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L.A. in a Day—by Bike

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By ARNIE COOPER

West Hollywood, Calif.

Spring comes early to Southern California, but it's easy to miss while driving down Wilshire Boulevard in a climate-controlled car. That all changes on a bicycle, especially when you're grinding up the hills of Bel Air—passing more blooming magnolias than you'd ever imagine could thrive in a semidesert. Those flowering trees are not on any tourist map. But on a spectacular, 76-degree day in late February, they were one of the incidental pleasures of the "L.A. in a Day" bike tour. The six-hour, 32-mile sojourn covers West Hollywood, Beverly Hills, Bel Air, Westwood, Brentwood, Santa Monica, Venice, Marina del Rey, Mar Vista and Culver City. (For the short-winded, easier tours exist.)

While other bike-tour companies target Santa Monica and Venice Beach, two-year-old Bikes and Hikes LA is the only one to get you within a handlebar's reach of, say, the alleyway Madonna used to escape the paparazzi, or to offer a "moving meditation" through Los Angeles's only protected wildlife preserve. I am an avid cyclist who lives just up the coast in Santa Barbara, but until I joined six others (locals and visitors) on this excursion, I, too, had steered clear of two-wheeling it anywhere in Los Angeles County except the winding ribbon of beachside concrete.



Enlarge Image

Bikes and Hikes LA

Off the beaten track: gate to the home where Michael Jackson died.

Like anyone who has spent time immobilized on the 405 Freeway or any of the county's lesser thoroughfares, I had always considered bikes and Los Angeles an odd pairing. Fortunately, cars and ambulances really aren't the only "two modes of transport in Los Angeles," as Fran Lebowitz once said. Though late in the game, the 500-square-mile Los Angeles Basin is finally discovering the virtues of pedal power. Inspired in part by Mayor Antonio

Villaraigosa's cycling accident in 2010, the area has been steadily adding bike lanes. The city of Los Angeles launches its first major bike-share program next month.

Helping to further biking's emergence here is Queens, N.Y.-born Danny Roman, who arrived in 2003 to work as—what else—a movie producer. Following stints at CAA, Scott Rudin Productions, Paramount and [Disney](#), DIS +0.47% Mr. Roman started his own production company.

"We'd hire people to come for three months at a time and provide them a rental car, but they couldn't get to the set. They were like 'I hate this city. How do you live here?'" says 36-year-old Mr. Roman. A longtime bike lover, Mr. Roman started casually escorting clients around the city by bicycle from his apartment. But his landlord began complaining about all the visitors. After a fellow producer suggested that he start his own touring company, Mr. Roman found a storefront on nearby Santa Monica Boulevard. Though still in "the biz," he now has 200 Trek bicycles, three full-time assistants and seven tour guides, including 23-year-old Kim Beaudoin.

"All right, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to your L.A. in a Day Bike Tour. We've got 32 miles ahead of us. We're gonna be burning about 2,000 calories. The first two hours we'll be doing some hills, then it's straight cruising out to the beach," Ms. Beaudoin announces.

After coasting a few blocks, we make our first climb—to a 1927 "textile block" structure designed by Frank Lloyd Wright's son as his own studio and residence. Soon after, we stop at a grayish building that, in 1953, contained a one-bedroom apartment rented by "a girl named Norma Jean," Ms. Beaudoin says. "This is where Marilyn Monroe first dyed her hair that platinum blonde that became her signature."

Next, a short but steep incline brings us up to the Sunset Strip. "This is where comedians, rock stars and celebs come once they've made it," Ms. Beaudoin says. We glimpse, in the distance, the Sierra Towers, which Sidney Poitier, Elton John, Matthew Perry and Lindsay Lohan (before she was kicked out—twice) once called home. Cher recently put her 4,000-square-foot duplex on the market. "Can you imagine riding down the elevator in the morning," Ms. Beaudoin says with a laugh.

Now the serious climbing begins as we enter the "leafy" areas of Beverly Hills and do our first walking tour—at the Greystone Mansion. Built by oil prospector Edward Doheny for his son Ned in 1928, the estate is now used for weddings and has hosted 3,000 commercials and such movies as "The Big Lebowski" and "There Will Be Blood."

"Wasn't there a scandal?" a member of the group asks. In fact, just five months after moving in, Ned was found shot dead next to the bloody corpse of his butler, who had accompanied the family from New York. "Most likely a lover's quarrel ended their lives," Ms. Beaudoin says.

Soon we're back in the saddle on a very welcome descent for some ride-bys ("I don't want you to lose momentum," says Ms. Beaudoin), including the salmon-colored house where Sharon Osbourne "so lovingly chucked a ham into the neighbor's yard one Thanksgiving."

From the empty lot where Frank Sinatra's English Tudor once stood to the gate of the rental property where Michael Jackson went into cardiac arrest, Ms. Beaudoin regales us with countless stories before guiding us back down to reality—as we reach Sepulveda Boulevard in the shadow of the thunderous 405. The grittiness doesn't last long, and soon we're passing by the site of the Brentwood Village restaurant (now Peet's Coffee & Tea), "where the guy, Ron Goldman, whom O.J. Simpson didn't murder, worked," on our way to a beautiful pine-lined street, devoid of cars, that guides us gently to the ocean.

The biking here couldn't be easier as we head down to the beach bike path in Santa Monica, ultimately stopping in Venice for lunch—a good 3½ hours after we started. We've begun the relaxing phase of the expedition, walking through the Venice Canals, a formerly vast wetland transformed by tobacco millionaire Abbot Kinney in the early 1900s. Stopping near one of the storybook houses, you can't help thinking how much of this town is fantasy. "It's a city built on the idea that whatever you dream you can have," Ms. Beaudoin says. Same goes for nearby Marina del Rey, the largest man-made marina in the country.

Not that nature has no role here. In fact, the last leg of the trip (before passing through Culver City) is the Ballona Wetlands. And while I couldn't exactly meditate while navigating the bike path, I did come to the realization that for all its traffic woes, Los Angeles is actually a very bikeable place.

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