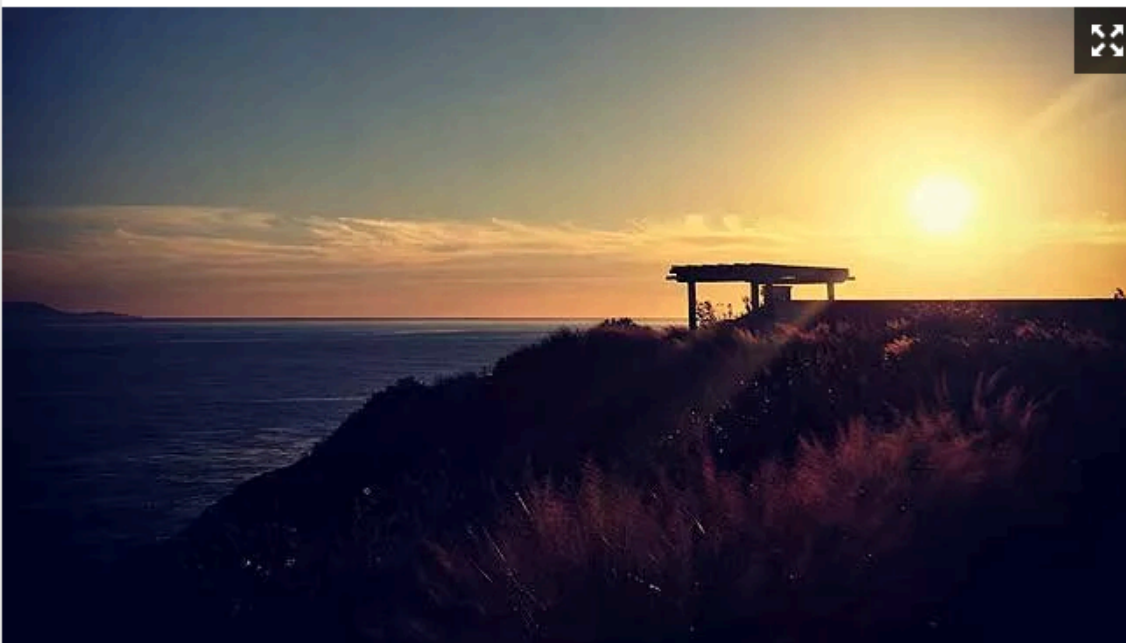


Rethinking the Los Angeles experience



1 / 10

View from the Terranea Resort on the Palos Verdes peninsula, not far from ultra urban Los Angeles. The '60s Batman TV series and some Pirates of the Caribbean scenes were shot in the area. MARK DANIELL/TORONTO SUN

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LOS ANGELES -- Tell someone you're going to Los Angeles, and it's unlikely the first thing they're going to think is: Wow, what a great place to hike, escape to an island and get in touch with nature.

But that's exactly what the City of Angels offers -- and so much more.

Of course there is the typical L.A. experience -- a visit to the Walk of Fame, a stroll down Rodeo Dr., a trip down Sunset to see all the old rock 'n' roll haunts, the beach scene, the theme parks, star spotting.

But there is a vastly different L.A. most tourists don't think of, with experiences that encourage visitors to get in touch with the city's natural beauty. If you're looking to rethink the way to do L.A., here are three places to start:

CATALINA ISLAND

Set 36 km off the mainland, Catalina Island is a perfect getaway for day-trippers or couples wanting a romantic day or two away from the hustle-bustle.

You'll immediately fall in love with the island's main town -- Avalon -- which greets you when you step off the Catalina Channel Express. Like beach locations in Ontario, Massachusetts or on the Italian coast, the town has a variety of quaint places to grab a bite and people watch. Accommodations are mostly of the B&B variety, so if you want to spend the night (I didn't), you need to plan well in advance.

There are swimming areas (off Descano Beach Club) and opportunities to standup paddle-board and kayak. You could also rent a golf cart to take a spin through Avalon's scenic spots, including what once was the Spring Training facility of the Chicago Cubs. Fun fact: Chewing gum magnate William Wrigley Jr., owned both the team and the island. His heirs maintain a controlling interest in Catalina Island to this very day.

But travelling into the interior of the island is where you can really get a glimpse of old California. Guided tours will take you from the sea to sky (literally), up Stage Coach Road to one of the island's many mountainous peaks. From there, on a clear day, you can see downtown Los Angeles in the distance, or one of the 140 bisons that roam freely on the island.

If you want to go it alone, you can. During my visit, I spotted several hikers. And don't worry about work trying to get a hold of you. Cell service on Catalina is spotty and when you travel into the interior, non-existent.

GRIFFITH PARK

Everyone knows what the Hollywood Sign looks like, but have you ever wondered what hiking around the mountains and through the parkland around the sign is like? Griffith Park is the largest municipal park in the United States (1,717 hectares) and it's a great place to get out and see Los Angeles while exploring its natural beauty.

Perfect for novices and experienced hikers alike, start your hike at the park entrance at North Vermont Ave., right outside the Greek Theater and the Griffith Park Bird Sanctuary. Bikes & Hikes offers daily guided tours at 10 a.m. and 3 p.m., or do a self-guided tour. The path is narrow in spots and you'll need to watch your step.

A hike in Griffith Park is also a perfect way to combat jet lag. The combination of sunshine, exercise and the beautiful landscape naturally rejuvenates you. When you reach the peak of Mt. Hollywood, you're 500 metres above sea level, the park's highest point.

You can cap your hike at the famous Griffith Park Observatory, which is great for star-spotting and catching a film. The park is open from 5 a.m. until 10 p.m.

RANCHOS PALOS VERDES

Seeing all of L.A., would take a week. But 30 minutes south of LAX in Rancho Palos Verdes you can continue to get in touch with the region's wild side.

Options there include seaside walks or runs in and around the Palos Verdes peninsula and the cove at Terranea (filming location for the '60s Batman TV series, parts of Pirates of the Caribbean, and the one-time home of Marineland).

The sunset over the Pacific Ocean is postcard ready, and in the distance you can clearly see Catalina Island and dolphins swimming.

If you want to stay in the area, Terranea Resort offers accommodations, fitness classes (sunrise spin anyone?) and spa services (massage overlooking the Pacific?) in a picturesque cliffside setting. For haute cuisine, its mar'sel restaurant features citrus and herbs from the resort grounds.

Or, if you really need to get your sports fix, grab a turkey Reuben at Nelson's bar (named after Lloyd Bridges' character Mike Nelson from the TV show Sea Hunt, which was filmed in the area).

Revamped L.A. sports scene a must

With the Rams back in Los Angeles after a 20-year exile, America's second-largest city is now officially sports mad again. Forget the celebs, a visit to L.A. means you can see the Kings (NHL), the Lakers and Clippers (NBA), the Rams (NFL) and the Dodgers (MLB). But it's the return of the Rams that make a visit to the historic Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum a must for any sports nut.

Opened in 1923, the venue can't have the bells and whistles at the latest and greatest NFL stadiums (anyone been to the renovated Hard Rock Stadium in Miami yet?), but it retains much of the old-world wonder that makes it a magical must-see for sports nerds.

The Staples Center, home of the Lakers, Clippers and Kings, is the house that Kobe built, but there are subtle nods to the Great One as well as the many musicians that have played at the arena (including record-holder Taylor Swift).

Griffith Park's Top 5

Here are five must do things in Griffith Park (from Erick Martinez of Bikes & Hikes LA): "The thing I like best about my job is taking people from all over the world and showing them my backyard and giving them a new perspective on Los Angeles. There's a lot to do in the outdoors in L.A."

1. Hike to Mt. Hollywood, the park's highest point.
2. Hike up to Mt. Lee to look down on the Hollywood Sign.
3. Spend some time at the Griffith Observatory
4. Visit Travel Town Museum to see old trains and the Walt Disney Barn.
5. Go to the L.A. Zoo and the Gene Autry Museum

NEED TO KNOW

For information on Los Angeles, see the following:

-- laparks.org/griffithpark/general-information

-- bikesandhikesla.com

-- terranea.com

-- Boat ride to and from Catalina Island: catalinaexpress.com

-- Visit Catalina Island: visitcatalinaisland.com, for general island information and details on the Catalina Island Zip Line Eco Tour and the Avalon Canyon Trail Tour.

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