

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CLOSE-UPS; There's a name for it: fun; Baseball, gorillas, music and more await in the L.A. swath that encompasses Elysian Park, Griffith Park, Los Feliz, Echo Park and Silver Lake.

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It's no easy job, being the lungs of Los Angeles.

But Griffith Park, the foremost green space in a city notorious for meager parkland and abundant smog, endures bravely, maybe even heroically. Venture into the park, or nearby Elysian Park, or one of the creative neighborhoods in between, and you'll find not only beloved landmarks such as Griffith Observatory and Dodger Stadium, but also happy surprises, such as the time-travel supply shop, or the cafe where cops dine daily to the sound of echoing gunfire, or the Korean greetings that echo at dawn every day atop Mt. Hollywood.

The more time you spend in these occasionally gritty, mostly gentrified neighborhoods around the park -- Silver Lake, Los Feliz and Echo Park -- the more you realize that they're incubators of American pop culture. Thousands who live here work onstage and off in movies and TV, make music, art and theater, keep up with the interwebs and savor all things ironic (including the nonword "interwebs," a.k.a. the Internet to the rest of us). Yes, Hollywood is glitzier and Beverly Hills is richer. But who's cooler? These 10 micro-itineraries, the third in a series that concentrates on Los Angeles and Orange counties, might help you decide.

And while you're at it, maybe you can decide what to call these people. Many call themselves Eastsiders, which sounds great but annoys people who live east of the Los Angeles River in the area long known as East L.A. Maybe we should call this the Near East instead. Or maybe, given that Griffith Park, Echo Park, Elysian Park and the Dodgers' ballpark all rub against one another, these people are Parksiders.

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From the ferns to the stars

In 1896, mining magnate Griffith J. Griffith donated 3,015 hilly acres that became L.A.'s biggest park. Later he put up the money for Griffith Observatory and the Greek Theatre. And in between donations, the hard-drinking Griffith shot his wife in the face (it wasn't fatal) and served two years in prison. But you're here to hike, not judge. Drive to the shady corner of Griffith Park known as Ferndell (or Fern Dell, depending on the source), park by the Trails Cafe, then head uphill. Yes, on foot. Follow the West Observatory Trail for about a mile up the scrubby hills until -- voila! -- three domes and a flawless lawn appear. That's Griffith Observatory, the city's hood ornament. It opens at 10 a.m. on weekends, noon on Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays. Browse the wonders of science within the 1935 building, which reopened in 2006 after a dramatic addition, mostly underground, that added dozens of exhibits and a cafe. Though shows in the Samuel Oschin Planetarium cost \$3-\$7 a person, most of the building is free. Outside again, savor one of the city's best views. Check out the bust of James Dean. (His 1955 movie "Rebel Without a Cause" includes scenes here.) Then head back down the hill to the Trails Cafe and its outdoor picnic tables, avocado sandwiches, vegan chili and homemade baked goods. Your kids -- the same kids who begged you to carry them down the hill -- will soon be hopping among the stumps and hay bales.

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Modernism, murder and "Snow White"

Silver Lake, a series of hills surrounding a scenic pair of reservoirs five miles northwest of downtown L.A., is where many of America's leading Modernist architects first made their marks from the 1930s to the '60s, working on sloping lots because they were cheaper. Walt Disney built his first studio and made "Snow White" at 2725 Hyperion Ave. (now occupied by a Gelson's supermarket). And in 1969, Charles Manson and followers drove here and killed Leno and Rosemary LaBianca in their home on Waverly Drive. For more on Disney and Manson, and much more on the architectural legacy of Richard Neutra, Rudolf Schindler and others, sign on for a two- to-three-hour tour from Laura Massino Smith, founder of Architecture Tours L.A. After a cup at Lamill Coffee Boutique (1636 Silver Lake Blvd.) and a stroll along the east or west reservoir footpaths, you meet Massino Smith, who wheels you through the hills in her minivan, spinning the stories behind the dozens of homes whose open floor plans, big windows and spare geometry were revolutionary in their time. In

the 2300 block of Silver Lake Boulevard, you go pedestrian to explore a colony of Neutra buildings (including his former home, which is open for tours 11 a.m.-3 p.m. most Saturdays). Atop Micheltorena Street, you glimpse the craziest tennis court ever, cantilevered from a hilltop as part of the Silvertop estate designed by John Lautner.

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Cops and Dodgers

Elysian Park, near downtown, is home to Dodger Stadium. But first, take Stadium Way or Echo Park Avenue to Academy Road. And pretty soon -- boom! -- you're at the Los Angeles Police Academy, where you're likely to hear shots from the nearby firing range. Show up between 6 a.m. and 2 p.m. on a weekday, and you can eat at the L.A. Police Academy Revolver & Athletic Club's cafe, where the 9mm burger is a bargain at \$5.95. Don't miss the old photos, nightsticks, handcuffs, brass knuckles and true-crime magazines on the walls. If you get a chance, thank a cop. The city's crime rate has been dropping since the early 1990s, and homicides happen about as often as they did in 1967, when the population was far smaller and Don Drysdale was pitching in the nearby stadium. Speaking of which: The Dodgers play 81 home games a year in Dodger Stadium (which dates to 1962), and if you can afford it (remember, you're paying the many divorce lawyers of owners Frank and Jamie McCourt), see one. But whether you do or not, consider a nightcap at the Short Stop on Sunset in Echo Park. For decades it was a cop bar, and it has a police patch collection by the pool table and a set of lockers where officers used to lock up their guns. The cops stopped coming a decade ago, and a younger, shaggier set has claimed the place. There's a jukebox, a batch of old Dodger pictures, a mirror ball hanging over the dance floor and a vintage photo booth. Mug shots, three bucks.

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To the top of Hollywood

Rise before dawn. Get to the Griffith Observatory parking lot (which is free but fills fast). Start at the Charlie Turner Trailhead, just north of the lot, and hike uphill. You're climbing Mt. Hollywood, whose peak (1,625 feet) offers staggering views. It's a three-mile round trip through scrub and chaparral, the pines of Berlin Forest and the shady oasis of Dante's View. From the mountaintop on a clear day, you can see the sun rise to the east and a sliver of Pacific to the west. Almost every day, you'll get an eyeful of the Los Angeles basin, the San Fernando Valley, the San Gabriel Mountains and the Hollywood sign on nearby Mt. Lee. (There's no hike to the Hollywood sign, and no access to it. Do this instead.) As the mist lifts from the ridges, listen to the birdsong -- and the Koreans. Dozens of Korean Americans like to begin their days with hikes here. So does City Councilman Tom LaBonge, who hollers greetings in their language and carries a football on his dawn hikes. He's been on this trail almost daily since 1978.

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The village of Los Feliz

Do happy people live in Los Feliz? Well, some. But the area got its name from Jose Vicente Feliz, an 18th century settler who received this real estate through a Spanish land grant. The Greek Theatre, home to many summer concerts, is a few blocks north of the commercial district on Vermont and Hillhurst avenues. Barnsdall Art Park (including Frank Lloyd Wright's Hollyhock House and a picnic-ready grassy knoll at 4800 Hollywood Blvd.) is a few blocks south. Once you snag a parking spot (or arrive at the Sunset-Vermont Metro stop), walk Vermont between Franklin and Prospect avenues. Begin with people watching and caffeination in a sidewalk seat at Figaro (1802 N. Vermont Ave.), which carefully cultivates its French flavor, or Fred 62 (1850 Vermont Ave.), a 24-hour retro-kitsch diner with lime-green walls. Both draw celebrities and often show up on TV, and among customers at either, you may encounter attitude. (For larger outdoor dining areas and more people-watching, there's also Alcove Cafe at 1929 Hillhurst Ave. and Home restaurant at 1760 Hillhurst Ave.) Browse Skylight Books (1818 N. Vermont Ave.), and check this week's T-shirts at Y-Que Trading Post (1770 N. Vermont Ave.), where today's news is tomorrow's silk-screen theme. (Recent inspirations: the fragile states of Egypt and Charlie Sheen.) If you stay on the block for dinner or drinks, the dull facade of Dresden Restaurant (1760 Vermont Ave.; since 1954) conceals a neighborhood treasure: the lounge act of Marty and Elayne, who have been playing and singing, Tuesdays through Saturdays, sometimes in matching caftans, for nearly 30 years.

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Cowboys, Indians, gorillas and elephants

The Los Angeles Zoo can't match San Diego's, but it's cheaper (\$14 an adult), and it's right in Griffith Park. A new Asian elephant area opened in December, but the best entertainment is still the Campo Gorilla Reserve, where your kids might get within inches of a gorilla's nose (with a thick viewing window in between). Their near-human attributes (we mean the gorillas) are endlessly absorbing. If you're more interested in human doings, the nearby Autry National Center's Museum of the American West may surprise you. It covers not only Indians, cowboys and other newcomers but also pop culture's portrayal of them. And it has a great gift shop full of books, art, music, blankets and belt buckles.

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Tchotchkes and tiki

You owe somebody a gift, right? Perhaps a grown-up pop-culture sort of gift, not necessarily in good taste? Step into the vast and semi-subversive retail wonderland known as Soap Plant / Wacko and the Luz de Jesus Gallery (all at 4633 Hollywood Blvd.) in Los Feliz. Tiki tchotchkes, concert posters, Beatles lunchboxes, Bozo kazooos, rubber frog handbags -- they're all here in a former post office building, along with many picture books not suitable for children. After shopping, get a bite at Umami Burger (4655 Hollywood Blvd.), a block to the northwest. And then it's time to catch a movie at the Vista Theatre (4473 Sunset Drive; Spanish on the outside, Egyptian on the inside). Or maybe you'd rather head for a drink at Tiki Ti, three blocks southeast at 4427 Sunset. No beer, no wine, no credit cards. What you get are tiki drinks, about 90 of them, served since 1961 in a tiny, 12-stool space that fills up quickly. Important note: Smoking is allowed inside because all bar employees are part of the Buhen family, which owns the place. The Ti is usually open Wednesday nights through Saturdays, but every three months, the Buhens take three or four weeks off. So check before showing up. And once you're inside, certain drink orders will cause everyone around you to start yelling "Ooga-Booga!" Act as though you expected it.

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Sunset Junction

Remember that weird spark Melrose Avenue had in the 1980s? Something like that is happening now at Sunset Junction, the stretch of Sunset Boulevard storefronts near Sanborn Avenue in Silver Lake. Slouching twentysomethings with high cheekbones and thrift-shop wardrobes. Budding authors and auteurs, poised over their MacBooks by the blue-and-white Nicaraguan tile work at Intelligentsia Coffee & Tea (3922 Sunset Blvd.) or listening to Jacques Brel under the parasols at the Casbah Cafe (3900 Sunset Blvd.). Now's your chance to inspect the 300 artisanal cheeses at the Cheese Store of Silverlake (3926-28 Sunset Blvd.), the 24 flavors of ice cream made from scratch at Pazzo Gelato (3827 Sunset Blvd.), the eight kinds of currywurst cooked at Berlin Currywurst (also at 3827 Sunset; opened in February). To soak it all up, find street parking (arrive early) or grab a spot in the little lot on Sanborn just west of Sunset. Lunch at Forage (3823 Sunset Blvd.). Listen for stray solos outside the Silver Lake Conservatory of Music (3920 Sunset Blvd., co-founded by Red Hot Chili Peppers bassist Flea). Browse the \$12 shadow puppets at ReForm School (3902 Sunset Blvd.), the comic books at Secret Headquarters (3817 Sunset Blvd.), the music at Vacation Vinyl (3815 Sunset Blvd.), the mixological marvels at Bar Keeper (3910 Sunset Blvd.). You get extra points for coming on a Saturday morning, when the Silver Lake Farmers' Market sets up near Sunset and Edgecliff Drive. You lose those points if you show up unaware on the summer weekend of the annual Sunset Junction Street Fair (Aug. 27 and 28 this year), when live bands and vendor stalls take over the streets and as many as 75,000 revelers (paying \$15-\$20 each) crowd in.

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The lake, the ladies, Taix and time itself

Echo Park, a blue-collar Latino neighborhood for decades, keeps getting trendier and more affluent. Start with a stroll around the Echo Park Lake -- if there's water in it. (City officials plan to drain it for repairs, perhaps as soon next month.) Cruise the aged ladies of Carroll Avenue -- that is, drive past the greatest concentration of well-tended Victorian homes in Los Angeles, seven blocks south of Sunset by way of Douglas Street. And walk Sunset between Echo Park Boulevard (where a striking Ricardo Mendoza mural wraps around a clinic building) and Taix (pronounced "tex"), the long-enduring French restaurant (1911 Sunset Blvd.) where Park Avenue comes to an end. You'll find stalwarts such as the Echo Park Pawn Shop (1702 Sunset Blvd.) and Pescado Mojado seafood (1701 Sunset Blvd.) jostled by newcomers such as the bookshop-cafe Stories (1716 Sunset Blvd.). The Echo and its downstairs sibling the Echoplex (1822 Sunset Blvd. and 1154 Glendale Blvd., respectively) are two of the city's leading venues for live rock music. El Prado (1805 Sunset Blvd.), once a dive bar, is now downright genteel (and plays mostly old vinyl on its sound system). On Thursday nights, the nonprofit Echo Park Film Center (1200 N. Alvarado St.) screens alternative and/or documentary films, asking only a \$5 donation. But before the day gets away, you need to hit the storefront labeled Echo Park Time Travel Mart (1714 Sunset Blvd.) In the rooms behind, tutors from 826LA (another nonprofit, part of a national network founded by author Dave Eggers) offer free academic help and writing workshops for students ages 6 to 18. Upfront, the outfit raises funds by selling supplies for time-travelers -- you know, like robot milk (\$19.99 a bottle) and centurion helmets (\$99.99 each). If you pretend this is normal, the clerk at the counter will too.

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By hoof and rail

Got kids? Proceed to the ponies near the southeast entrance of Griffith Park at Los Feliz Boulevard and Riverside Drive. There, Tuesdays through Sundays, your child (age 1 or older) can sit on a tethered pony (which will make eight circles for \$3) or ride two laps, untethered, on a larger oval track (also \$3). On weekends, the scaled-down Griffith Park & Southern Railroad carries children and parents for \$2.50 a ride, and more trains await in Travel Town and at L.A. Live Steamers at the north end of the park. The park's biggest playground, Shane's Inspiration, is a short drive from the ponies, and along the way there's a spot to rent bikes and a historic merry-go-round that's open weekends all year and every day in summer. Show up around noon on a Sunday, and you'll hear a strange throbbing in the air. That's the Griffith Park drum circle,

always free, frequently fascinating.

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If you go

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel250, also known as the Hollywood Silver Lake Hotel & Suites, 250 Silver Lake Blvd., Los Angeles 90004; (213) 639-1920, www.hotel250.com. Sixty-five rooms, free Wi-Fi, parking and continental breakfast and an unheated outdoor pool. Website says \$129-\$259, but discounts as low as \$110 (plus tax) are common on weekdays.

Los Feliz Lodge, 1501, 1503 and 1507 N. Hoover St., Los Angeles 90027, and 4357 Sunset Drive (same city and ZIP); (323) 660-4150, www.losfelizlodge

.com. This four-unit resident-

ial-rental operation is a series of Spanish-style courtyard bungalows that date to the 1920s. All have kitchens; two have washer-dryers. Walking distance to Los Feliz, Sunset Junction and the Sunset-Vermont Metro station. Rates \$150-\$180 a night.

El Tres Inn, 4439 W. Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles 90027; (323) 666-6351, www.eltresinn.com. The salon and rooms are often rented together for parties. Rates \$189-\$385, with occasional discounts.

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

Forage, 3823 W. Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles 90026; (323) 663-6885, www.forageLa.com. Lunch and dinner in a long, skinny, chic space. Dinner main dishes usually \$9-\$11; side dishes \$4 and up.

Trails Cafe, 2333 Fern Dell Drive, Los Angeles 90068; (323) 871-2102, www.thetrailslosfeliz

.com or www.facebook.com/trails

cafe. Breakfast and lunch, dishes up to \$6.75. No reservations, cash only.

Blair's Restaurant & Cafe, 2903 Rowena Blvd., Los Angeles 90039; (323) 660-1882, www.blairsrestaurant.com. Dinner only. Main dishes \$10-\$34.

Alcove Cafe & Bakery, 1929 Hillhurst Ave., Los Angeles 90027; (323) 644-0100, www.alcovecafe.com. Set in an old cottage. Open daily for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Dinner entrees \$9.95-\$17.95.

Intelligentsia Coffee & Tea, 3922 W. Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles 90029; (323) 663-6173, www.intelligentsiacoffee.com. Open daily. Coffee drinks \$2.50-\$7.

L.A. Police Academy Revolver & Athletic Club Cafe, 1880 Academy Road, Los Angeles 90012; (323) 221-5222, Ext. 3, www.lapraac.com. At the LAPD Academy site in Elysian Park. Burgers and coffee shop fare, with a top price of \$7.99. Open 6 a.m.-2 p.m. Mondays-Fridays.

Short Stop, 1455 W. Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90026; (213) 482-4942, www.myspace

.com/shortstopechopark. This Echo Park bar goes back to the '40s. Once a cop haven, it's now a dive-style hipster hang with dance floor, pool table, smoking patio and Pabst on sale for \$2 during happy hour. Open 5 p.m.-2 a.m. daily.

Tiki Ti, 4427 W. Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles 90027; (323) 669-9381, www.tiki-ti.com. Since 1961, this family operation has served up tropical drinks in a tiny space. Usually 6 p.m.-2 a.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays. Cash only, no beer or wine.

[Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO: LOS FELIZ: Movie theaters, above, Skylight Books and more are along Vermont Avenue.;

PHOTOGRAPHER:Wally Skalij Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: BEYOND THE CITY LIGHTS: Griffith Observatory, with downtown Los Angeles as its twinkling backdrop, is part of the city's largest park. The hiking is great, too.;

PHOTOGRAPHER:Wally Skalij Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: HEADS-UP ON FLAMINGOS: They aren't lawn ornaments -- they're the real deal. You can see them at the Los Angeles Zoo in Griffith Park. Nearby, you will find the Autry museum.;

PHOTOGRAPHER:Mariah Tauger Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: ALFRESCO AND ATMOSPHERE: Dine inside or outside at Alcove Cafe and Bakery (and/or have a drink at its Big Bar) on Hillhurst Avenue. It's set in an old cottage with a big shady patio in front.; PHOTOGRAPHER:Wally Skalij Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: GIDDYAP: Children can ride ponies, tethered or untethered, around an oval track in Griffith Park. There are wagon rides too.; PHOTOGRAPHER:Mariah Tauger Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: SUNSET JUNCTION: This part of Silver Lake has vintage stores and coffee shops and is the site of an annual music festival.; PHOTOGRAPHER:Jay L. Clendenin Los Angeles Times; GRAPHIC: MAP: Los Angeles; CREDIT:Los Angeles Times

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