

THE SPREE WAY



Shopping at the Rose Bowl Flea Market leaves you ready for some refreshment (above). If it's tres chic you want, places like Tarina Tarantino store (left) on Melrose fills the bill.

Why would you want to make the drive to the Los Angeles area? Shopping is one good reason. You get plenty of it — from super to “are you kidding?” in the fashion district.

If you're driven to shop, try these L.A.-area tours

By Maggie Espinosa

According to the Travel Industry Association of America, shopping and outdoor activities are the top two pastimes for domestic travelers. With this revelation, the entrepreneurial spirit of Southern Californians has combined the joy of shopping with the pleasure of the outdoors to create shopping tours. Each has its own offerings, but all include fun. So grab a comfortable pair of walking shoes, sunscreen and a credit card. Here we go.

Urban shopping adventures

Christine Silvestri's Adventures has guided tours of the Los Angeles Fashion District and of the Melrose Heights Shopping District, L.A.'s yin and yang of shopping.

The Fashion District is a buyer's

paradise. The 90-square-block treasure-trove of deals is jam-packed with guilt-free purchases. It has the largest number of fashion-related businesses in the western United States. Everything from clothing and accessories to housewares, textiles and flowers can be found at

extraordinary prices.

Under the tutelage of Silvestri, you can add unusual items to your wardrobe without rendering yourself penniless. She has combed the neighborhood for gifts under \$50. “With over 1,000 stores to browse, you're sure to find lots of goodies,” says Silvestri, pledging to decode the mysteries of selecting the best deal.

The walls of Mi Mundo accessory store are bathed in faux bling. Long rhinestone necklaces sell for \$7. Affordable European designer clothes fill racks at Marc Laurent, with price tags that won't fracture your budget. Drop-waist dresses

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SHOPPING

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No extra charge for celebrity sightings

can be found for \$19. French-style lacy tops will set you back \$25.

Santee Alley lies in the heart of the Fashion District. Three blocks of loud, crowded excitement put you into a shopping stupor. Louis Vuitton knock-offs, baseball caps, shoes, CDs and cell-phone covers burst the seams of every storefront. Silvestri maintains "everyone can find some treasure for \$5 here." T-shirts go for \$10 and up. Wedge shoes with ribbon ties run \$25. Clothing sizes range from petite to extra large. The Alley offers a great mix of trendy pieces and styles that are a real hit with the 20-something crew (and with the 30-through 70-somethings who think young).

For those who want to rub elbows with the interminably chic, join Silvestri for the Melrose Heights tour. Aesthetics trumps practicality on this fiercely trendy avenue.

Jonathan Adler's store sign sums up the locale — "Enter Our Groovy World." With \$165 throw pillows, \$295 umbrella stands and \$350 vases, this savvy designer's home furnishings and other nearby high-end boutiques have raised the bar on Melrose's funky, vintage scene.

Chic resides west of Fairfax Avenue. Trendy is now a lifestyle. Furnishings, clothing and cuisine determine whether you're on the cutting edge. In a city of one-upmanship, Melrose is a necessity. "There is no better place for people to find new ways to express their style," says Silvestri. "The shops strive to be unique."

Check out Fitsu Society's ultramodern kitchen paraphernalia. The objective is to streamline the clutter of customers' lives with 21st-century modern designs of everyday kitchenware. Italian-made Alessi stainless-steel creamers for \$70, and a set of six stainless coasters for \$80 takes the fou-fou out of the home.

If it's possible to fall in love with a store, Tarina Tarantino's will be the one. Marvelous, candy-colored Lucite baubles mingle with crystal beads to create wearable art. Whimsical silk-flower hair clips are worth every penny of the \$38 cost — for the fun factor alone.

More expensive pieces, such as the \$385 hand-painted Russian wood medallion bracelet, may have to be resisted. But the pavé crystal ponytail holder for \$20 will have you smiling again. Many merchants offer cour-



You sometimes get more than you bargained for in Chinatown Los Angeles. Festivals on the lunar calendar are frequent and fun. L.A. Chinatown Business Council

tesies to Urban Adventure's tour participants, as well as incentives and discounts not available to the walk-ins. Silvestri educates clients on the good, the bad and the ugly. Lynn Chisnell, a recent tour customer, came away from the tour better informed. "I learned about the upcoming and current fashions, and that shopping can be fun. It was interesting to see the variety of people who enjoy shopping on Melrose."

Chinatown

One glance confirms why *Sunset* and *Los Angeles* magazines tout this locale as a hot destination for urban adventures. It's hip, it's distinctive, and it allows visitors to take in an energetic, thriving quarter.

Twenty-four square blocks stand as a testament to the cooperation between the Chinese and American communities. Walking under the enormous golden dragons atop the gateway to Chinatown transports visitors to a foreign land. Chinese lettering adorns signs, unfamiliar aromas emanate from crowded restaurants; jade, 22-karat gold and crimson silk are lavishly displayed in storefronts.

Guided walking tours of L.A.'s Chinatown are available the first Saturday of every month. The 2½-hour jaunt, led by Holly Barnhill, Chinatown's marketing consultant, is a great way for newcomers to familiarize themselves with the area. "The tour is very popular, and shopping is a big part of the attraction. Many people make a day of it — tour, lunch, and an afternoon of shopping" says Barnhill.

The tour visits a temple, antique shops, boutiques and supercool art galleries. Once you have the lay of the land, venture out on your own. A walking map and brochure from Angels Walk L.A. is available at most businesses.

Central Plaza is the nucleus of Chinatown. Although its history dates to 1938, the



Items in Jonathan Adler fit the store's sign: "Enter Our Groovy World." The store on Melrose is one of many with sass.

plaza is proof that the march of progress hasn't waned in the region. Trendy shops have emerged beside kitschy stores from yesteryear. A perfect example is Realm, an edgy boutique with Asian-influenced housewares, books and gifts. Silver fortune-cookie place card holders at \$10 for a set of four are a steal. Funky plastic trays with images of the last emperor sell for \$17. Glass tumblers with colorful swirl designs are \$5 a piece.

Chung King Road, directly across from Central Plaza, has morphed into a burgeoning art scene. This happening locale houses a few dozen galleries, epitomizing the avant-garde art colony in Chinatown. Works range from performance art and paintings to sculptures and ceramics.

Flux Ceramic Gallery, owned by Delane Hamik and Lilith Rockett, represents the atmosphere of the area. "We wanted beautiful handmade objects that people can use" says Hamik.

The studio showcases the work of artisans who have inspired the owners: tea sets, vases, jewelry costing from \$10 to \$500.

In the mood to barter? Head over to Dynasty Center on North Broadway. Shoes, hats, toys, prom dresses and children's clothing fill the 225 kiosks inside the court. State your price; if it's reasonable, it's accepted.

Saigon Plaza, a few doors down, is a labyrinth of outdoor stalls with some good deals on the luggage, lingerie and clothes that spill into the aisles, pleading to be purchased.

Submerge yourself in the Asian culture at Wing Hop Fung — the largest store in Chinatown. A pastiche of peculiarities fills the two-story building in the Far East Plaza. The first floor houses barrels of ginseng, dried seafood products, a Chinese pharmacy and herbalist — even a selection of wines and spirits. For \$15, the herbalist will evaluate your health by looking at the color

If you go

URBAN SHOPPING ADVENTURES:

(213) 683-9715,
www.urbanshoppingadventures.com

Four tour selections.

The Walking Tour — Minimum of two people. Includes three-hour tour of either district and continental breakfast. Cost per person: \$36.

Mini Shuttle Adventure — 15 to 24 people. Includes three-hour tour and continental breakfast. Cost per person: \$50.

Luxury Coach Adventure — 40 to 52 people. Includes three hours at either district, full-size luxury coach and breakfast. Cost per person: \$54.

Luxury Limousine Adventure — One to 15 people. Includes minimum of three hours and stops at design stores by appointment. Ideal for theme parties. Cost per person: Call for hourly rate and planning.

Chinatown

Amtrak has a direct route from San Diego to Los Angeles' Union Station, a short walk to Chinatown. Go north on Alameda Street for one block to East Cesar Chavez Avenue. Go west on East Cesar Chavez Avenue for four blocks to North Broadway. Go north on Broadway for one block to Ord Street, where you'll find the gateway to Chinatown.

Chinatown Walking Tour: \$20; reservations, (213) 680-0243 or e-mail info@Chinatownia.com

The Angels Walk L.A. brochure is readily available. To get one ahead of time: e-mail info@angelswalkla.org; (213) 744-0016.

Rose Bowl Flea Market

DayTripper Tours, 3585 Adams Ave., San Diego, CA 92116; (800) 679-8747; www.daytripper.com

Cost of tour: \$49. Includes: escorted transportation to and from Rose Bowl Flea Market, snacks, beverages and admission into the Flea Market. Hours at Rose Bowl: 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

of your eyes and tongue, as well as taking your pulse. Packages of medicinal herbs are prescribed, yielding a concoction that is to be boiled in water or chicken broth. Commonly, boiled ginseng, fish maw, mushrooms and fungus results in an energy-boosting elixir.

On the second floor you'll find food, teas, housewares and a bit of distant China. Thirty percent of Hop Fung's clients are not Asian. Celebrities, such as Shaquille O'Neal, purchase herbs there.

Rose Bowl Flea Market

The Rose Bowl Flea Market, in Pasadena, is considered one



of the world's greatest marketplaces. With more than five miles of booths, and 2,200 vendors, it holds the distinction of being the largest outdoor event of its kind. Attendance soaring in the tens of thousands validates its popularity.

Held the second Sunday of every month in the lot surrounding Rose Bowl Stadium, this shopping mecca is both whimsical and exquisite. The wonderful jumble of antiques, collectibles, furniture, knock-offs, clothing, plants, beauty products, and more, makes a visit to the flea market an experience in and of itself.

You can navigate your first trip through this sea of bric-a-brac on a tour. DayTripper of San Diego will take you there in a bus, but the tours are not offered every month. Owner Myron Stam finds "the Rose Bowl Flea Market tour is one of the most popular, especially the November trip before Christmas. People want to get a jump on holiday shopping."

On the ride from San Diego to Pasadena, a tour guide educates shoppers on the ins and outs of finding the best deal. Most vendors are savvy about what they're selling.

Keri Belisle, who has been on the tour seven times, says "You can find what you want at the flea market," noting that "better deals are in the outer part of the parking lot." A few of Belisle's past purchases include a vintage Las Vegas postcard from 1941 for \$1, a Hawaiian shirt for \$10, welcome mat for \$10 and a \$200 coffee table. Don't worry, there is plenty of room in the coach's luggage compartment to hold everyone's acquisitions.

The Rose Bowl experience is visceral as you cruise the aisles, hearing the clang and clamor of shoppers haggling with vendors. You never know who you may be shopping beside. Celebrity sightings include Madonna, Cher, Clint Eastwood, Diane Keaton and Barbra Streisand.

A looky-loo paradise, the market is guaranteed to hold surprises to keep you amused. Legend has it that a man came across a booth selling old greeting cards. To his amazement, he found a card his mother had sent to his grandma announcing his birth more than 45 years earlier.

With more than a million items on sale, it's nearly impossible to come home without a tchotchke or two. Nostalgia may waylay your pragmatic side, and you'll purchase a "Partridge Family" lunchbox for \$120. No matter what you find, at the end of the day there will be fewer presidents in your wallet.

Maggie Espinosa is a La Mesa writer.