

L.A.'s Hidden Hot Spots

Like many San Diegans, I don't often feel the need to go to Los Angeles. I realize it's home to world-class museums and the movie industry, but I find the size and the brassiness of the city a bit unappealing. Having said that, circumstances have taken me there recently, and I've discovered a few special spots that I really enjoy.

Venice turned out to be one of the biggest surprises. I'd always heard it was kind of a dubious area, so I was taken aback when I was invited there to a media lunch for a very high-end travel business. What I discovered is a vibrant community that is home to a lively oceanfront walkway, lots of A-list actors, and a wonderful restaurant called Hal's Bar & Grill.

With an atmosphere not unlike *Cheers*, Hal's reflects the eclectic mix of Venice residents and offers a seasonal menu of

market-fresh meals. Signature dishes include their popular Caesar salad, golden French fries, Hal's ice cream sundae, and a warm pear and cranberry bread pudding. I loved my lunch of seared tofu on a bed of brown rice with baby carrots, zucchini, sunflower seeds, broccolini, black beans, and tomato sauce.

(www.halsbarandgrill.com)

On another trip to L.A., my husband Richard and I stopped to admire the Walt Disney Concert Hall, designed by Frank Gehry and open since 2003. The project was initially funded by Walt's widow Lillian as a tribute to her husband, with the condition that it include an accessible garden for the public. While the building is clearly an architectural marvel, the Blue Ribbon Garden on the third level is what impressed me the most. In this secret spot, unnoticed by the majority of concert-goers, brown-

baggers enjoy their lunch along with views of City Hall, the Griffith Observatory, and the San Gabriel Mountains.

The focal point of the leafy hideaway is a rose-shaped fountain, with each petal inlaid with broken pieces of blue and



Mike's margaritas are popular with the regulars at Hal's Bar and Grill, Venice

white Delft china. The Rose for Lilly fountain is Gehry's homage to Mrs. Disney and her beloved collection of Delft that she and Walt acquired on trips throughout their marriage.

It's also worth noting here that Patina Restaurant, a Relax & Chateau property and Michelin One Star in the Walt Disney Concert Hall, is convenient to all of the theatres in the Music Center. (www.musiccenter.org)

Another "find" of ours is the Japanese American National Museum in Little Tokyo. I like it because it's small enough to feel intimate and large enough to contain significant and meaningful exhibits. Here, individual journals, old photographs and documents, and personal belongings tell the



Local residents of all walks of life ride their bikes on the Venice Beach boardwalk

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADAMS/HANSEN STOCK PHOTOS AND COURTESY OF THE JAPANESE AMERICAN NATIONAL MUSEUM AND L.A. INC.

story of 130 years of Japanese American history. The Heart Mountain barracks, an original structure saved and preserved from the Japanese internment camp in Wyoming, was dismantled and brought to Los Angeles by museum volunteers. Photos of the Japanese American servicemen who helped liberate Dachau Concentration Camp in Germany after internment ended in the U.S. in 1944 are poignant and thought-provoking. (www.janm.org)

Our most recent trip to L.A. took us to Burbank and a nondescript warehouse — in fact several nondescript warehouses — full of priceless classic cars and motorcycles. Fans of Jay Leno will know that I'm referring to Jay's Garage. The TV host greeted members of our car club in his classic jeans and denim shirt and spent several hours showing everyone through his extensive collection. It was clear that he knows the nuts and bolts of every vehicle and seemed to enjoy answering questions and exchanging info with his visitors. He drives the bikes and cars regularly — even the 1955 Buick



that brought him to California in hopes of starting a stand-up career. This car also served as his "apartment on wheels" while he was a struggling comedian.

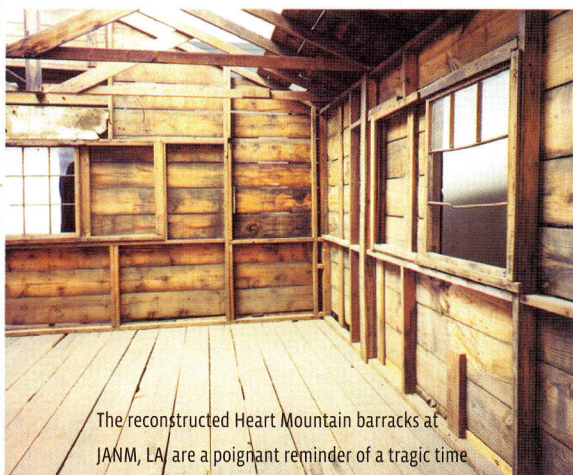
Leno owns Bugattis, Dussenbergs, Bentleys, Porsches, and Jaguars, as well as a raft of American cars. He is fascinated by 19th-century British steam engines and early American steam-driven cars, such as Stanley Steamers and Dobles, because they're "quiet, fast, and environmentally friendly." The walls of his several warehouses are lined with floor-to-ceiling enlargements of original automotive posters. (www.jaylenosgarage.com)

At the end of the day, the club members agreed that Leno is "a real hands-on car guy." That's not a secret, but it is the highest compliment they could bestow.

ELIZABETH HANSEN



The Blue Ribbon Garden at Walt Disney Concert Hall in L.A. provides a quiet oasis in a busy city



The reconstructed Heart Mountain barracks at JANM, LA are a poignant reminder of a tragic time