of the subway we've been avoiding for two miles now.

Circumnavigating the rather shady (but attractive nonetheless) MacArthur Park has long been a good idea, particularly after dark. So, after stopping for some Yucatecan-style snacks at a restaurant just off the park (helpfully named Chichen Itza, to avoid confusion), we cut over to Alvarado Street, which offers another in the series of scene changes we've been through today. Here, on the edge of what at this point is almost Ye Olde Los Angeles (by local standards, anyway), we find ourselves in the middle of a thriving marketplace atmosphere that's more South of the Border than two hours to the north.

Like Roosevelt Avenue in Queens, without the 7 train thundering overhead, Alvarado still bustles as night sets in, offering shopping and dining options to numerous to make sense of. Now, we're just one stop by subway from downtown . The ride takes all of 2 minutes, in fact, and covers just about a mile and a half. Exiting at 7th Street, we're here. We've done it.

Of course, cocktails are in order. After all, dawdling included, we did the whole thing (over 17 miles at this point) in less than 12 hours. I can think of no better option than the Seven Grand bar, mostly because it's really close to where we are right now.

Up a long flight of stairs in an old jewelers on a fast-gentrifying stretch of Seventh, it's one of those where-the-hell-are-we bars, a cross between a hunting lodge (Antlers! Dead stuffed things!), a private club in Edinburgh (tartan everywhere, also), a New Orleans bar (such cocktails you didn't know they could do around here) and a friendly, happy houring, after-work kind of place (lots of guys who look to be professionals of some sort.) They also have more than 200 types of whisky / whiskey / scotch on hand which, you have to admit, is pretty useful.

We find the one spot available for standing at the bar, where I see a man in a black shirt and a red tie perusing the cocktail list. It seems to have been shortened since the last time I was in here. There used to be a Ramos Gin Fizz, which don't see anywhere.

Worried, I ask the man with the list if the Sazerac here is still good, which turned out to be a really stupid question because right across the bar, the bartender is obsessing over a cocktail like Professor Frink conducting a scientific experiment.

Not to worry, said Red Tie Guy. They're excellent.

There's an air of conviviality here, a friendly, gentlemanly atmosphere that's missing from too many bars in Los Angeles. I know what this is, I realize: These people are *grownups*. No attitudes, no chips on their shoulders, no immediately apparent image problems.

Nobody is looking to impress anybody else, and I remembered what I like so much about Downtown. It's not really that kind of Los Angeles at all. This is the other Los Angeles, where people of all sorts walk up and down the streets all day long, the way it happens in other cities.

Seven Grand has a great outdoor patio, which runs along the eastern side of the building, staring straight into the adjacent tower, which sits empty and largely windowless. Candles burn in red glasses on the sills, ceiling fans whir, there are more antlers mounted on the wall. Comfortable seating makes it the sort of place you can sit forever, sipping in the strangely appealing grittiness of it all.

EPILOGUE

Finally ready to throw in the towel, I wonder aloud for variesake, we might just walk up to the other nearby subway station at Pershing Square. With this in mind, we cut over to Olive Street, passing the elegant Cicada restaurant, a one-time haberdasher that's now one of the more established Downtown gathering places. It's quiet tonight - so is the unequivocally ornate lobby of the Biltmore Hotel, for years home to the Academy Awards, long before most of us were alive.

Even Pershing Square, now converted to a concrete but colorful, Ricardo Legorreta-designed puzzlement that's often like an open-air homeless shelter after dark, seems oddly quiet. Passing the Title Guarantee Building, which for years housed the offices of local Spanish-language daily La Opinion (and played home to the Los Angeles Tribune on "Lou Grant" back in the day), I notice it has turned into apartments, like so many other old gems down here.

At the corner, a stylish young couple asks us for directions to Main Street, at which point I realize there's a lot of noise coming from over in that direction, which is odd for this time of night.

Main and neighboring Spring Streets, just across busy Broadway (the city's first theatre district and now a bazaar-like, cut-rate shopping strip in the process of being transformed into something less colorful) have become quite artistic, and residential beyond the pre-existing crop of SRO hotels.

Lots of people appear to be going in for the edgy, urban thing, which is surprising, considering the beautiful neighborhoods this city has to offer. Not only are they moving on to gritty streets, they are doing it right on the fringes of America's premier Skid Row, a seemingly endless array of misery you have to see to believe.

Tonight, misery is banished from Main Street, now bursting with people - a highly unusual sight at any time of day, let alone after dark. There's a saxophone player, a drum circle, packed restaurants. There are crowds trying to get in brightly lit galleries.

Turns out, we've stumbled on to the monthly Downtown Art Walk. No less than 45 galleries in the space of a few blocks are participating; a map reminds us that there are no less than 35 or so restaurants and bars in the same area, plus a smattering of retail stores that will be open late for the evening.

Fierce rock - lyrics in Spanglish - is being played live in front of a tattoo parlor, bluegrass just half a block up, at the corner of 4th and Main, across from Pete's Bar. There's a guy dressed like the Easter Bunny, after work types mix easily with the unwashed East Side masses, homeless guys ask for change, security guards stand in the shadows and pretty girls sell roses. The whole scenario is saturated in clouds of tobacco smoke - more than usual for Los Angeles, which smokes a lot more than you'd expect.

Heading down 4th Street, we detour into Harlem Alley and head into the Lost Souls Café, where a DJ is spinning and people are reading the bad poetry that's hanging on the walls. Jason's off taking pictures, but I'm unable to stand for another minute. I sink into a chair out in the alley, which is strung with white lights, flooding the grim space - now full of happy drunk people - with a sort of warmth. The whole thing was pretty perfect. I'd never doubted that Los Angeles was one hell of a town. Tonight, though, I was kind of in love.

with reporting by Jason Cochran

DITCH THE CAR: 5 ways to get to know LA without driving

Had it with valet parking? Going crazy, circling the block? Can't take another slog down Santa Monica? Don't hate Los Angeles - hate your car. Here are five great ways to get to know the city without driving (or popping another blood vessel).

1) HIKE *Mount Hollywood*

LA's Griffith Park is a lot like Central Park, except Central Park doesn't have coyotes and mountains and 360-degree views from 1,625 feet above sea level. Just a short climb off the basin floor, and you're in the wilderness. Park your car at the Observatory and catch the 1.2-mile trail that winds up Mount Hollywood. Your reward at the top will be sweeping city views, plus the mighty - right now, snow-capped - San Gabriel Mountains (laparks.org).

2) LEARN *Downtown*

Headquartered in the stunning Bradbury Building on bustling Broadway, the folks at Red Line Tours believe that the best way to experience Los Angeles is on foot. We agree. Their "Inside Historic Downtown Los Angeles" tour will show you the best sites of old LA, from the colorful Grand Central Market to the opulent Biltmore Hotel, not to mention get you inside a couple of the old movie palaces - yes, this was the city's original theater district (\$20, daily at 9:45, redlinetours.com).

3) GAWK *Beverly Hills*

Beverly Hills is a great place to walk around. Take in the best of it by starting at the foot of Rodeo Drive, which everyone walks down anyway. Drink in the sights (fancy stores and people) and the sounds (luxury car drivers honking their horns). Three blocks or so in, you're already at Santa Monica Boulevard. Cross over into residential territory; you'll pass by the famous O'Neill House (No. 502), a homage to the work of Barcelona's Antoni Gaudi. Continue up the hill, past dozens more incredible homes, to Sunset Boulevard. On your right is Will Rogers Park, where George Michael was famously caught, er, misbehaving. Across the way is the Beverly Hills Hotel. End your stroll with a Bloody Mary at the pool bar (beverlyhillsbehere.com).

4) **RIDE** *Citywide*

It took a while, but these days, most everyone in Southern California knows that Los Angeles has a subway - 17.4 miles of subway, to be exact. It's not a lot, but add to that 60 miles or so of light rail (plus even more in the offing), and you've got yourself the beginning of a very decent transit network. These days, you can get anywhere from Old Town Pasadena to Long Beach to Universal Studios to Hollywood Boulevard to Downtown without setting foot in your car - plus, rides are just \$1.25 each way, one of the best bargains going. With a little effort, you can plan your trip so that a car is almost unnecessary, particularly once you get a handle on the city's ever-expanding Rapid Bus network, which offers faster-than-normal connections nearly everywhere rail doesn't go (mta.net).

5) **BIKE** *The Beaches*

It's okay to admit that all you really want to do in Los Angeles is hang out by the beach - the city proper can get a little hectic, after all. The best way to get under the skin of the diverse Pacific-side offerings is the Legends Beach Bike Tour, which visits the colorful Santa Monica Pier, takes you down along the beach and into Venice, where you'll get a guided canal tour, as well as see a few celeb homes, and plenty of beautiful people down on the eponymous strip of sand. The tour is nice and low-key - all ages and ability levels welcome (\$30 per person; perryscafe.com).