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From Times Online
March 25, 2010

A soaked and silly California road trip

What do you do when you expect sunshine but get a freak weather patch during your holiday? Look for laughs, food, films and shopping



Paul Sweeney and Samantha Lyster at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel

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Samantha Lyster

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"We're so sorry, it's very unusual for California to get rain like this," said the hotel receptionist.

"Cheers for that, love," I thought. "But it doesn't make it any better."

Just two days into a ten-day road trip taking in Los Angeles, San Diego and Orange County, truly biblical storms had descended. It rarely rains in California, even in January.

People were sympathetic, but I felt like knocking on Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's door to say, "You know that advert, where you're in that disco white suit inviting people over to sunny California? Well you might want to re-think it."

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The upside was that I had opening material for the stand-up comedy gigs my travelling companion Paul Sweeney and I were there to perform: "It's great to be here, Californians are so welcoming and friendly. Why you even changed the weather to make me feel at home."

It had all started so well in Los Angeles; we had woken up in the Andaz Hotel on Sunset Boulevard to glorious sunshine. How smug we felt that January morning, having breakfast outside sans jackets.

The weather certainly helped to distract from my dodgy driving, I had not been behind a wheel for eight years and was thankful Paul resisted screaming, "For God's sake woman, you're going to kill us" each time I swerved into the path of an oncoming vehicle.

By Sunday, the night of our first gig at the [Comedy Store](#), the streets of Los Angeles were as shiny-wet as those of the London

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However, the bad weather did have one saving grace. It prevented me from indulging in the British compulsion to lie and bake by the water until my oiled skin shallow-fried.

This way, we discovered many an entertaining way to pass time in-between gigs. In Los Angeles, we headed to Bergamot Station, formerly warehouses for the area's tram services, now home to some 40 independent galleries and the Santa Monica Museum of Art. All of the galleries are open to the public, and one can easily spend a whole day wandering through the spaces discovering new American and European artists.

In San Diego, we were directed to **Balboa Park**, a purpose-built complex dating from 1915 and housing a diverse range of museums and theatres. We particularly enjoyed the Museum of Photographic Arts, the Automotive Museum (where you can pose on motorbikes) but I would not recommend waiting in line for the 3-D cinema. We watched a documentary on ancient Egypt and there wasn't even a zombie mummy in it.

Clearly, bad weather cannot prevent credit cards from working so I did my bit for the American economy with a few purchases – mainly in Venice Beach's many vintage stores.

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The concept of a no-fault divorce is a concession to our unwillingness to attribute blame Melanie McDonagh

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The Kitson outlet on Third Street Promenade is a treasure chest of past season designer shoes, with Marc Jacobs heels starting from £70. How I regret my sensible side winning and forbidding me to buy those Pucci pumps.

Still the best place for designer goods is Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills. A rather charming actress told me that unlike in the film *Pretty Women*, the stores are not snooty and they don't care if you wander in wearing tracksuits or pyjama bottoms (hear that Tesco); what matters are the purchases you rack up.

Should you be in that part of town I suggest checking the [Paley Center for Media](#) as it often hosts some amazing events. You know all those American shows we adore, such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and the original *Batman* series to name but two of my favourites, well the Paley Centre will more than likely host an evening with the actors and directors, with Q & A sessions and the chance to meet cast and crew.

On the subject of *Pretty Woman*, it's the 20th anniversary of the movie and the perfect excuse to book dinner at the [Beverly Wilshire Hotel](#), where Richard Gere and Julia Roberts filmed so many of the scenes. Surprisingly, you don't need to be a millionaire to eat there. What I loved about California most, and dinner at the hotel summed this up, is that you can have wonderful restaurant meals at British gastro pub prices.

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I had a delicious roasted king crab starter, as big as a British main course, for around £12, and my real main course of roasted John Dory was around £20.

Californians are genuinely spoilt when it comes to eating out – the quality is high and the prices reasonable compared with many a British establishment. And

Mexican is the equivalent of our curry, the immigrants' gift to their new home.

One of the best Mexican restaurants we visited was [Border Grill](#), where alongside the expected burritos we tasted quesadilla and green corn tamales. The good news for Londoners is that the owners are in talks to open in the English capital this year.

In Huntington Beach, where we were performing at the Laughing Grape night, we had planned to surf during the day. Instead of hanging out with boards under our arms and pretending to be The Beach Boys, we sat in Duke's restaurant watching people being blown from one end of the pier to the other. At least lunch in [Duke's](#) cheered us up, especially its human head-sized hula ice-cream pie.

The day before our departure, the sun came back and we hung out in Los Angeles in the kind of weather that Tom Ford captures so beautifully in the film *A Single Man*. We drove to an area called Silver Lake in East LA. This is known as the bohemian quarter, with cool coffee shops and bars. Even though it's home to artists and musicians, don't expect a cluster of venues such as in London's Shoreditch. Everything is spread out, and so if you want to check out a couple of places, be prepared to drive and not drink.

Despite the freak weather, we experienced plenty of warmth

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from the people we met. I wonder how friendly they'll be when I turn up on their doorsteps during my return trip. I think I'm owed some sunshine.

Where to stay:

Andaz, 8401 Sunset Boulevard, West Hollywood California 90069 (Tel: +1 323 656 1234)

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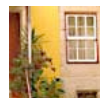
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One can only say that anyone who is tired of British theatre is tired of life
Minette Marrin

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Although still part of the Hyatt group, the Andaz has recently had a name change but its history remains as the rock 'n' roll hotel where Led Zeppelin's drummer John Bonham drove a motorcycle through the lobby. It's in a perfect location for enjoying Los Angeles' nightlife. For those who get up before noon, there's a complimentary buffet breakfast. Doubles from \$199.

[The Standard](#), 550 South Flower St, Downtown, California 90071 (Tel: +1 213 892 8080)

We stayed at the sister hotel on Sunset Boulevard, but I would suggest booking in at the downtown one that opened in 2008 and has quickly become one of the most celebrated hotels in Los Angeles for its quirky decor and commitment to hosting free art and music events. The rooftop bar is worth visiting alone, with its views of an area that is constantly changing as regeneration takes back buildings lost to indifference or ruin. Rooms from \$245.

[Viceroy](#), 1819 Ocean Avenue, Santa Monica, California 90401 (Tel: +1 310 260 7500)

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The Viceroy is often cited as one of the hippest hotels to stay in California, but I found it was more style over substance. The room we stayed in looked amazing, but the walls were tissue thin and we could hear the conversation of the guests next door. Also the bath would not drain. However, the outside area is stunning and it is well worth dropping by for a drink

or dinner as the service was excellent. Rooms from \$340 for city view and \$415 for ocean view.

[Hotel Solomar](#), 435 6th Avenue, San Diego, California 92101 (Tel: 619 819 9500)

A lovely hotel in the Gaslight district, one of the treats is the rooftop pool area. The service was fantastic, as were the animal print bathrobes that make you feel like a character in Dynasty. It's in a great location, close to restaurants and theatres. Rooms from \$169 for a deluxe king.

[Hyatt Regency Huntington Beach Resort & Spa](#), 21500 Pacific Coast Highway, Huntington Beach, California 92648 (Tel: +1 714 698 1234)

An amazing resort, with a lovely spa attached. A few yards from the beach, it appears at first to be a standard resort complex, but is full of gorgeous surprises like an outdoor living room and an oversized hot tub area with a Tropicana bar and fire pits for roasting marshmallows. Rooms from \$216.

Be aware that California hotels will charge for car parking, from \$25 to \$35 so add this to the cost of the room.

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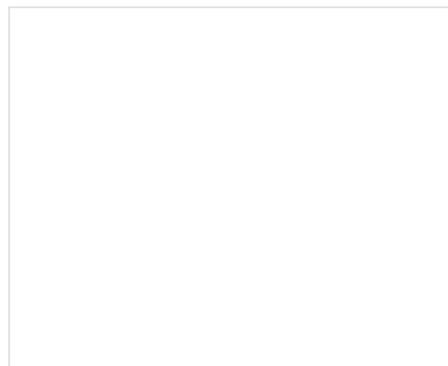


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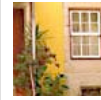
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