



Orange County Westways

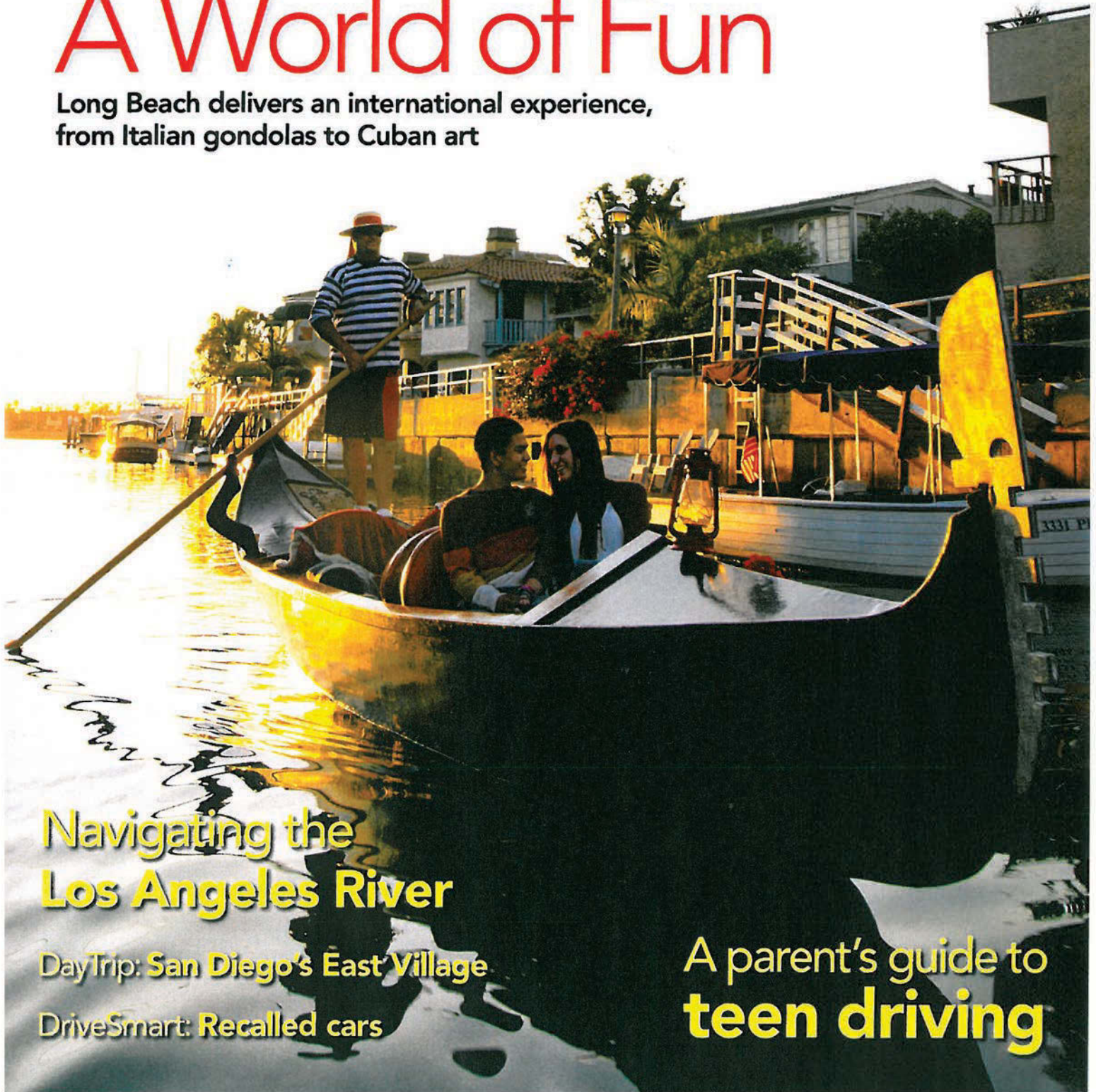
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QuickEscape:

A World of Fun

Long Beach delivers an international experience,
from Italian gondolas to Cuban art



**Navigating the
Los Angeles River**

DayTrip: San Diego's East Village

DriveSmart: Recalled cars

**A parent's guide to
teen driving**

Global Trek

Long Beach has a world of things to do

BY STARSHINE ROSHELL ■ PHOTOGRAPHS BY VANESSA STUMP

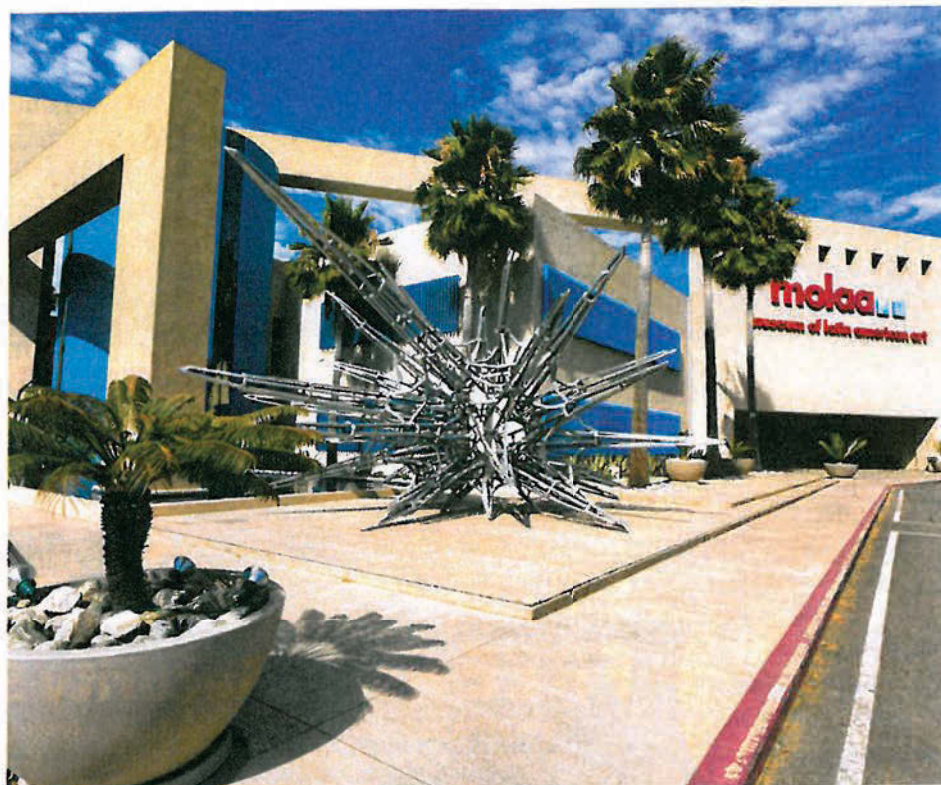
I'm a city snob. There, I said it. I like a town with a taste for culture, a touch of continentalism, and a tinge of exotic *je ne sais quoi* (also, it must tolerate my French clichés). So when a world-traveled friend told me he'd found bliss while living—get this—in Long Beach, I was dubious.

The navy town? At L.A. County's sleepy southern edge? But my pal Al coaxed me down for a look-see and—*zut alors! sacré bleu!*—I was shocked to find today's Long Beach is a savvy seaside playground with a cosmopolitan, even international, flair.

The place is postcard-pretty; just a mile from the city's industrial shipyards sprawls a pristine shoreline that doubles as Miami on TV shows like *CSI Miami* and *Dexter*. And the gleaming downtown has chic boutique hotels, retro shopping districts, and the sort of right-this-minute nightlife (heated patio floors? come on!) that makes you feel tragically unhip.

But the biggest surprise, to me, was the worldliness that pervades the city—the fifth largest in California, and one of the most diverse in the nation. From European eats to Latin American feats of expression, my weekend in Long Beach was a veritable, if whirlwind, trip around the globe—my own little *Eat, Pray, Love*.

Al and I began with mai tais and mojitos at the Hotel Maya's seaside hipster bar and hookah lounge. A mesmerizing design mash-up of fire pits,



(Clockwise from above) Things to do in Long Beach include visiting the Museum of Latin American Art and the Queen Mary or taking a sunset gondola ride.



Getting There

>>> **Downtown Long Beach** is located at the southern terminus of Interstate 710. L.A.'s Metro Blue Line links downtown Los Angeles to downtown Long Beach. For transit options within Long Beach, see lbtransit.com. For other things to do, see visitolongbeach.com.



A server ignites *kasseri* cheese at George's Greek Cafe, which has downtown and Second Street locations in Long Beach.

crystal chandeliers, and whitewashed barn wood, Maya perches on the harbor, overlooking the majestic RMS *Queen Mary*. The view is actually too good; we stared so long that we couldn't resist popping over and greeting the British dame in person.

"The *Queen's* seen better days," Al said of the old gal, the fastest ocean liner in the world when she first sailed across the pond in 1936. "But you can still get an idea of how things were." In fact, the best part of strolling the ship's dozen decks was imagining myself a passenger in her heyday, fox-trotting amid the art deco decor and lounging in the staterooms, where bathtub faucets provided both fresh and saltwater, and peach-tinted mirrors reflected a healthier complexion for guests green with seasickness.

The next day, we got our olé on at the Museum of Latin American Art, the only museum in the country dedicated to modern and contemporary art from Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean. The ultra-modern building houses cutting-edge work pulsing with social and political commentary. An exhibition of Cuban

artists—including Esterio Segura's toy airplanes crammed into a metal birdcage—practically shrieked with the sense of being trapped on an oppressive island.

Our freedom came in the form of a genuine gondola ride through a section of Long Beach called (what else?) Naples Island. I asked our striped shirt-wearing gondolier to sing for us, but he outright refused. "Trust me," he said, with a smile, "You'll wish I hadn't." We drifted peacefully through a charming system of canals, under bridges and behind homes that ranged from grand and ostentatious to cottagey and quaint.

But all that adventure made me hungry (confession: I stopped reading *Eat, Pray, Love* after the *Eat* part), so we ended Al's Weekend World Tour at George's Greek Cafe. Perpetually smiling owner George Loizides hugged us tightly—he'd never seen us before in his life—as we entered his temple of *tzatziki*. I ordered the flaming *saganaki*: battered and fried *kasseri* cheese soaked in brandy and lit afire at our table. Opa!

As the French say, *quelle surprise!* **W**

DO **Gondola Getaway** offers daily one-hour cruises from 11 A.M. to 11 P.M., including a Pizza Cruise for up to 10 people. \$85 for two people, \$20 each additional. (562) 433-9595; gondo.net. The **Museum of Latin American Art** is open 11 A.M.–5 P.M. Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday and until 9 P.M. on Thursday. Admission \$6–\$9. (562) 437-1689; molaa.com. The **Aquarium of the Pacific** is open daily 9 A.M.–6 P.M. Behind the Scenes Tours cost extra, but you'll learn how they perform surgery on fish. It's crazy-cool. Admission \$12.95–\$24.95. (562) 590-3100; aquariumofpacific.org.

STAY Most rooms have a view of the water at quirky **Hotel Maya**, where luxurious cabanas appear to float atop the swimming pool. Rates start at \$189; AAA discount available. (562) 435-7676; hotelmayalongbeach.com. In addition to offering regular ship tours, **The Queen Mary** operates as a floating hotel with original staterooms and suites. Rates start at \$99; AAA discount available. (877) 342-0742; queenmary.com.

EAT Get a hug, or at least some flaming cheese, at **George's Greek Cafe**, which has two Long Beach locations. (562) 437-1184; georgespreekcafe.com. If you can get in the door for breakfast at the popular **Starling Diner** in the Belmont Heights neighborhood, try the famous Broiled San Francisco Stuffed Toast. (562) 433-2041; starlingdiner.com.

A free Los Angeles Southern Area map is available at your local AAA branch. For free TourBook information and TripTik routings, visit a branch or go to AAA.com/travel.