

Column: Where would you take a visitor to Los Angeles?

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Today, I'm offering you a job. The pay is no good, but the schedule is your own, and all you have to do is pretend you're a tour guide.

Friends or relatives are coming to Los Angeles for the first time. They want to see the Hollywood sign, check out the beach scene in Santa Monica or Venice, and visit the Getty or the Broad. All the usual stuff.

But they also want to get past that, and have an authentic experience or two before getting back on the plane.

So where will you take them?

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I wondered about this two weeks ago on a trip to Rome, where massive crowds of tourists at the Colosseum, the Forum, St. Peter's and the Trevi Fountain made me want to stray off course and find the city only locals know. Where would I advise someone visiting my city to do that?

I realize, of course, that you can live in Los Angeles for years and not know half its secrets or even begin to understand this necklace of disparate cities and neighborhoods strung together with asphalt. But we all have found a few of our own sanctuaries.



A view of the Griffith Observatory, with downtown Los Angeles sparkling in the background.

(Wally Skaliy / Los Angeles Times)

I asked some people around town to let me in on their secrets.

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“Go grab a Busy Bee sandwich on Walker Avenue and head down to Royal Palms Beach and watch a beautiful sunset, or you can even catch a glimpse of whales in peak season,” said City Councilman Joe Buscaino, making a good pitch for the San Pedro area he represents.

“What we call entertainment along our waterfront is watching the massive ships” coming and going, Buscaino said. “You see the regional and international economy right before your eyes, and you don’t get to see that in other parts of the city.”

All right, so that isn’t quite a Universal Studios experience, but that’s the point.

The Los Angeles Tourism & Convention Board offers itineraries and ideas at discoverlosangeles.com, and there are some unexpected treats among them, including the Libros Schmibros Lending Library in Boyle Heights, the Baxter Street stairs in Echo Park, or the Martial Arts History Museum in Burbank.

“We know travelers today are increasingly seeking authentic experiences where they can really become immersed in the destination and live like a local,” said Ernest Wooden Jr., chief executive of the tourism board.

“Go check out Leimert Park and see the black influence on the city,” said my friend Lawrence Tolliver, a South Los Angeles barber. He just celebrated his 75th birthday in that neighborhood, where you can find books and live music and check out the art space created by local artist Mark Bradford, who was recently featured on “60 Minutes.”

Tolliver also recommended going to the heart of downtown L.A.’s commercial and residential renaissance, and then wander a few blocks east.

“You’ll see people in tents and get a sense of the real Los Angeles paradox — rich people two blocks away from poor people,” he said.

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Emanuel Berry, 12, plays in the Watts Towers Art Center Amphitheater as the sun sets on a warm February day.

(Bob Chamberlin / Los Angeles Times)

Luis Rodriguez, author and former Los Angeles poet laureate, recommends visiting what he called “the most iconic L.A. symbol outside of the Hollywood sign”: Watts Towers, built over 33 years in the last century by Italian immigrant and tile mason Simon Rodia.

Rodriguez would also have you travel by the Metro Gold Line, not Uber, to Mariachi Plaza in Boyle Heights.

“Walk around. Get the flavor of the turn-of-the-last-century houses and learn about its Jewish, Japanese and Mexican history,” he said. “There’s still a Buddhist temple and synagogues as well as Jewish and Chinese cemeteries.”

Whatever your neighborhood, living like a local means knowing we all sleep on a bed of cracked plates. One of the most eye-opening and terrifying local experiences I’ve had was a tour of the San Andreas fault with earthquake queen Lucy Jones. But you don’t have to go all the way to the desert for a sense of our impending doom.

“I’d take them on a tour of the Hollywood fault — from Griffith Park to Ozzie and Harriet’s house” near Runyon Canyon, Jones said. She sent me details on scarps, thrusts and a tell-tale topography that reveals our eternal peril.

But we live in denial, so let’s eat.

“There’s a hot dog place that’s really hot right now at the top of California Market,” said Peaches Chung, a communications specialist with the Koreatown Youth and Community Center.

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“You know how American people eat corn dogs as a meal? Koreans eat them as a snack... You fry corn dogs, sprinkle them with sugar and top them with ketchup.”

Peaches, her real name, recommended the squid ink and mozzarella dog.



A view of the 110 Freeway slicing through downtown Los Angeles as photographed from a helicopter.

(Wally Skalij / Los Angeles Times)

Kathay Feng, an attorney with Common Cause, told me she just took a visiting friend on a three-day tour of the San Gabriel Valley, and she sent me her notes on the whole itinerary.

Day 1: Vietnamese Pho at Golden Deli, trip to Huntington Library, dinner at Xiao Vei Yang — “hot pot of boiling soup base that you slowly throw in meats, vegetables, noodles and a lot of other goodies.” And “this sounds crazy, but we ate a second late-night dinner at Juicy Dumplings in Focus Plaza.”

Day 2: Breakfast at Si Hai (scallion pancakes, sweet soft tofu, and Zhong Zi, a Chinese tamale), tour of San Gabriel Mission and Ramona Museum, chilaquiles at Luna’s, performance at Mission Playhouse, Popsicle break at Nomad Ice Pops, dinner at Mian (“amazing spicy Chengdu noodles), Boba at Bo Po Mo Fo, “and, yes, we lost our minds and had a second later dinner at Green Zone restaurant.”

Should I give you Day 3, or should we just give Kathay Feng her own reality TV show and follow her around that way?

I could go on, of course.

You have to once in your life see a grunion run, for instance. And you have to go to the intersection of Lincoln and Ozone on the Santa Monica/Venice border, breathe deeply and see if you can find the willpower to pass the Mariscos Guillen La Playita shack WITHOUT stopping to buy a shrimp taco.

You should go to the Griffith Observatory before the sun comes up and hike the trail behind it until the downtown skyline and the Pacific Ocean appear in the first light of day.

Or go to El Matador State Beach in Malibu and watch the waves carve the rock sculptures, or to a Marina del Rey bait shop, where you might get lucky and see monks in saffron robes buying live bait and setting it free.



Sophie Yoo, 10, of Thousand Oaks plays in the arches of a rock formation while watching the tide roll in at twilight at El Matador State Beach in Malibu.

(Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times)

And then you'll know you can be in only one place.

Now, I'm turning this job over to you. Send me your own personal guide to your Los Angeles, and you might get it published one day, right here.

No Disneyland, no Walk of Fame, no Santa Monica Pier. I want the hidden gems.

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