



THE RIDE OF HER LIFE

Looking for a “gritty” experience, a Kiwi rides the Los Angeles buses and glimpses the flip side of Hollywood

WORDS SHARON STEPHENSON

IN LOS ANGELES, FAMOUSLY no-one walks unless there’s a red carpet involved. Nor, it would seem, do Angelenos ride the bus unless they’re poor, black or just plain mad.

We’re in Santa Monica trying to get to the J Paul Getty Museum, the marble-clad cultural acropolis where visitors can eyeball some of the world’s greatest artworks for free. It’s less than 12 kilometres from our hotel, but you’d think we’d asked the dude at the visitors’ centre for a guided tour of Baghdad when we say we want to use public transportation. “Tourists don’t generally ride the buses here,” he says diplomatically. “They just aren’t safe or comfortable.”

In a nation obsessed with travelling in air-conditioned steel cocoons, his reluctance is understandable. But, dammit, I want some urban grit with my holiday. I want to see if rapper Chris ‘Ludacris’ Bridges is right when, in a scene from the 2005 Oscar-winning movie *Crash*, his character memorably says: “The only reason they put big windows on the sides of buses is to humiliate the people of colour who are reduced to riding on them”.

But that’s not all: there’s also the fact I can’t be bothered negotiating congested, six-lane freeways from the ‘wrong’ side of the road. And the small matter of a driver’s licence left in the car which is, at this moment, parked in my Wellington garage. →



None of which is proving much chop with the visitors' centre staffer. Eventually, with a dramatic sigh, he produces a timetable. It seems straightforward: Catch a 720 bus from the corner of Wilshire Boulevard and 4th Street, cross Westwood Boulevard and wait for the 761, which will pretty much deliver us to the shuttle that snakes its way up the hill to the Getty.

The first leg runs smoothly and we congratulate ourselves on experiencing another side of this vast, low-rise metropolis. Because, love it or hate it, LA is part of everyone's world. From cheesy pop songs to endless television shows, we've all lingered at some time in the City of Angels' magical thrall.

Unsurprisingly, there's something of a disconnect between the achingly hip LA lifestyle onscreen, and the more prosaic reality. On our bus odyssey, we strike the overweight, the badly dressed, the dazed and bored, and those on the economic fringes.

I GLANCE AT THE BUS DRIVER. HE'S STUDIOUSLY IGNORED THE WHOLE EPISODE AND LOOKS AS THOUGH HE LOST THE PATIENCE AND WILL TO LIVE A LONG TIME AGO

Yet the atmosphere is anything but dour. Mainly thanks to the cool black guys down the back of the bus who holler to each other in 'gangsta'. They don't seem threatening, just loud. And then there's the bunch of uniformed Latino women who get on with what looks like full laundry bags. They're full of gossip and laughter and raise the decibel level still higher.

The only person not interacting with his fellow passengers is the obese teenager stuffing doughnuts into his mouth. I lose count after three but am mesmerised by the fact he seems to chew but not swallow.

In contrast to the London Underground, our fellow travellers do make eye contact, but not in a way that makes you clutch your bag tighter to your chest. We don't feel unsafe, but we're not keen to advertise the fact we're out-of-towners.

Mind you, we could have six heads for all the other passengers care; there's far more interesting stuff going on. Seems the black girl who just boarded has tripped walking down the aisle. She turns on the white guy who

owns the offending leg and, as they say here, cusses him out. He responds in kind, saying she should look where she's going, and before you know it, it's all on.

By now, all the passengers are riveted; why go to Disneyland when you can get this kind of thrill? The gangsta boys in particular are loving it and offer words of encouragement. There are some serious threats being made and you could cut the atmosphere with a knife. Or a gun because we are, after all, in the trigger-happy Land of the Free where it's every citizen's right to pop down to Wal-Mart and select their weapon of choice.

Seasoned travellers often talk about transcendental moments, when you look at yourself from above and wonder how you got there. I'm having one of those moments right now. Blame it on too much bad telly, but I can see this all going horribly wrong.

Fortunately the girl's cellphone goes off and she flips her aggressor the bird before sitting down to have a loud conversation about what she'll be wearing tonight. We're all relieved the moment has passed but collectively inhale when she mentions her chosen outfit will "show off more skin than usual". The skimpy lycra

one-piece she's currently wearing is barely able to contain her fleshy haunches.

I glance at the bus driver. He's studiously ignored the whole episode and looks as though he lost the patience and will to live a long time ago. He must know what I'm thinking because he shoots me an 'I don't get paid enough to put up with this crap' look in the mirror.

Indeed. I'd hate to think what he's making when it only costs a buck twenty five to ride most sectors of this city's extensive Metro Bus network. Yet I pay almost double that to travel a short distance every day up The Terrace in Wellington. And Stagecoach never lays on the kind of entertainment I've experienced today.

I've wanted to make the pilgrimage to the Getty ever since I saw a Discovery Channel doco about it – the last 124 acres of LA not desecrated by a hideous celebrity mansion. Yet, curiously, it all feels a bit anti-climatic. Sure, I'm still looking forward to seeing Van Gogh's *Irises* and Cézanne's wonderfully bizarre *Eternal Feminine*. But I wonder if it will top the thrill of riding an LA bus? **N**