

## Three Days in the City of Angels by Brian McAleer

### *Day One*

Sunday October 5<sup>th</sup> 2003

The air is grey and unclear as endless buildings, houses and swimming pools whiz by beneath. Nine million people in one city – crazy! Then we land and I feel that impact as I touch down in America. *‘I’m finally here’* I think with excitement. It only took me till I was twenty but to me that felt like ages. After we land and slow down to driving speed, we actually drive around the airport for about half an hour. LAX is a huge airport as we pass building after building after plane after plane and as I look out my window while our plane is turning there is a queue of four or five planes slowly following us.

When we connect with the terminal we all get off quickly as the plane is very un-full. We arrive in the luggage arrivals area and it takes what feels like an hour for me to get my bag. Then it’s another hour wait as we pass through immigration. When I finally get there the man who attends to me is quite nice.

“Good morning sir” he says in that immigration-officer style way. No real emotion you know?

“Good morning, how are you?” I return

“Passport and arrival card please.” I extend them out and he takes them “How long are you staying in the United States?”

“About 11 days” I say

“Are you carrying any fruit or vegetables with you?”

“No” I said, but felt like saying *‘Yes I’ll have an apple please’*, but he looks way too serious to take a joke; pleasant, but serious.

“Where is your hotel or motel that you’ll be staying in for the first night of your visit?” he asked while looking at my green arrival card. *‘It’s on there you should know’*, I thought.

“Umm, in Anaheim” I said

“Ah, Disney land country?” he said with a wry smile

“Yeah” I wonder if he thought it stupid that a guy my age would be going to Disneyland. He stamps my passport, tears off the bottom section of the green arrival card, staples it to a page in my passport and hands them back to me. That’s my cue to go.

“Thank you” I said and walked on.

I walked out into the International Terminal and I’m bloody tired. I’m also very much tripped out as I am now in America and it’s 10.30 on Sunday morning. Cool, after fourteen hours of flying I’ve arrived half an hour before I left Melbourne on the same day! I walk out to the taxi and bus rank knowing that I have to get to the Ramada Inn in Anaheim, which I am dying to do. I keep an eye out for a bus I read about in the Lonely Planet book which will take me to Anaheim. To be sure I think I should ask someone who can give me more information. I spot a large cop, with the green uniform and hat telling drivers to not park in certain areas. I walk up to him and ask,

“Hi I need to get to my hotel in Anaheim. What would be the best way?”

“No problem sir” he said “If you stand around this area you’ll see a bus with animated characters on it. It has all the Disney characters on it. That bus should be coming along very soon. Just hop on that one and it will take you straight to Anaheim.”

“Thank you” I said, and he walked away. He wasn’t so bad for my first Los Angelino. He was a cop after all, so I doubt he would have been rude.

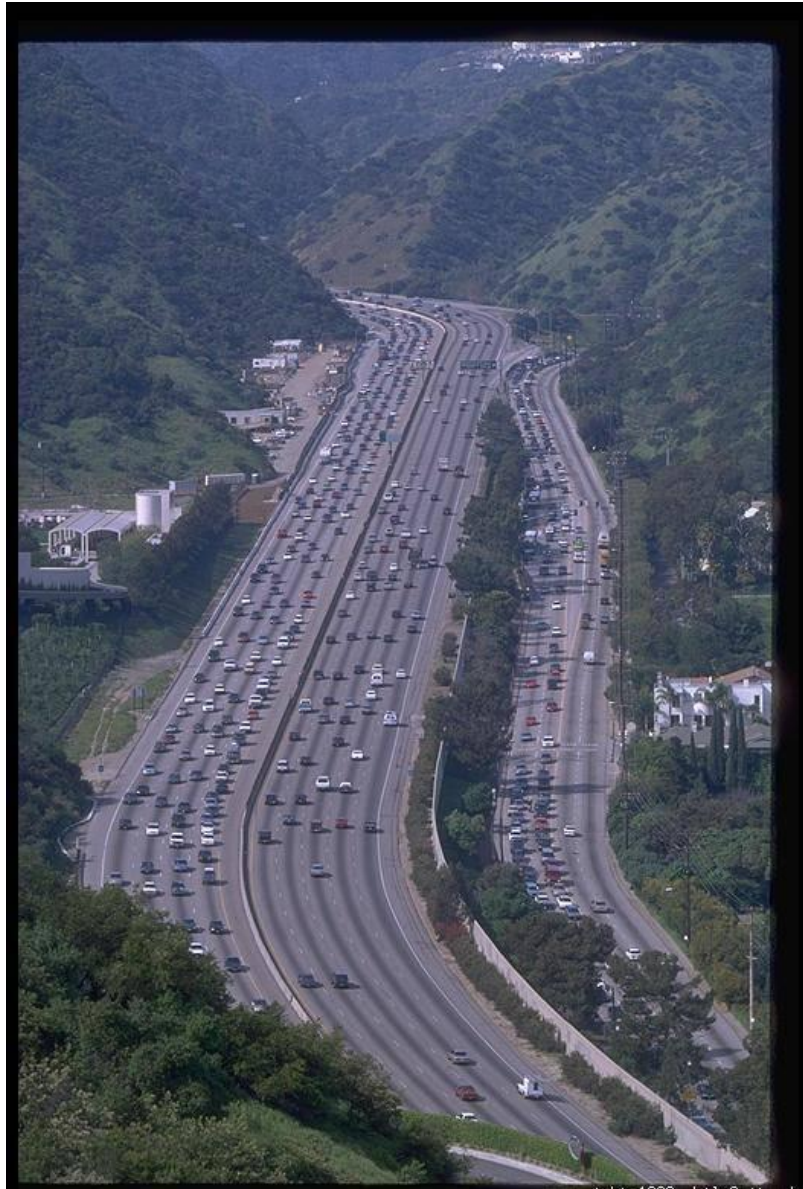
So I wait for about half an hour and see no such bus. I think I saw it just as I walked out of the terminal so I’m thinking the next one won’t be for a little while. I look in my wallet and I have all my cash in there - \$700. All my other funds are on a credit card and my limit on that is about \$2300. Yep, not very much money, but I had enough to survive until Scotland at least. Anyway, I spotted a Super Shuttle, which I read about in Lonely Planet, and was a taxi service. Since Anaheim was about 45 minutes away I figured it would be expensive but I didn’t care. The airport was starting to get to me and was I worn out and tripped out. I walked over to a Super Shuttle area and got in one right away.

“Where you headed?” the driver asked

“Anaheim” was what I said.

He put my bags in the trunk and I hopped in. I discovered I would be sharing the shuttle with a few other people, one group was a family and the other group was a young couple. When all the luggage was stowed and everyone was in, we were on our way.

As we drove down the concrete freeway which was just like one vein in a body of freeway veins, criss-crossing in every direction, I sat in the back staring observantly out the window. I listened to the husband and wife of the family talk to the other couple. The family couple was from Oregon and had their two little girls with them. They were on their way to Disneyland of course and were living up to the important American Family Tradition, which was a trip to Disneyland. I’d be going there too, but I was a 20 year old guy from Australia and by himself. They also talked about the current Californian election. Arnold Schwarzenegger was in the running and tipped to win. His main opponent was Gray Davis and as I listened to that I never would have imagined that in nine months time I would be teaching his son Video production at a Special Needs camp in Pennsylvania. As the grownups continued talking, I just gazed out the window. It was all so different and exciting. The first thing I noticed was that the cars were huge and they were never-ending. We were on one a freeway but as I looked at the dozens of other freeways going in every direction, each of them was pulsating with very large, very flash cars. I could just barely see the Los Angeles city skyline as it was so smoggy, so the buildings were more like tall, grey blurs. I had been expecting that.



When we arrived in Anaheim we dropped off the family and the other couple at nice, big hotels until eventually it was just me. There were resorts and hotels everywhere and all the streets were lined with palm trees, that towered above us and looked like they were watching the world below with the points of their leaves.

“So where exactly is your hotel man?” the driver asked, interrupting my daze. I got out a little piece of paper and written on that was the address of my destination. I read it out, clearing my throat first.

“It’s the Anaheim Ramada Inn, on East Katella Avenue”

“Okay” he complied. A few minutes later we were there. I hopped out and he took out my bags.

“What’s the damage?” I said forgetting I was not in Australia, but before he could show his confusion with that I said “I mean how much for that?”

“Ah, fifteen dollars will do” he said, and I was wrapped. I was expecting 80 bucks easily, but the fare must have been split between all the passengers. I looked into my wallet at the brittle,

paper money and pulled out a twenty. Remembering that I had to tip in this land I let him keep the change. He thanked me and entered his car.

I grabbed my large bag and swung my back pack over my shoulder. Damn it was hot but as I entered the simple looking foyer with its front desk I was greeted by cool air. I knew I couldn't actually check in until 2.00 pm and as I looked at the time on the clock on the wall it was just after 1.00 pm. I was greeted by the young man at the desk and I told him my name.

"Are you aware that you cannot check in until 2.00pm sir?" he asked

"Yes that's fine. Can I dump my large bag here?"

"You'd like to leave it behind the desk?"

"If I could? I'll just go and get something to eat and come back at 2.00pm"

"That's not a problem" he said. Another worker came around from behind the desk and took my large bag placing it behind it and I walked out the door to go and find a place to eat. I noticed a sign on the front desk that said 'Free shuttle's to Disneyland Resort'. So I returned to reception and asked,

"How often are the buses to Disneyland?"

"They leave from out the front every hour on the half-hour sir" he replied

"And they're free?" I asked

"Yes they are"

"Okay thanks. I'll see you in an hour"

"Okay"

As I walked out the front into the heat I came to the road. It was very wide, just like all the others I had seen. I scanned up and down, looking for some kind of fast food joint but all I could see was a McDonald's. I thought that the first place I would eat in on my first visit to America would be a little more exciting than McDonalds, but that was I all could see. It was hot; I was a bit disoriented and hungry. So with my over packed back pack over my right shoulder, I headed up there.

When I arrived I imagined that I could have walked in while a robbery was going on but I was lucky not to. I Ordered a Quarter Pounder with Cheese meal, with a Coke, and sat down. I ate it. It was pretty bad. I wasn't really a big fan of McDonalds so I just let it go down my system and hoped that it would all be successfully flushed out the following day. After eating, I went through my bag and just shuffled through my stuff to kill some time. As it came to be 1.50pm, I left McDonalds and walked back to the motel. I kept looking the other way as I crossed the road and a few cars caught me by surprise. I had heard stories of tourists that had visited countries where the cars drove down the other side of the road. Not knowing that they would walk across the street, looking the wrong way, get hit and killed. So I tried to keep that in mind.

When I got back to the Ramada Inn I got my room card and retrieved my bag. I wasn't escorted to my room, but instead just given directions. That also surprised me. It took me a minute to find it and when I did it was right above the pool. I saw some other young people lying around it and wondered if they would be on the Contiki. This motel was the leaving point of the tour so everyone on it would be here, the night before we left at least. I opened the door, swiping the card to do so, and walked in. it was pleasant enough and as I dropped my bags near the bed, I loosened myself and collapsed face first onto it. I love doing that and it's a great feeling to arrive in your room after hours of travelling. After lying there for about

a minute I got up and toured the room. My first observation was the toilet. The water in the bowl was nearly up to the rim and it was shaped differently than the Aussie ones. The shower looked confusing to. I had a shower anyway and that also felt good to get all the sweat and 'travelling dirt' off my body. Once I was out, I changed into my shorts and a t-shirt feeling cool and refreshed.

"So" I said out loud "*what do I do now?*" Anything I wanted. I was by myself and I looked forward to a whole year of having that freedom to do what *I* wanted, when I wanted. But I wasn't expecting the loneliness that would follow.

Looking at my options, part of me said "Just stay in your room and relax; you've had a long flight." I was tired right enough but then I realised where I was only minutes away from – Disneyland. *The* Disneyland. There was a free bus leaving in thirty minutes and I could go there, no problems. My sister Kate was coming tomorrow and when she would arrive we would go to California Adventure Park, another theme park directly opposite Disneyland and part of the Disneyland Resort, complete with Downtown Disney, the food, shopping and entertainment complex. With me so far? Kate had already been to Disneyland on a previous visit and didn't care if she didn't go, but wanted to go to California Adventure, having never been there.

The day after California Adventure, we would probably go to Hollywood and Beverly Hills and the day after that was when the Contiki Tour started. I wanted to go to California Adventure Park, I wanted to see Beverly Hills, Hollywood and a bit of L.A. if possible so this day was really my only chance to go to Disneyland. Hell it's right around the corner and there's a free bus going there real soon. Even though I had been travelling for 20 hours I suddenly had that burst of energy you get once you've landed and forgot that I had already had a whole day in a place.

So I left my room, went down to the foyer and waited for the bus. When it arrived I got on and there were several other people there; adults, teens, kids, old people and suddenly I didn't feel awkward going to Disneyland by myself anymore. We began driving, and literally five minutes later we pulled up into the main entrance. I got out and walked towards it. I stopped and stared

Here I am. I'm at Disneyland

*Still Day One (time awake – 27 hours)*

The first thing I remember hearing was the music; that wonderful, happy, childhood memory music. The first thing I remember seeing was the main entrance. It was like an old-fashioned train station and three large, American flags flapped gently in the warm breeze high above me. The sky was deep blue and cloudless and everything was bright and colourful. I knew I had to go and buy my ticket, so I went over to one of the five booths. I only stood in line for about 5 minutes and when I got up to the window, the woman behind it said,

"Can I have you zip code sir?"

And I said, "3175"

"Huh? she asked, smiling.

"I'm from Melbourne, Australia" I said but didn't expect her to know exactly where that was. I got my ticket, which cost \$45 dollars and allowed me to just visit Disneyland and stay for as



long as I wanted. I took it gladly and walked over to the main entrance. There was more of a queue here, but still not too long so it looked like I had come on a quiet day. There was security there checking bags of course, and I was reminded of how far the aftermath of 9/11 had reached. Once I handed the doorman my ticket I was waved in and I looked upon the Happiest Place on Earth.

I walked through an archway and came to Main Street – an early 20<sup>th</sup> century American designed street complete with shops to buy all your Disneyland merchandise. This was where I would spend some time on the way out I figured. To start off I just walked around the park making myself familiar with the layout. It was all much smaller than what I was expecting but that was cool. Of course I headed straight for the castle that sits halfway through the park and that was also surprisingly small. I remembered back to that Disneyland CD my sister Kate the travel agent had given to me before I left Australia. I found all the lands and ended up back at the main entrance again.



It was about 3.30 by this point and I decided to go and find all the major rides and do them straight away. To my surprise again, three of the major rides and attractions were closed down. Actually, two weeks before I got there a man was killed when one of the main rides derailed. I remembered the stories of how a few people had been killed at the park because of faults or mechanical failures in the rides but that didn't worry me. I wouldn't have come all this way if I wasn't going to go on any rides. And so I did. I think the longest I queued up for was about 45 minutes to go on one ride.

The rest of the time I was there I just walked around and observed all the American people passing me by; the kids were bubbly and tanned, the parents, well most of them, were very obese. Welcome to California. I made my way over the famous parade at about 4.30 and found a spot on a small wall right along the street. I was sitting next to a couple and was

amazed at how different they looked from each other. The woman was obese, whereas the man was tall and skinny. However they were very nice people. The man started talking to me first and asked me where I was from.

“Melbourne, Australia” I said proudly

“You’ve got a lot of desert there haven’t you?” he asked. I had to give him a little credit as he knew at least something about Australia. The unawareness I would get in coming months would just astound me.

“Yeah we have quite a bit of desert, but where I live is in the suburbs south of the city, very similar to here actually.”

“And you’ve got some troops over there as well haven’t you, fighting with the Americans?” he said, and I was impressed

“Yeah we do” and I had to veer towards George Dubya. “So what do you think of George Bush and his decision to send troops over there?”

“Well I think it was the right move” he said clearly “Suddam has to be brought down.”

I had to agree with him there and as I saw he was opinionated I asked him what he thought about Arnie running for Governor

“Well I think he has a good chance” he answered “as he’s been successful in every other area of his life”.

As the parade started to proceed down the street I watched on like all the little kids who were sitting attentively on the side of the street and thought about the millions of others who had done the same thing. What a special place.

“So do you live nearby?” I asked

“We live here” he said, and for a minute I thought he meant Disneyland, but he continued with “Anaheim – born and raised”

“Oh yeah” I said thinking that was all that could be said. The man turned to his partner and asked what she would like for dinner.

“I don’t know” she said, watching the parade at the same time “what do you feel like?”

“I’d like to get a large pizza with sausage and pepperoni”. How many of those did they eat a week I wondered.

As the parade continued all the characters came out and then something interesting happened. People in their casual clothes but with too-toos walked down the street. There were men, women, teens and kids and I was curious as to why they were there.

“Excuse me mate” I said to the sausage and pepperoni man “but what are those people doing in the parade?” The woman answered

“Oh they are in training because they would like to be characters in the parade one day.” Oh, how nice I thought. It’s good to see them up there having a go.

Shortly after, the parade ended I strolled around the park. It started to get a bit darker and cooler and at that time I went and saw the “Honey I Shrunk the Audience 3-D Show” which I really enjoyed. It involves sitting in a giant theatre and as you walk in they give you a big, black pair of 3-D glasses. I watched the screen which was a movie, of a science lab of some kind. Rick Moranis’s character, his wife and his two sons (including the one he enlarges dramatically in ‘Honey I Blew Up The Kid’) were all there and they were trying to get the shrinking machine to work. It didn’t and all these things went wrong in the lab. Whatever happened there happened to me and the rest of the audience. When water was spilt in the movie, a spray of water came down on the audience. When some lab mice escaped in the

movie, these wires that shot out compressed air and where underneath our seats went off, making it feel like it was the mice running past your feet. It was a great.

I then headed to the “The Pirates of the Caribbean Show”. I had seen the movie a few months ago with Johnny Depp and thoroughly enjoyed it. I had no idea what the ride was like and wondered how much of it was represented in the film. After queuing for only a short while, I hopped into a small boat with two other people and it made its way down a dark, narrow canal of water. Slowly, we made our way through several different scenes, all containing animatronic pirates. There was a bar, a dock and a few sword fights going on. Then at the very end, you see Captain Jack Sparrow, sitting in a rocking chair, singing and swinging a bottle of rum. It was cool.

Feeling a bit peckish I wondered around looking at where I could grab a bite to eat. I didn’t want to sit down at one of the many eateries because they were full of families or people in groups. I knew that I would get stared at if I ate there by myself. So I found a food stand, which was being cared for by a young girl.

“Would you like a Cheerio” she asked. I had no idea what they were, even though they’re famous at Disneyland.

“What are they?” I asked, looking honestly unaware.

“They’re sticks made of soft dough and covered in cinnamon” she explained.

“Sure, I’ll have one”. She prepared it for me and told me the price. It was five dollars and I handed her seven.

“No thank you, you can keep the change” she said politely.

“I’d like to tip you though” I said

“We can’t accept tips here at Disneyland”

“Oh I see. Do they pay you good money?” I asked and she smiled.

“Pretty good”

“Thanks for the Cheerio. Bye”

“Seeya later” she said and I continued on my way.



Next up was “The Haunted Mansion”. As I was standing in line for this attraction, I noticed that Disneyland had gotten busier as it got later in the day. This time, I didn’t get to walk



straight into The Haunted Mansion, so to kill the time in the line I eavesdropped on the conversations of the people around me. One of those conversations in particular got most of my attention. It was a young Hispanic man talking on his mobile phone.

"I'm at Disneyland at the moment with my boyfriend, but my dad thinks I'm in LA" he said on the phone. Suddenly I imagined what this young guy's situation would be. Why did he tell his dad he was somewhere in LA and not at Disneyland? And, did his dad know he was with his boyfriend, or even know he had a boyfriend for that matter? Then I felt sorry for the guy talking on his mobile because I guessed that he was probably hiding the fact that he was gay from his father and to escape that he was spending some time with his boyfriend at the Happiest Place on Earth. Quite sad in a way...

After all that I went on the Disneyland Resort Monorail. The young guy driving it spoke to us through the PA and made it sound like he was having a conversation with the recorded voice that was guiding the tour. The driver would ask a question in his young Californian accent, and the recorded voice which sounded like the guy who does the voiceover for the trailers to all the Disney Animated films would *answer*. It went like this:

"So what do we have coming up on the right here?" asked the driver  
"Coming up on the right, we have Downtown Disney" the voice answered. It went on for the whole ride and was funny and clever the way it was done. I guess you probably had to be there though.

Disneyland stayed open to 11.00pm that night and I left feeling satisfied with what I had seen and done. It really was the Happiest Place on Earth and completed the longest day of my life. By the time I got back to the hotel I got straight into my bed. After watching a bit of American television, I turned off the set and went to sleep. I slept well that night.

*Time awake – 36 Hours. Beat that!*

## **Day Two**

The next day I awoke at 12.15pm and it was hot. The California heat had seeped into my room and I felt real thirsty. For a moment I forgot where I was but a few seconds later I was in present time again.

I knew my sister Kate would be arriving at about 1.00 pm so I jumped in the shower and made it a quick one. When I was ready, I went downstairs and made my way to the foyer. I was there by 12.45 and was thinking I might be waiting for about fifteen, or twenty minutes but a Super Shuttle arrived just as I got there. The door opened and out came Kate. We hugged each other like we hadn't seen each other in a few weeks even though it had only been 2 days. Kate flew into LA the day after me because the night before I left, she was at a Flight Centre Work Party and didn't want to endure the long flight hung-over. It was a smart move because as I asked her how the party was she said was a big one. She didn't get home until 1.00pm on the Sunday afternoon. She checked in and I carried her bags for her. Once we got to the room, she hopped in the shower and like we had discussed we went straight to the Disneyland Resort and into California Adventure Park.

As we bought our tickets, I slightly glanced over my shoulder and looked at Disneyland. I was just there yesterday but it felt like eons ago. Wow! Before we entered the park Kate

whipped out her digital camera and took a picture of me in front of the giant C. The word CALIFORNIA stands outside the entrance of the park. The letters are about 10 feet tall and gold-coloured. After that we went in and got a map of the park. Before we started on any rides we went and got something to eat. We both ordered large burgers with fries and a coke and it was officially my first proper meal since arriving yesterday. I had been too embarrassed to order a meal and eat it at one of the restaurants in Disneyland as I would be surrounded by all the families and feel a bit intimidated.

After consuming our greasy, fatty meals amongst the greasy, fatty people of California we headed for the rides. The rides at this park were a bit more extreme and adventurous than those of Disneyland but Disneyland had that special feeling and atmosphere. However Kate and I had a great time and the ride that sticks in my mind the most was “Soaring Over California”. It was a simulation ride that involved you being strapped in chair, which is in a row of about six other chairs, and you have a few other rows in your section plus the same amount in a section a few feet next to you. Once you’re all strapped in, the rows rise and stop on an angel. Your feet dangle and you’re few metres above the ground. Then you move forward and all around you is a giant screen. It’s kind of like IMAX but this screen was dome shaped. As the sounds and effects started, the air conditioning is turned on and you’re blown with cool, machine air. Then you literally soar over about a dozen famous and beautiful attractions that make up California; the cities of San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego, the national parks and rivers and lots of other things. It was very real and showed just what an amazing state California really is.

California Adventure Park closed at 6.00pm that day and afterwards, Kate and I went for a stroll through Downtown Disney; and that is a cool place. It’s lined with shops, restaurants and it just pulses with spunk. We went into the Rainforest Café and I tried to order a cocktail but the bartender asked me for my I.D. As I was still 20, I said I had forgotten it and had to settle for a Coke. I just couldn’t wait to be 21 and I knew I had come to the right place to celebrate it. I had no idea what lay in store for me, and you will be surprised by what took place. But I’m getting ahead of myself. After thoroughly observing Downtown Disney, we took a cab back to our hotel.

We just had dinner in the restaurant in the hotel and in true movie style tradition I had a cup of coffee after my meal. After that we discussed what we were to do tomorrow, being our last free day before we took off on the Contiki Tour. We went to the foyer which had several brochures and pieces of information on special tours you could do. Kate asked me what I would like to do and I said, of course, that I wanted to mainly see Hollywood. The clerk at the front desk referred us to ‘The Grand LA Continental Tour’, which lasted the whole day and took you through Downtown LA to start. After that was a visit to Hollywood and then a special tour of Beverly Hills. I will explain the rest in the next part as it will be continued in detail. It was a very interesting and entertaining day full of movie references, freeways, wise-cracks from the tour guide, and of course, more smog. Let the story continue....

### **Day Three**

A free shuttle took us from our hotel in Anaheim to another hotel closer to LA. There, we picked up more people and got onto another bus. A slightly overweight man got in and took the wheel. He didn’t look like your average tour guide, more like a mechanic or plumber. He was unshaven, with scruffy hair and casual clothes. Oh well, that’s new and different I thought.

“Good morning gang!” he said, with an accent that wasn’t Californian. “My name is Al and I’ll be your guide for our tour today of Los Angeles and its surrounding attractions. Before we get started, I’d like you all to synchronise your watches please” and immediately everyone grabbed their wrists and prepared to alter their watches.

“The time is now, according to my watch, 9.17am. Have you all got that?” he asked and a few people said yes. “Great gang, we’ve got a lot to do and see today and we’re on a very tight schedule so it’s important that we’re on the same clock and you all stick to the schedule. Please don’t be late, because it will hold us up and like I said we’ve got a lot to go through today” Even though his words were direct, he said them in a gently persuasive way. I think everyone else, like me, was more surprised that he was our tour guide. He just didn’t look or sound the part.

The tour commenced and we were headed towards our first stop of the day, which was Downtown LA. To pass the time on the road, Al told us his life story. Even though he was from Brooklyn originally, he has been living the past 8 years here, and knew a lot about LA. His Brooklyn accent had stayed with him though. His brother was a cop and every time we went past a fire station he would say “God bless”. He thanked us for doing the tour, especially after the event that was 9/11. Many people had been put off by visiting American cities after that horror, but the brave ones forget about that and just live life. He referred to an English girl on the bus as “England” but her real name was Heidi. There was a girl on our bus who had been out the night before partying and drinking and was dealing with a serious hangover. We would later find out that she would be on our Contiki tour.

The first leg of our journey took place on the freeway. It was still morning, around 10.00 am and we were restricted to a slow crawl with hundreds of other cars amongst us. And the cars, I would never forget. They were all huge and relatively brand new. Most of them had tinted windows and each driver would be on a cell phone, or talking out loud, probably using a hands free phone set of some kind. Oh yeah, LA was already living up to its image for me, and we hadn’t even seen the bulk of it yet. Our tour guide talked about the LAPD as we passed two separate police cars pulling people over.

“As you can see gang, some poor fool has been pulled over by our local police force; the infamous LAPD. Don’t mess with them, because they *will* get you and they are tough!”

Eventually the crawling traffic died off and our tour guide took us towards an overpass. “Does anyone recognise this overpass we’re coming up on? Anyone?” Al asked, and everyone said no.

“I don’t blame you, because for most of you the only time you would have seen that overpass, was in the movie ‘Speed’, and they hadn’t even finished building it”

Now it was, and back in 1994 when that movie was released it was that giant gap that the bus has to leap over, and does so in classic movie stunt style. As we approached it the tour guide prepared us.

“There’s going to be a slight jump for us, just like there was for the bus in Speed. Get ready gang, 3....get ready, 2.... get ready... Here we go.....”

And we went over it. The bump was just a small mound on the freeway. Everyone gave a little chuckle, admiring him for his sense of humour. It was just a taste of things to come.

The next overpass we crossed over had a surprising bit of the smoggy city underneath that I did not expect to see; South Central Los Angeles. What a sight. A rundown area, that scared me just to look at it. I instantly thought of the movie “Boyz in the Hood” and could imagine

cars tearing down the streets and the sounds of gunshots. Every house's windows were covered in black bars, and I believe the fact we were told is that the people there have bars on their windows but they didn't lock their doors. They didn't lock their doors, because if they were getting chased by a mugger, they would run towards their house, be able to automatically open the door, and then lock it when they were safely inside.

We went through Downtown LA first and we drove past a movie being made. I saw a young guy who looked like he was in charge. The driver beeped at them. The streets were quiet and I wondered where everybody was. He pointed out the building that was used in 'Die Hard' and another one I recognised from a certain alien movie.

"The tallest building in downtown that we are passing now gang is the Bank of America building. You might recognise it as the building that the aliens blow up in 'Independence Day'" he said. I looked up at it in awe; it was an absolute monolith of a building.

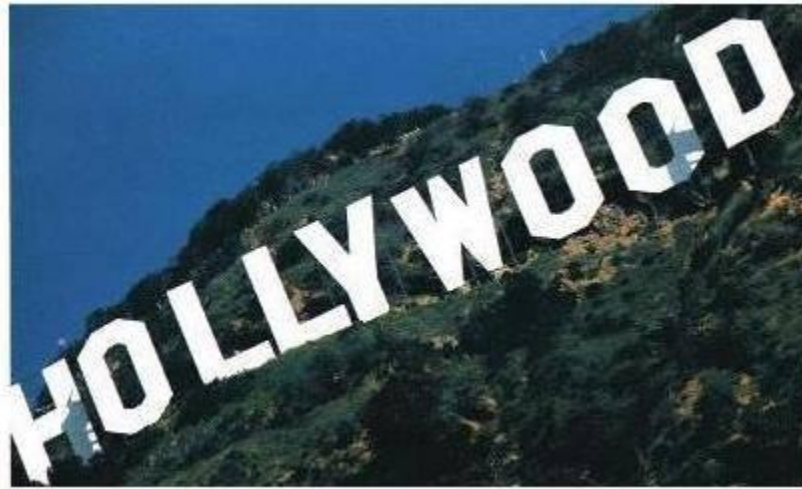
"A little while back" Al continued "I had a Mexican woman on this tour and when I told them about that building getting blown to bits in the movie she asked '*So how long did it take for them to rebuild it?*'. The whole bus laughed.



As we drove along through the empty streets of Downtown LA, I was totally naïve to where I truly was and in early 2005 I would know what this part of Los Angeles was really like, and how much it mystified me. It would also be in my dreams over the next year for some reason, and when I looked up that meaning (flying over or walking through a city) in a dictionary of dream definitions, it meant that there would soon be a change in my place of residence. Well that was fitting enough as I imagined I would be living in a few different places over the year I was away. After the semi-interesting tour of Downtown LA, we headed to our next stop; Hollywood.

The smog was still above us and it didn't look like it was going to clear anytime soon. When we arrived in Hollywood the bus pulled up right on the side of the road, that road being Hollywood Boulevard. We only had 30 minutes here, so Kate and I made it our mission to see the Hollywood sign, check out the Walk of Fame and of course Grauman's Chinese Theatre. We came across the Kodak Theatre, which was the home of the Academy Awards Ceremony every year. We walked up a few flights of stairs where there was a viewing platform for you to see the Hollywood Sign. We were standing in the right place, but could hardly see it. The letters were so small and far away, and the smog wasn't helping much either. Kate and I didn't even bother to take a picture of it. I was really disappointed with that, because I really wanted a picture of me with the HOLLYWOOD Sign in the

background. I was thinking it would be a great profile shot for the Melbourne IndieClub (more on that later).



We left the platform, and went back down onto the street to find some of our favourite names on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. I came across ones such as Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, and John Wayne. Then I saw the one I was hoping to spot; Alfred Hitchcock. I took a picture of it.





After all that Jazz, we had about fifteen minutes left so we crossed the road and popped into a big souvenir shop. I knew what I wanted to buy during my visit to Hollywood and fortunately, they sold them in the dozens, in all sizes and as paperweights, shampoo bottles and t-shirts. I'm talking about the Oscar Statue. I wanted to get one as life-like as I could, and they had those, in full size but not dipped in gold of course. The one I bought was a full size replica, with a plaque on the base that had MAN OF THE YEAR written on it. I thought that was quite deserving and I got it. I pictured it sitting on my desk in the years to come as I penned my first original screenplay, and when I received a real Oscar statue someday, I would put that on my desk, next to the fake one I bought in Hollywood at the age of 20. Ahh, dreams...

With a few minutes to spare, Kate and I just hung out on Hollywood Boulevard and there was a lot of activity happening outside the Roosevelt Hotel. We walked towards it to get a closer look, and the main entrance was sectioned off with a barricade of velvet ropes. On the other side of those ropes, were about 15 paparazzi guys, with their cameras at the ready. They were all men, wearing dark sunglasses and expensive clothes. None of them spoke to each other; instead stood there in silence liked trained dogs waiting for their master. Kate and I stood there guessing which famous celebrity might be coming outside.

"Arnold Schwarzenegger?" I asked

"Brad Pitt?" Kate suggested, looking hopeful. We would never know, and whoever it was in there, didn't come out in the short time we had to spend in Hollywood.

Our half an hour in Tinsletown was over, so Kate and I got back on the bus, where Al the tour guide told us that he just saw an actor in a small café. It was Chris Penn, the fat brother of actor Sean Penn. Al went in there to get a cup of coffee when he saw him, and chatted with



him. Chris Penn told Al how he was in talks about making a new movie. Al described the moment with a lot of casualness and not much expression, like it was something that happened to him on a daily basis. When we were all back in the bus, it started driving up the rest of Hollywood Boulevard. Al showed us some other parts of the town and it was larger than what I thought it would be. It reminded me of St. Kilda back home, as it was about the same distance from LA as St. Kilda was from Melbourne.

We drove past the famous nightclub 'The Viper Room'; owned by Johnny Depp and the location where River Phoenix met his demise. We also saw the café used in 'Get Shorty' and the house from 'Happy Days', where Ritchie Cunningham lived. We then left Hollywood and merged onto Santa Monica Blvd, heading towards our next destination; Beverly Hills. When we got there, Al pointed out several more famous spots in the area, all used in movies of course. *Was anything in this place not related to movies? What was the real LA all about I wondered?* We got out at Beverly Hills just near Rodeo Drive. It wasn't much of a drive really. I was expecting a long street, like Chapel Street in Melbourne. Rodeo Drive wasn't as long, but still a street none the less. It was a little cobblestone pathway with about 15 shops occupying it. It was nice enough I guess, but I wasn't that captivated. Kate liked it though. Greeting us at the start of the drive was a man in a top hat, and a neat red petty coat. He stood there all day greeting the folks and tourists who came for glimpses of the privileged life.



"How you doing mate? I asked him

"Very good sir, how are you? Welcome to Rodeo Drive, Beverly Hills" he said. He had the look of an actor, but his face was old and worn as if he had been doing this gig for years, and was really over it.

"So have you seen any movies being filmed in the area lately?" I asked him.

"Have you seen Hollywood Homicide?" he asked, enthused.

"It was playing on the plane on my flight over here, but I didn't really watch it" I stated.

"Well the big chase scene towards the end of the film, where Harrison Ford's character is chasing the criminal. You know, he chases him through Downtown LA, Hollywood and

Beverly Hills? It's a huge chase and very climatic" he described. "Well when Harrison Ford runs through Beverly Hills, he bumps into me and asks for directions. I give him directions, so he can find a shortcut to catch the criminal"

This really didn't interest me, and I think the guy could tell. Without me even saying goodbye, he said "Good day to you sir, thank you for visiting Beverly Hills" and he turned away from me to greet two ladies with shopping bags, who started heading up Rodeo Drive. That was my cue to go I guess. A little abrupt, but I thought he was a bit of a tosser anyway. Kate appeared to my left, and we walked up the drive our selves. We peered into the doorways and windows of the shops, where attractive people, dressed fancifully moved about inside, trying on things, holding up things, and talking to the store workers. We knew we couldn't get into any of these stores without an appointment apparently, and probably a few thousand dollars to spend. It only took us a couple of minutes to walk from end of Rodeo Drive to the other.

Hopping back on the bus we continued heading down Santa Monica Blvd, stopping at Venice Beach. *The smog still leered above, would it ever clear?* This beach was quiet but I recognised it instantly. The winding pathway that would normally be populated by people on rollerblades or jogging with their Labradors was empty. The basketball courts used in the movie 'White Men Can't Jump' were occupied by a few guys playing basketball. Kate and I sat on the chairs and watched the mixture of cultures taking place. It was a game of two-on-two. Two young Hispanic boys, an American male, and an older African-American male, with grey hair and veins pulsating from his skinny legs, but boy could he move on the court. We didn't sit there watching too long, because we felt a bit rude staring at them. After all, they were just playing basketball.



In the same area and nearby was Muscle Beach, where Arnold Schwarzenegger trained with weights back in his Mr. Universe heyday. Kate tried to take a picture of the few seriously buff guys that were working out there at the time, but before she could even press the camera button a woman rushed up from the fence of the gym and snapped "No photos!" Kate obeyed and we were both surprised at how quickly she was onto us.

After the beach we headed to the CNN television studios and shopping mall. We had a beautiful pasta lunch at a nice restaurant and walked around the shops. The blue sky was finally showing itself and I was wishing it had been with us all day so we could have got some clear photos of the Hollywood sign. Oh well.

Later that day the tour ended and returned to the hotel in Anaheim. We popped our heads into the bar and there were several young people hanging around. We guessed they were our fellow Contiki travellers as it was on this evening that we were all to gather in the bar to meet the tour guide and have a quick low-down on the 7 days to come. He appeared eventually and simply said “just be ready to leave by 7.45am in the hotel lobby” and that was it. He took off after that and the rest of us hung around to have a few drinks, meet and mingle and play pool.

There were several Aussies on the tour Kate and I got talking with a few of them. As the night drew near to an end, I returned to my room to relax and watch a bit of telly. Kate stayed in the bar to talk to more people. When I got to the room, I put the telly on and as I knew it was the California Governor elections that day; I searched all the channels to see who had won. I got to FOX and saw Arnold Schwarzenegger walking on stage with a cheering crowd, and balloons and confetti falling down all around him. Yep, he had won. The Governor had been born and I stayed tuned to watch his acceptance speech.

