

A trip to LA's art and soul

In a city better known for blockbusting glamour, the Downtown Los Angeles Art Walk celebrates a bohemian subculture, says Tim Walker

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Los Angeles may be known as the capital of the mainstream – home to the Hollywood movie community, most of America's major recording artists, and the original Universal Studios – but the city has an alternative underbelly, too. And nowhere is this more evident than in the Downtown district, on the second Thursday of every month, when up to 20,000 art lovers, aspiring bohemians and assorted hipsters descend for the Downtown Los Angeles Art Walk.

For a long afternoon and evening, more than 40 galleries located within just a few city blocks open their doors to visitors for free. The brainchild of Bert Green, a local curator, in its seven-year lifespan the Art Walk has grown into more than merely an unguided tour of the area's art spaces. Music, food and a Camden-style market of clothes and crafts cluster around Spring Street and Main Street in a strip now known as "Gallery Row", far removed from Hollywood gloss.

During the 1990s, the area was barren and rife with street crime. But thanks to a change in the law allowing former industrial buildings to become retail locations, there has been an influx of creative types. They have converted Downtown into LA's answer to London's Shoreditch, complete with boutique stores and galleries, basement bars and warehouse loft apartments. Encouraged by the success of neighbourhood art walks in traditionally artsy LA districts such as Venice and Santa Fe, its new residents decided to set up their own.

So popular is the Downtown Art Walk, and so unprepared were its organisers for this many visitors, that just a few months ago it was threatened with permanent cancellation – until, that is, eight of the area's major property owners pledged around \$200,000 (£135,000) to pay for the security and clean-up operations associated with such a large gathering. Not everyone is overjoyed by the development: some locals feel the event has got out of hand and attracts a crowd with only a passing interest in the art itself. For the foreign visitor, however, it's still a sight to behold.

Naturally, I decided the best place to begin would be Bert Green Fine Art (www.bgfa.us); the gallery is still thought of by many as the hub of the Downtown contemporary art community. Green describes LA as "the up-and-coming place for art-making in the USA, [and] the best place for artists to live and work." He handed over management of the art walk to others in 2009, but remains a welcoming host at each month's event.

One of the most arresting exhibitions on my impromptu tour was at the Museum of Neon Art (www.neonmona.org). MONA not only features its own collection of compelling original signs and new neon artwork, but also runs a regular expedition to the city's neon landmarks, from Hollywood Boulevard to Chinatown.

Spring Street's Bang Gallery (www.banggalleryla.com) has a roster of young artists whose work, often for sale at perfectly affordable prices, references such classically cool visual touchstones as street art, retro photography and Japanese toy design.

The boutique-sized Norbertellen Gallery (www.norbertellengallery.com), meanwhile, exhibits art from around the world – though you may be most interested by its occasional focus on sci-fi and fantasy-inspired work. Previous exhibits have included a sculpture of Darth Vader, and a Spider-Man dining table and chairs.

Walking is not an activity frequently enjoyed by the car-bound Angelenos, so sustenance is required at some point. For that, the Art Walk boasts a parade of so-called "roach-coaches" – mobile kitchen trucks purveying endless niche varieties of quality street food from all over the world. The unmistakable pink of the Flying Pig Food truck, for example, belies its gourmet-trained chefs and their "Asian & Pacific Rim flavors with French technique".

The Dosa Truck, on the other hand, offers, naturally, "dosas" – a sort of sourdough crêpe originating in South India – while the cuisine from the Soul Food Truck comes from America's own Deep South. In a new twist to the traditional burger van, you can follow the progress of your favourite roach-coaches (which appear at various locations around LA) on Twitter.

If you'd prefer to sit down for dinner, the grand new Bottega Louie restaurant is a short stroll away at 700 South Grand Avenue, and serves modestly priced Italian-themed dishes. Make a booking, though: I'm afraid I got no further than the bar and the mouthwatering patisserie counter.

I was staying a few freeway exits from Downtown, at the Mondrian Hotel in West Hollywood. I was overjoyed to learn that it was the setting for much of the third series of *Entourage*, during which the HBO dramedy's central character Vincent Chase lived at the hotel, ate in the Philippe Starck-designed Asia de Cuba restaurant, and partied at the Skybar, a chic poolside outfit with a view from the Hollywood Hills towards Downtown.

Vincent Chase is played by Adrian Grenier, who also had a vested interest in the Downtown Art Walk. Along with film producer Peter Glatzer, Grenier co-founded my final destination: SHFT, a pop-up store and gallery stocked with sustainably designed products and more than 50 artworks. An extension of the pair's environmentally conscious website www.shft.com, it was the hottest (free) ticket of the evening. Sadly, pop-ups are temporary by definition, and the gallery has since popped down again. The rest of the Downtown Art Walk, however, looks to have become a permanent fixture.

Travel essentials

Getting there

The writer flew from Heathrow to Los Angeles with British Airways (0844 493 0787; www.ba.com); returns start at £567.70 in economy, from £2,976 in business class. Flights are also operated on the same route by Virgin Atlantic, Air New Zealand and United.

Visiting there

Information on the Downtown Los Angeles Art Walk is available from www.downtownartwalk.org.

Staying there

Mondrian Los Angeles, 8440 Sunset Boulevard, West Hollywood, Los Angeles, US (001 323 650 8999; www.mondrianhotel.com). Doubles start at \$315 (£210), room only.

More information Los Angeles Tourist Office: www.discoverlosangeles.com