

DOWNTOWN REVIVAL

John Bishop ventures to Los Angeles' once undesirable Downtown district, and finds a revitalised hub where public transport meets contemporary culture.

Words by John Bishop

Downtown Los Angeles, USA, long abandoned by tourists, is worth visiting again and, thanks to billions of dollars of investment, is set to get even better.

The major investments are in accommodation and infrastructure, particularly transport, as the greater LA region has finally realised the motor car does not have to rule the universe.

A few years ago, the LA City Council realised people were running away from Downtown. No one wanted to live there: too much crime, not enough facilities, poor housing, no transport, all the usual ills of a rundown inner-city area.

Commercial buildings had high vacancy rates; the local Broadway theatre area had lots of theatres, but no shows; and the Grand Central Market, a big tourist drawcard since the 1930s, was failing.

From 2013, the picture started to change for several reasons. Downtown became the centre of a hot culinary scene, because rents were affordable for innovative entrepreneurs of cuisine.

Rooftop bars attracted people for Saturday and Sunday brunches – safely up high and away from the streets. Shopping started to revive. The landmark Macy's store reopened, and the Grand Central Market was revived. And The Broad art museum opened.

Now there are lots of high-end shops, good restaurants, stylish cafés, swish apartment buildings and green nooks, and a transport system that is safe



Petersen Car Museum



The Broad museum



Walt Disney Concert Hall



Grand Central Market

to use, cheap, runs on time and takes cars (and people) off the streets.

The biggest single investment in accommodation is the 73-storey Intercontinental Hotel, set to open in Downtown in April/May 2017. It's a spectacular building, whose very construction symbolises a renewed confidence in the Downtown area.

Spokeswoman Cindy Tang says that, at 1100 feet (333 metres), it will be the tallest building west of Chicago, and is costing Korean Airlines \$US1.3 billion to build. The 889-room facility will be managed by the IHG Group.

Check-in will be at the 70th floor, just 50 seconds by lift from the ground level lobby.

A little further out of Downtown, on the seemingly endless Wilshire Boulevard, are two other substantial attractions directly opposite each other; so close that visitors can walk from one to the other, an absolute rarity in Los Angeles.

These are the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and the Petersen Car Museum. Both are well worth visiting, although for entirely different reasons.

LACMA is a showcase of the slightly unusual in modern art, and when I was there I experienced the sensational Rain Room. Water gushes from the ceiling, but as you approach, sensors detect your presence and stop the flow. Eerie. You experience the rainfall without the wetness.

Across the road at the Petersen Car Museum, I saw displays that paid tribute to the motor car and the motorcycle in the development of America, and the culture these forms of transport have engendered in art, style, movies, gender roles, and in sheer admiration Americans (and others) have for speed and performance.

You can admire Mr Benz's first "motorwagen" – patented in 1886 – and compare it to the 2016 Maserati Quattroporte S Q4 V6, which combines "sports performance with sedan comfort". Study the massively popular 1956 Chevrolet Bel Air convertible, and the very popular 1961 Honda 50, which was, like the Vespa, so liberating for the young generation.

It's positively the best car museum I have seen, because it recognises the cultural importance of the car and its significance as an icon of freedom and luxury, wealth and rebellion. Even non-petrol-heads will like it.

Back in the centre of town is The Broad museum, the generous gift of philanthropists Eli and Edythe Broad, who spent \$US140 million on the building and donated the 2000 works of art they had collected. Opened in September 2015, it's already recorded 600,000 visitors. Entry is free, but bookings are taken a month in advance. The standby line can stretch back for two hours most days.

On Grand Avenue, The Broad is next door to the Walt Disney Concert Hall, home of the renowned LA Philharmonic, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, making this clutch of buildings the centre of contemporary culture and big drawcards for Downtown.

The rooftop bar at the Intercontinental Hotel



The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) is currently spending \$US36 billion, mainly on the rail system, with another \$US120 billion being scheduled over succeeding years, all to transform transportation in Los Angeles County.

“We want people to see the destination without having to drive,” says MTA Communications Manager Dave Sotero. “Where 10 years ago there was none, now lies 106 miles of rail track.”

Trains run from Downtown to LAX

Airport, to Pasadena, Santa Monica and several other destinations. Roads now have 1600 miles of bike lanes; not enough, but again, vastly more than previously, and most of the trains carry bikes.

At LAX, the airport company has 25 projects worth \$US8 billion underway to build two new terminals, with 22-24 extra gates, plus other improvements to enable better access.

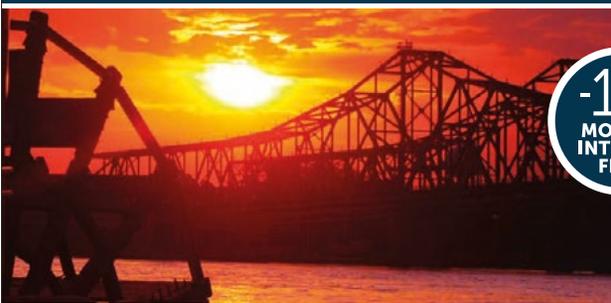
Mary Grady from the airport company says they are spending \$3.1 million a day through to 2018 – about

\$US14 billion in total – and she agrees with everyone else that it’s “about time, too”.

Los Angeles still has a way to go before it reaches its goal of free movement without cars, but the progress is tangible, and the revival of the rundown Downtown area is a positive benefit.

John Bishop is a Wellington Rotarian and travel writer, and received assistance from Discover Los Angeles. •

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