

ATLANTA **PEACH**



KRISTEN B

# TRAVEL

BY CATHY BYRD

## FALLING IN LOVE WITH L.A.

*Romanced By Retro, Affected By Art, She Leaves Her Heart In The Hills*

Last fall, my timing for flying into LAX didn't seem exactly perfect: Los Angeles was on fire that week. What could be more dramatic than heading into a disaster zone for a holiday? Luckily, the coast was no longer in flames by the time I landed. But my trip did turn out to be the perfect script for a hot California romance—a delicious rendezvous with architecture, art and design, cocktails and cuisine, sunken koi pools and sunsets. And it all began with a crush on Beverly Hills.

**Scene I: The car.** I found out fast that you can't fall in love here without one. Take plenty of cash for valet service and parking. ATMs are scarce. Street parking is scarcer, and the LAPD is very particular about what is authorized curb parking. A 'public' parking garage will cost you \$6 for each 15 minutes (unless you can figure out the secret way to get your ticket validated). Unlike Atlanta's bumpy personal transit experience, L.A. offers a smooth ride and a city laid out in a totally comprehensible grid. Locals committed to surface streets say, "Any destination is 20 minutes—or else it's an hour." No matter. In a place where every corner might be the setting of a movie,

erly Hills (a pawn shop for the rich and needy), Flynt Publications, Escada, Saks, Neiman's and Bergdorf's.

**Scene II: The gallery.** Keep driving east on Wilshire to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. LACMA is getting a lift from the High Museum's friend, Italian architect Renzo Piano. LACMA's fall 2007 exhibition of Salvador Dalí's notes, drawings and films eluded the typical surrealist cliché. For me, the ultimate moment was watching visitors gasp at *Un chien andalou* while I was reading the artist's quirky instructions for transport of the ants that end up swarming this ever-awesome film. Revisiting the

porary Art and the Geffen Contemporary. The latter was meant to be a temporary venue during the construction of MOCA's Arata Isozaki-designed building. It is a Frank Gehry remake of a once-hardware store—and it became so popular that MOCA decided it was a keeper. A couple of quarters for the DASH shuttle on First Avenue makes it easy to visit both MOCA sites and Little Tokyo. MOCA was showing the work of my idol Gordon Matta-Clark and Coosje van Bruggen, a contemporary art star of last year's *documenta* exhibition in Kassel, Germany. But the hip endpoint was Takashi Murakami's exhibition at the Geffen. The Louis Vuitton boutique inside the gallery eclipsed the Japanese artist's paintings and sculptures. Style-lovers were taking numbers for \$900 Vuitton/Murakami handbags. (Murakami made waves on our coast in December by transporting his GEISAI emerging artists' fair from Tokyo to Art Basel Miami Beach.)

Do drive south on La Cienega Boulevard to Culver City and visit a short but sexy stretch of private galleries. LA's Castleberry-without-lofts is a fringe contemporary art zone that features 'best of' art spaces such



**Satisfied cravings.** Rodeo Drive offers the ne plus ultra in shops, spas and restaurants.

half the thrill is getting there.

From the airport, cruise Sepulveda Drive and cross through Culver City where neon-lit classics like the Culver Ice Arena, Johnnie's French Dip Pastrami, Cozy Inn Cocktails and the Half Moon Motel will turn your head. A right turn on Pico and a left on Canon carry you to 90210, where Wilshire Boulevard meets Rodeo Drive and a half-dozen streets tweak your craving for upscale boutiques, cafes, restaurants and spas. Stretching from the ocean and Santa Monica to downtown L.A., Wilshire is edged by the who's who of Beverly Hills business and commerce—the likes of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, International Creative Management, the Collateral Lender of Bev-

## The who's who of local commerce includes Collateral Lenders of Beverly Hills, a pawn shop for the rich.

dream sequence from Hitchcock's *Spellbound* and walking into a room filled with an enormous wall projection of Andy Warhol's *Dali Screen Test* were equally strange and thrilling. But that was yesterday. Today, Latin is hot (and, apparently, contagious). For much of 2008, LACMA will be introducing contemporary Chicano art (while our High shows contemporary Latin American and Latino art from the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego.)

Head further east on Wilshire and you'll end up in deep downtown L.A. at the Museum of Contem-

as Walter Maciel, Blum and Poe, LAXart and Kim Light/LightBox. (If you can't make it to L.A., you'll catch these galleries each year in Miami, too.)

**Scene III: The seaside.**

Back on Wilshire, go west until you get a whiff of ocean scent and take a right on Sepulveda to catch sunset at the Getty Center. Yes, this is a fabulous art space, but on a clear day the exhibitions have to compete with an incredible 180-degree view and the live performance of a glowing ball that melts into the mountains. To encounter both, plan to arrive at the base of the Getty an hour and a half before dark.

If you visit the house of Charles and Ray Eames in Pacific Palisades just south of the Getty, you'll find

the source of the 1950s aesthetic that's become so *now*. Self-guided tours of Case Study House #8, built by the couple in 1949, are scheduled the old mid-century way—by telephone. The Eameses were definitive do-it-yourself. Their minimalist furniture and modular building designs combined with industrial prefab materials have become models for the ne plus ultra in contemporary architecture and design. Situated ten minutes from the house, the Eames Office holds a colorful design showroom and an archive of the duo's history. A recent display of "Charles, the Early Years" included the architect's bow tie collection, his whimsical love letters to Ray and a stack of his essential button-ups from Larry's Custom Shirts in Beverly Hills.

organic oasis of custom facials and body wraps. One of the spa's fabulous treatments left me feeling fresh, relaxed and *très soignée*.

For a retro junkie like me, it would be hard not to alliterate in describing a stay at the Beverly Hilton, a mid-century icon with: solicitous service, spacious rooms, scrumptious beds and a scintillating water scene. This Hilton is like no other—a classic destination for young and old Hollywood, conventioners and stargazers. Newly redesigned and spilling out onto the hotel's pool patio, Trader Vic's is the current

clear distillations to infusions such as celery peppercorn and banana. Sip a designer martini while noshing Nic's oysters and bar food cloaked in 1950s glam. And save some headroom for the Vod Box, an ice-cold Valhalla. We donned fab fake leopard coats to enter the frosty (28 degrees) glass-fronted room where shelves upon shelves of vodka awaited tasting.

If you're dizzy after Nic's, watch your step. There's a koi pool beneath the glass walkway that curves into the dining room of An Crustacean, a

## Our heroine (that would be me) keeps falling for Beverly Hills' elixirs and edibles.



Scene in L.A. From left, Charles and Ray Eames' house, a source of the 1950s aesthetic; Vuitton Murakami handbags at The Geffen Contemporary; The Avalon offers visitors a place to lounge poolside, L.A. style.

While at the edge of the world, don't miss the Huntley Hotel's Penthouse restaurant bar. Every surface is translucent, transparent or reflective. Gauze drapery, windowed walls and beaded doorways frame the sea, the mountains and the city. Stopping there for lunch, my friend and I toasted the crispy crab cakes and a wasabi-laced pear salad with a glass of J champagne. The crème fraîche that accented soft chocolate chip cookies and a crème brûlée with fresh raspberries proved that the best dessert is in the details.

**Scene IV: *The bedroom.*** Luxe, touted as the only boutique hotel on Rodeo Drive, is simply furnished, bright and perfectly situated for the shopping workout. Great beds inhabit quiet rooms where the windows actually open! After hitting the new Prada store, Cavalli, Bebe and the rest, spenders might consider a walk to the Jurlique Day Spa, an

hyper pop spot for lounging with a mai tai and a pupu platter.

**Scene V: *The bar-restaurant.*** Our heroine (that would be me) keeps falling for Beverly Hills' elixirs and edibles. Built into a quiet block of Canon Drive, the understated Avalon Hotel is a great place to start and end the day. Breakfast and cocktails at the blue on blue restaurant take place around the curving azure pool in cabanas and at small tables. Don't worry about the evening chill; this and every other outdoor bistro and bar has lovely dome heaters. Cindi Byun, Avalon's delightful restaurant manager and an Emory grad, worked with our own Govantez Lowndes (co-owner of The Globe) when he opened Commune in Atlanta a few years ago.

I couldn't resist the shrine to the Rat Pack at Nic's restaurant. Owner Larry Nicola sees your future, and it's vodka. There are 60 types available, from

French Vietnamese restaurant on Santa Monica Boulevard. The expansive menu suggests wine pairings for each dish. Prawn mousse and seafood dumplings are two of the sublime Asian tapas that give way to savory entrées. If you haven't heard about the delicate sorcery of An's secret kitchen, your waiter will describe the small room behind closed doors where a successive trio of chefs have concocted family specialties for over 400 years. He'll insist that you order An's succulent garlic noodles and one of the sublime creations made with shrimp, crab and lobster. Do not underestimate the servings here; there will never be room for dessert!

Of course, there's no end to this love story. I was still gazing into the twilit twinkle of Beverly Hills as my plane took off for Atlanta. She had seduced me and left me standing beside a Ferrari at a red light, promising to make plans for our next rendezvous. ☉