
Pasadena: No longer an LA sideshow

A former dormitory town, Pasadena has become a destination in its own right, says Bruce Schoenfeld.

By Bruce Schoenfeld

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Pasadena was doing fine until the cars came. Tucked into the San Gabriel Mountains nine miles from Los Angeles, its weather noticeably warmer than the coast, it served as a winter destination for tycoons such as Henry Ford and Leland Stanford. Railway lines sent Pullman cars toward its 2,000 hotel rooms, spread over seven resorts, and a fast-growing city that felt cultured, urbane, modern.



Pasadena has quietly become a destination for those seeking substance with their style

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But the 1940 construction of the Arroyo Seco Freeway, the first highway in the American West, not only linked Pasadena to Los Angeles, it proved its ruination. With remarkable rapidity, Pasadena was transformed into a dormitory town filled with transplanted Midwesterners. By the time Jan and Dean recorded the 1964 hit *The Little Old Lady From Pasadena*, the city had become a cliché of upper-middle-class conformity, the least likely place anyone would look to find someone who might possibly be hip.

That's still the reaction I get when I tell my LA friends that I'm coming out to spend a weekend in Pasadena. No-one can fathom why I'd fly to California and stay so far from the water. I last visited 15 years ago but I've been hearing that, over the past few years, Pasadena has quietly become a destination for those seeking substance with their style. The burgeoning dining scene alone sounded worth the visit, along with the Norton Simon art museum, and a chance to soak up sunshine and that pleasant California vibe without the conspicuous consumption of Beverly Hills or the narcissism of the beach towns.

For my first meal in town, at an intimate restaurant called Tre Venezie one block off Colorado, I eat bigoli all'uovo with sea urchin followed by tripe alla Vicentina: rarefied stuff for an erstwhile backwater. It turns out that Tre Venezie was one of only 18 restaurants awarded stars by Michelin in its initial pass through southern California a year or so back. Another was The Dining Room at Pasadena's Langham Hotel, a development that has stunned the tastemakers from the perpetually trendy Westside. (Imagine if a respected survey placed more than 10 per cent of London's most exalted restaurants in Croydon.)

But it isn't just restaurants that have energised this graceful city of around 150,000. Europeans cling to the faded bit of conventional wisdom that this corner of North America lacks culture, but the Norton Simon – one of the world's truly great private art collections – obliterates that notion with its lawn full of Rodins accessed before a visitor even reaches the entrance.

Inside the handsome museum are a few hundred well-chosen paintings and sculptures, from Botticellis and Rembrandts to colourful Impressionist works and suitably discomfiting Picassos. At the other end of town, what was once the 207-acre estate of railroad baron Henry E Huntington are now botanical gardens that may be unmatched anywhere in the world. (I can't imagine the combination of affluence and climate that would support it anywhere else.) You don't have to be horticulturally savvy to be awed by the 12 themed gardens, including Chinese, Desert, Jungle, Rose and so on.

From there, I headed to the majestic Langham, which emerged as one of my favourite American hotels during the course of my stay. A masterpiece built in stages in the early 1900s in a vaguely Spanish style, it symbolised Pasadena's status as a luxury destination during its glory days. Then it was shuttered and partially demolished before being rescued in 1986 and reopened in 1991, an event that serves as a marker for the start of the city's revival.

But the major reclamation project in Pasadena is the old downtown, where wig stores and pawn shops have given way to a thriving retail, dining and entertainment quarter. The last time I visited Old Pasadena, following the World Cup final in 1994, gentrification had just begun. I sat on the terrace of a brewpub after the match, pinned to my table by a sea of Brazilians swaying to a samba beat that emanated from thousands of boom boxes.

Now I realise that I'm dreading my return. It isn't just that those exuberant Brazilians are long gone, sadly, but because once most of the similarly reclaimed neighbourhoods in the United States – history regurgitated as shopping malls – reach a commercial maturity, they tend to feature the same numbingly dull chain stores and themed restaurants. If you've seen one Abercrombie & Fitch store or eaten at one Cheesecake Factory, you don't need to travel across the continent to do it again.

I'm pleased to find that Old Pasadena isn't like that, at least not exclusively; behind the storefronts, many of which date to the Twenties, are locally owned shops I actually wanted to patronise, such as The Soap Kitchen, which mixes naturally perfumed soaps to order, and Shizu, a Japanese paper emporium. And I have my choice of genuine ethnic restaurants offering everything from *tamales* to *pho* (Vietnamese). Best of all, the whole area is pedestrian-friendly, one of the few such enclaves in the Southland. It feels positively European.

But Pasadena has also made peace with the car. I was thrilled to be able to glide right up to the Norton Simon and park just a few paces from the entrance (try that at the Louvre). And one afternoon, I spend an hour driving through the city's graceful neighbourhoods, past Craftsman bungalows and ornate apartment blocks immaculately painted and framed by palms and sycamores. Then I jump on the freeway. Not 15 minutes later, I'm staring at the canyon of skyscrapers in downtown LA, nine miles and a world away. If, despite all its improvements, Pasadena remains nothing but a suburb at heart, as many Angelenos are still wont to sneer, I have to say it's not a bad one at that.

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