

'Ask J-Lo if she has a window for dinner'

From a feng shui haircut to rooftop pool parties, nothing is too much trouble for LA's top tour guide. But can she fulfill John Arlidge's California dreams?

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Lying on a heated, vibrating red water bed on the roof deck of the Standard Hotel, the view of downtown Los Angeles is every bit as optimistic as Manhattan. Frank Gehry's titanium-sheathed Disney concert hall, the ceramic tiles of Los Angeles Central Library and the fluted columns of the California Gentleman's Club jostle for attention with the 50-storey Citicorp building and Arco Plaza. Helicopters swoop between the skyscrapers, the 'whup-whup-whup' of the rotor blades booming off the glass and steel.

It is 1.30am. Ja Rule and Jennifer Lopez are filling the dance floor behind me while bikini-clad Angeleno girls pool prow. Everyone is drinking prickly pear Margaritas, served by waitresses with a white S, for Standard, cut into the back of their red hot pants. It is the end of my first day in LA.

Since I woke up this morning I've had my hair feng shui'ed by a tastefully pierced yoga instructor; shopped and gawped at the cosmetic surgery queens of Rodeo Drive; overtaken Pop Idol's Mr Nasty, Simon Cowell; bought porn in the world's biggest sex supermarket; eaten the latest food fad, 'Reverse French'; and tried - and failed - to have tea with rap star Snoop Dogg. Now, downstairs, a silver Rolls-Royce is waiting to take me back to the Hollywood Hills. Twenty-four hours ago I was in London. How did I get here?

Blame Anne Block. It was all her idea. I've known Anne now for 48 hours, although it feels a lot longer. We met on the phone. I was in a minicab heading for Heathrow airport first thing yesterday morning. I had heard that she was leading a quiet revolution in tourism and I wanted to put her to the test.

America has given us the personal shopper, the personal trainer and the personal injury lawsuit, and now it wants to introduce us to the personal holidaymaker. With just 12 hours' notice, Anne promises to pick you up from LA airport and arrange your perfect day. All you have to do is to tell her what you want.

I gave her my list: I wanted to live the LA lifestyle, to enjoy the latest Californian health and fitness fads, eat the latest food, stay in the best modern hotels, cane my credit card in Beverly Hills, drive the latest 'car to be seen in' up Pacific Coast Highway 1, watch a porn movie being made, pop over for tea

at a rap star's house, and have dinner with Jennifer Lopez - OK? 'See you at 3pm,' Block replied. 'I'll be in a silver Cadillac.'

It's the curly red hair I see first, then the giant tortoiseshell glasses. Anne is sitting behind the wheel of her 1991 Cadillac Sedan De Ville. I'm very glad to see her, not just because I'm exhausted and want to head for the hotel to bed, but because I have just realised how much I am going to need her.

Nothing prepares you for your first sight of LA. As your plane leaves behind the desert and comes in to land, the city seems to stretch to the horizon in every direction. The scattershot freeways, buildings and malls just keep on going. It takes a few days to realise that what you are looking at is really several cities

in one - West Hollywood, Santa Monica, Beverly Hills, not to mention the Downtown, Malibu and 'Valley' districts. For now, however, I am lost. Very lost.

'Let's go to your hotel. You'll be tired and we've got an early start tomorrow,' Anne says. On the way to the Viceroy in Santa Monica, she tells me she started her company after she took her friend, actress Lily Tomlin, on a tour of Berlin. 'Lily liked it so much she said it would make a great business. Five years later, I'm still here, picking up complete strangers in my car every day.'



How was my LA day shaping up? 'Health, fitness, food, hotels and shopping are fine. I have my feelers out for tea with a rap star. A friend of mine knows Snoop Dogg's manager. Porno movies are out - if I did that, you've no idea how many weirdos would get in touch, but I can take you to the world's biggest sex supermarket. Jennifer Lopez is out of town but she does have a restaurant in Pasadena. We can go for dinner, if you want, but I think you'll enjoy what I've got lined up more. I'll see you at the hotel tomorrow at 7am.' Not bad for 12 hours' notice.

Jetlag means my LA day starts early, without Anne. Opening the curtains of my modern, colonial-style room - where kitsch chandeliers, china plates and spaniel lamp stands invent a folksy, British past - the beach stretches out in front of me. Beyond it, early morning surfers make for the breakers. Time for a run.

In health-obsessed LA the paths are already full of joggers, roller-bladers, cyclists, and power-walking moms in DKNY Lycra suits. By the time I reach the Venice canals, the body builders of muscle beach are already pumping iron in the outdoor gym. Over the road the 'Tuff Stuff' class is getting under way at Gold's

Gym, where Arnold Schwarzenegger sculpted his career. I'm no Mr Universe. In fact, looking at the pictures on the wall, I'm nowhere near even Miss Universe. I make my excuses and leave.

'Breakfast?' says Anne, her eyebrows popping up over the rims of her tortoiseshells in mock astonishment at my suggestion that we get something to eat. 'In LA nobody goes out to breakfast without a trip to the salon first.' We're turning off Avenue of the Stars and pulling into the Century Plaza Hotel. In the Mystique Spa downstairs Sarah, a yoga instructor with a platinum nose ring, and Jacqui, wait to give me a 'Twin Tigers'.

'A what?' 'Twin Tigers. That's a massage with two masseuses. Us.' After half an hour of rhythmic Swedish-type pummelling, I'm covered in sticky paste made from root vegetables, scalded in a Vichy shower and have a few iced boulders placed on my back. 'It's LA stone therapy,' Sarah explains. Call it what you like Sarah, I feel stoned.

'Wake up, there's hair next,' barks Anne. 'You've heard of feng shui homes, well, the latest thing is to feng shui your hair.' Sarah is back to help. 'I need to discover your "chi",' she says. 'Tell me, if you were a colour, what would it be?' 'Silver,' I reply. She frowns. 'In feng shui you are metal. You are a good communicator but you're also a bit of a control freak. I need to soften your hair which will soften the way you are. I want to introduce earth tones. How about bronze and copper highlights?' How about I tell her I've never wanted to look like Nicky Haslam and I'm not about to start now?

So we skip the highlights and finally head out to eat. There is only one place for breakfast on your first day in LA, the Polo Lounge at the giant pink Beverly Hills Hotel. Here, over a So-Cal (Southern California) omelette, you get a front-row seat at the Hollywood show. 'My agent's got a better table than your agent,' one actress smiles as she walks in. I nibble my omelette and feast on the snippets of overheard conversation from leather-skinned power-brokers who brandish unlit cigars and mobile phones as though they are weapons.

'He's financed two cable deals in the last two weeks and he wants to meet.' 'I've got \$100 million I need to park.' 'My last picture grossed \$25m and I need \$30m for cable distribution.' 'Have you ever killed anyone before?'

It is a short run from the Beverly Hills Hotel to Rodeo Drive, where shopping has become so fashionable that a designer 'Walk of Style', just like the Hollywood Walk of Fame, is being built. Look out for the bronze stars in the pavement, engraved with the names Giorgio, Calvin and Donatella. In LA you can go to the shops to buy things but in this 'if you're not in therapy, there's something wrong with you' town, it's more fun to watch other people. As I move from store to store, I pass women who have the kind of hair that destroys ceiling fans and young couples who have had so much cosmetic surgery they have no idea what their children will look like.

Anne and I gawp and tune in to Radio Rodeo. 'Your hair colour is divine. Can I have a swatch to show my stylist?' one Zeppelin-breasted temptress asks her friend. 'What are you worried about?' says another. 'The planet is so O-V-E-R.'

It's absolutely fatuous and I soon need some air but I can't just go for a walk. In a town that is bigger than most island nations, you don't walk anywhere, you drive. What's more, you can't make do with 'a' car, you need the car - the kind that gets you

the best dates and the best tables. Anne has a friend up the road in Santa Barbara called Tony who can help. Forget Ferrari, Maserati, Porsche and Lamborghini; in LA size matters and Tony cruises up in a car bigger than Rhode Island.

The car to drive very slowly and be seen in is the 19ft long \$400,000 new Rolls-Royce Phantom. As I head north to feel the breeze on Pacific Coast Highway 1 - I promise this really happened - I overtake Simon Cowell, fresh from shooting an episode of American Idol, the US version of Pop Idol. In his 'cheap' Mercedes convertible, he gazes longingly at my ride. Ah, feel the love!

Who would appreciate this car more even than Cowell, I wonder? A light blings on in my head. 'Can we go to Snoop Dogg's house now and have tea?' 'No way,' Anne says. 'I called my friend and she says the man has threats against his life every day. All his people are armed. It's way too dangerous to go up there. Welcome to America, John.' Silence. 'But,' Anne continues in her best bespoke tour guide voice, 'if you can't have a rap star, would a porn star do?' Perfect.

We swing back off Pacific Coast Highway 1 and cruise through Belair along Sunset Boulevard. Not even Larry Flynt arrived at the Hustler supermarket like this. We park the Rolls outside and walk in under a bright red sign that reads: 'Relax. It's only sex.' Inside, the First Amendment meets free-market capitalism. In America you can do, say and broadcast what you like and then arrange it in neat consumer-friendly categories: 'Ethnic', 'Fetish', 'Asian', 'Gay', 'Bi', 'Trans-sexual' and 'Gonzo' - and sell it at \$27.99 for a DVD. The nearby San Fernando Valley is the home of the porn industry so I decide to support local business.

It's getting late. Time to try LA's latest food fad, Reverse French. At AOC - Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée - you start with the cheese board and work back through the main courses to the hors d'oeuvres. A hunk of Vacherin Mont d'Or, followed by pork confit, with endive salad to finish may sound odd. And it is. We make our excuses and head downtown to the Standard, where the valet parks almost hugs me hello when he sees the car. The maitre d' follows suit. Everyone in the lobby watches as Anne and I walk in through the maze of pink lounge furniture, enjoying the syrupy, intoxicating rhythm of our instant status.

And that is how I came to be standing on the roof of the Standard, enjoying a prickly pear margarita and an unreality check. The security steakheads at the nightly roof party don't let just anyone in but, seeing the car, they figured Anne and I were anything but anyone. As we headed off that night for one last drink staring down at the lights of LA from the terrace of the Grafton Hotel on Sunset Boulevard, Anne asked: 'So, how was your LA day?'. 'Weird.' 'Perfect,' she smiled.

Factfile

Day tours with [Anne Block](#) (00 1 323 737 2200) cost £255.