L.A. Confidential

Look past the la-la-land clichés—the traffic, the beach bunnies, the star maps—to find an urban cultural mecca. BY CELESTE MOURE

Those who dismiss L.A. as a massive suburban sprawl aren’t looking hard enough; it’s a unique collection of small towns, each with a distinctive character worth exploring. Thanks to its taste for reinvention, this ever-changing urban landscape is emerging as a vital, metropolitan cultural capital.

Stay
Shimmering sheer curtains, plush beds with tufted headboards and sleek modern lines accentuate the rooms at Santa Monica’s Huntley (1111 2nd St., 310-394-5454, thehuntleyhotel.com), a beachside oasis where the walls in the all-white lobby feature paint-dipped piranhas, oversize leather sofas and delicate white orchids throughout.

Over in Beverly Hills, try Maison 140 (140 Lasky Dr., 310-281-4000, maison140beverlyhills.com), a Kelly Wearstler-designed 43-room hotel where the Far East meets 1920s Paris. Inside are crystal chandeliers, lacquered panels and red-ink wallpaper; crimson plates hang as objets d’art on the ebony walls.

The newest addition to the hotel scene is SLS at Beverly Hills (465 S. La Cienega Blvd., 310-247-0400, starwoodhotels.com), where the 297 rooms feature luxe Italian furniture from Cassina, custom designed by Philippe Starck for the property (Guests who fall in love with them can purchase by special order). Inspired by 18th-century cabinets de curiosités, the
hotel features a “shop without walls” concept that flows throughout the public places; showcases hold a selection of objects from über-design store Moss.

Eat
Nancy Silverton (Campanile, La Brea Bakery) partners with Mario Batali to bring Angelenos the city’s best pizza at Pizzeria Mozza (641 N Highland Ave., 323-297-0101, mozza-la.com). The dough is thin, light and airy and loaded with Cal-Ital toppings like squash blossoms, egg and speck.

Comme Ca (8479 Melrose Ave., 323-782-1178, commecarestaurant.com) is a casually glamorous West Hollywood brasserie from David Myers, chef/owner of the award-winning restaurant Son of a Gun. The main dining room is an all black-and-white affair, with Paris flea market finds scattered throughout. The menu focuses on well-executed classic dishes like moules frites and bouillabaisse, plus an excellent selection of cheeses.

The Hollywood resurgence is in full effect at Katsuya Hollywood (6300 Hollywood Blvd, 323-871-8777, sbe.com/katsuya), a sushi restaurant, also designed by Stark. Blown-up photos of geishas’ pouty red lips and smoky eyelids create a seriously sexy atmosphere.

Play
In the last few years the stretch of Melrose Avenue west of Fairfax and east of La Cienega has become the destination for the design-savvy. Inside the hot-pink Paul Smith space (8221 Melrose Ave., 323-951-4800, paulsmith.co.uk) you’ll find women’s and men’s fashions as well as quirky creations like wooden moose heads and Union Jack upholstered chairs. Jonathan Adler’s West Coast outpost (8125 Melrose Ave., 323-658-8390, jonathanadler.com) is chock-full of retro throw pillows sitting beside lacquer nesting cubes and zebra rugs. The Prada store in Beverly Hills (343 N Rodeo Dr., 310-278-8661, prada.com) is worth a look for its Rem Koolhaas design.

If archi-tourism is high on the agenda, don’t miss the Disney Concert Hall (111 S Grand Ave., 323-850-2000 laphil.com). Built by Frank Gehry and opened in 2003, it’s the exclamation point that Los Angeles, and downtown in particular, needed. Down the street is the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels (555 W Temple St, olacathedral.org), a majestic adobe-hued concrete building designed by Jose Rafael Moneo that features a 50-metre bell tower and a beautiful cloister garden full of young oak and sycamore trees. The new Broad Contemporary Art Museum at LACMA (500 S Grand Ave., 323-828-7676) is a playful masterpiece framed in steel beams painted tomato red and a scaffold of escalators and stairs that architect Renzo Piano calls “the spider”—a design reminiscent of his work at the Pompidou Centre in Paris. wd