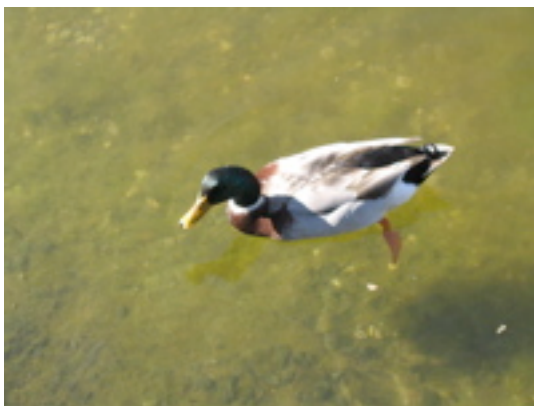


# Sam's US Experience, The Summer Edition<sup>1</sup>: July to August 2003

## Describing Venice

The people are a bunch of fruitcakes. I live on the border between Venice and Marina del Rey on the Venice side of Washington Boulevard. It is all palm trees up and down the street, but then most places around here are. Venice goes north from my place until it hits Ocean Park — the suburb south of Santa Monica — and east until you hit Mar Vista. My first introduction to living in Venice was obtaining car insurance: I was told that I could use one of three post codes, all of which would work. Funnily enough my car insurance dropped by \$50 per month for using the code that is nominally “closer” to the Marina.

So, how do I describe Venice? The most well known features of Venice are the drugs, the canals and the beach. Apparently Venice is a great place to go to for crack: there are certain sections of the suburb that are officially labeled as “rough”. Good for me that one of the games of Ultimate I play involves me riding my bike through said areas. Unless of course I drive: every so often you have to get into the swing of the LA drive scene. I call it my cultural experience and it has nothing to do with self-preservation. Speaking of Ultimate for those who care, the main pick-up game I play is in Venice at a park called Penmar. For those who do not know, pick-up involves coming along with a white or non-white shirt to place you on a team and playing with whoever is on the line. No gender matching, you stay on the field if you win, and first back to the line if you lose. This means, if there are not many people, you will get a very good run, and if there are lots of people you will get a very good run but only running for the line to get on the field.



The canals are a lovely feature of Venice, and are literally a stone's throw from my place, though you have to be a good throw and the neighbors seem to get irritated. They lead to a multitude of ducks wandering the street that can make driving, or even walking, very entertaining. A rich American, with way too much time on his hands, wanted to recreate the delights of the original Venice by introducing a canal system with gondolas. Unfortunately he was not a civil engineer and did not allow for the flow of sewage that kept backing up. Many of the original canals were subsequently filled in, but the ones that

remain do retain a certain beauty. Footbridges and walkways trace a path along the waters edge allowing unrivalled viewing pleasure, if peering on other people's property is what wobbles

---

<sup>1</sup> Now I've been here six months. I bet that snuck up on you. It bloody well did on me.

your jelly. I personally enjoyed the experience of watching The Doors movie with the opening scenes set in Venice, pausing the DVD and walking five minutes to the same spots. So I am a cheap night out...

Of course the main thing that people associate with Venice is Venice Beach, and with good reason. This is the place where it all does not happen, but you can have a great time watching others watching others whilst not achieving it. If you want a henna tattoo, a real tattoo, some art, little bundles of sage, more art, your name written in nearly illegible picture letters, your name written on a grain of rice<sup>2</sup>, jewelry, tarot readings, palm readings, eastern tarot readings, bongos, t-shirts<sup>3</sup>, cheap and nasty food, or sunglasses then this is the place to go. Then there are the specific places along Venice Beach: Muscle Beach being the most obvious. You too can watch guys prancing around after filling themselves with horse steroids, waxing or shaving off their body hair, and covering themselves with way too much fake tan. There are the basketball courts, beach volleyball courts, paddle tennis courts, handball courts, the spray-painting wall and the skate boarding area, not to mention the actual beach and the surfing.



My favorites are the roller disco and the drumming. The roller disco involves loud disco music outside with people on roller skates, not roller blades. All buff bodies, hot pants and extraversion. The drumming seems to be a collective that happens on Sunday of the order of 300-400 people: turn up with drums and whistles, start a beat and keep going until sundown, dancing and drumming. I am sure that this is good clean, wholesome fun without a single prohibited substance in sight. There is also freestylers (Frisbee throwing), guys playing soccer volleyball with a low net (a poor man's sepak takraw), guys doing bike tricks, people flying kites, people with metal detectors, hundreds of people walking and toileting dogs usually on ten meter long retractable leads<sup>4</sup>, hundreds of guys playing guitars, roller hockey, trick roller blading, land surfing, and basically any outrageous human activity that makes you do a double take.

Of course there is the standard hobby of people watching. Call me biased, but I am yet to work out why some guys do not wear shirts. My reaction to buff guys is that they are posers. To the others it is usually thankfulness that I have not eaten given the extra kilos creating a porch for the tool shed, or bewilderment of how they could think that that tattoo actually looks good and that they will not hate it in, say, five minutes. LA is the land of the bad tattoo. Very occasionally you see a guy without pretence who has a decent body. I mean very occasionally. Do not look to me to be adding to this shirtless population. Apart from the risk of cancer, and realizing that I would be in the lunch-loss category for many people, I have been heckled enough at Ultimate about my farmer's tan, so I will take the modest path. Who says people in LA are shallow? Anyway, apparently the only way you can display chest hair is to have an equal complement of back hair, and I am not ready to wax my chest.

---

<sup>2</sup> Now this I do not get: why have your name written on a grain of rice? Who are you going to show? Besides it would take ages to collect enough monogrammed grains for a decent risotto.

<sup>3</sup> My favorite: "If you can read this then the bitch fell off." Those Harley riders are such caring people.

<sup>4</sup> Do not sit on the grass at Venice Beach. The greenness of the grass has nothing to do with irrigation.

You could say the same for the women when it comes to allowing all to be seen. At some stage, when say you hit sixty, it is probably time to admit that hot pants are not suiting your figure anymore. I wish I were joking. On the younger girls, has anyone thought that everyone else has a naval ring and a back tattoo and that they are not an expression of individualism? Still they tend to grab my attention a little more than the guys. So sue me: this is California after all. Occasionally you get the absolute beauties that know they are beautiful, and they want everyone to notice how beautiful they are. I have news for you: bikini tops are supposed to keep your cleavage up, they are not supposed to be draped across the top because your breasts need no support. And to be honest, we really do not need to see a bathing suit so tight and high cut that your pudenda<sup>5</sup> are easily discernable. I must admit that I was impressed when riding home one day I ran into a photo shoot with a dozen models in various forms of bikinis. Not your average daily-commute.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of July down on the beach, I was treated to an outbreak of nationalism. Americans have so many songs celebrating their country, many of which have been covered, most notably by Jimmy Hendrix on acid. After a couple of beverages and some dinner, we headed from my place to the beach to watch the fireworks. Not only did we see a large display in Marina del Rey, with many more major displays happening up and down the coast, but we also got to dodge the local fireworks, when you could hear them coming over the sounds of Hendrix and others murdering another song. A couple of the locals that were with us mentioned that, although they were very proud of their country, there were times when they were somewhat embarrassed by their country men. Conveniently after the fireworks we could retire to my place for a couple more beverages and watch the traffic not move for a couple of hours. Everyone in LA drives<sup>6</sup>, or in this case, sits in their car with the motor running and making a close inspection of the car in front.

Another thing you will definitely notice around Venice Beach, certainly while riding along the bike path, is the huge number and variety of bikes. There are “normal” bikes like mountain bikes, hybrids, and the racers with riders in their superman get up. Then you have trikes, quads, hand pedallers, lie-down bikes, lean-back bikes, chopper style bikes, tandems, trikes with back seats, and bikes with a multitude of trailers including child seats, half another bike or a surfboard rack. My favorite bikes are the ones with a ridiculous amount of chrome: we are talking more than your average sixties car, plus between ten and thirty rear vision mirrors, and numerous bells and horns. They often also have extraneous additions such as curled and chromed metal in various shapes. What is quite popular among these additions is a steering wheel, and I am completely unsure whether it is functional. The beach bike is also impressive with extra wide wheels that you would expect on a dune buggy for riding on sand, and a guy riding it with calves that look ready to explode. Then there is the high-rise chopper: similar to a chopper but with extra frame components that mean your feet are actually above the top of the wheels, and the rider is leaning back sitting about six feet above the ground hoping, I assume, that they do not have to stop in a hurry. Finally there is the sideways bike. Some guy has developed and seems to be trying to market a bike where you sit on it sideways and pedal in a direction perpendicular to the wheels. I am yet to work out why, but try finding his website and that may explain it. Given

---

<sup>5</sup> I saw this word the other day and had to use it. There is a word for people who use such words: “prat”.

<sup>6</sup> The USA is the largest oil producer in the world — the Saudis could produce more if they wanted to — and the USA is still the world’s largest importer of oil. The other day a pipeline between Phoenix and Texas broke down, and hence they increased the amount they were pumping from LA to Phoenix by 15%. Local prices jumped by around 30 cents a gallon. You could hear the SUV drivers whining...

all this bike action, you would think they should be capable of stringing two street bike lanes together, but apparently not. This does not even begin to look at the number of different styles of skateboards: long boards, extra long boards, extra, extra long boards (5 foot is getting a little silly), hinged boards, motorized boards and so on.



Even considering all this it is the individuals you notice the most. One young lady I often see in the morning, roller skates down the bike path swinging her head like Stevie Wonder and singing loudly to the song she is hearing through her headphones. The first time I saw her I almost dropped my coffee and nearly rode over a rat (sorry Fifi!). There is a guy with a hat like a raccoon hat, but made with a skunk from what I can tell. It could be fake or real but I am not willing to get close enough to find out. Once you get to the end of the day or the weekends, then things really start to hot up. I will not give a

description of all the performers, but you can safely assume there are a lot of them, all doing the same thing day after day. One of my favorites is the roller-blading electric-guitar playing swami, who has his own postcards. White clothing, white turban, white guitar and more solos than you can shake a bundle of sage at. Another guy wears an almost g-string and basically rolls a metal ball about the size of a cricket ball up and down his arms. He is buff, if you like the black inverted triangle figure, but I cannot work out why he is doing it, but I think he thinks it is cool. As to others, there is the short, forties black guy who wears nothing except very tight lycra bike shorts<sup>7</sup> to, I assume, display his wares which at first, and last, glance appears to be a reasonable or at least reasonably presented package. He stands next the bike path all oiled and glistening and doing nothing except occasionally talking on his cell phone. You can always find him outside the house with the four-foot statue of Buddha. Another guy is there every day standing by a bunch of white boards written out with colored pens. Interesting topics like “the female orgasm myth”, “Jesus was gay”, “why there is a pyramid on the US\$1 bill”<sup>8</sup> and about thirty others. He calls it the largest free speech display in the world, but I think he is subtly trying to push the Bahai faith. Unfortunately the Hari Krishnas are a dieing breed: I have only seen them in Venice once. Finally on the religious theme I also think Lucifer is impressive: a short guy who has a long black pointy beard and a shaved head apart from two lots of hair, dyed red and fashioned into horns. I know his name is Lucifer because he has it tattooed across his stomach. He also has his arms completely tattooed, tattoos of flames coming up his calves, and a devils tail tattooed on his back. Classy.

My neighbors are entertaining, but they are fruitcakes.

## **A Perspective on the USA**

It falls on me to say that the following comments are my perspective, meaning they are biased as everyone else’s are, but mine at the moment is probably more so, simply because I have lived in this country for such a short time. For example, my perspective is that the east coast of the USA

---

<sup>7</sup> Red, white or blue just to be patriotic.

<sup>8</sup> Bloody masons. Rumor has it that every US President has been a mason.

is east of the 405 freeway. Few people would agree with me on this, given that the 405 is less than 10 miles from the beach. My perspective is that LA is a great place to live, and then my commute involves a 20-minute bike ride and not the two hours a day of travel. I thought I should put things in context, or at least give myself another chance to brag about my place.

It has to be said that the USA is remarkably different from Australia. A lot of the differences are obvious, and there are many similarities but those differences that are there are stupefying at times. The biggest thing on a day-to-day basis is simply language. Yes, we all speak English, of a form. I have several problems, though, in understanding conversations apart from the obvious retardations. Firstly my height means I am usually only getting part of the conversation as people speak below me, as is the case in Australia. So I should be used to that by now. Secondly, people speak very quickly and with an accent that is at times difficult to follow. Thirdly, they use phrases that I do not understand, make references to common things in the USA which I do not know, and also references to places peculiar to LA that I have not experienced. All in all, this can make a conversation very difficult to follow. So I simply fight back by using as many Australian phrases as I can remember, which when challenged is not many. "I'm as dry as a dead dingo's donger" only goes so far, and people might spot that we do not commonly use it in speech. "Fair suck of the sav" sounds fine until you have to explain it and you still receive blank expressions. Strangely other statements that I would have found completely normal are questioned: "I'm not fussed", and "at the end of the day" for example. When asking people around to my place for a roast "chook", the acceptance rate was remarkably low. I did meet a Glaswegian the other day who made me feel better, and who seemed delighted to not repeat everything he said. He should have thought twice about naming his dog Billy — "Noh, hus name us Bully" — considering every person with a dog must stop you, ask for the dog's name and let them sniff each other's bums. It has gotten so bad for him he often has to write notes.

The second thing is that death is a commonplace occurrence. In LA when you take into account the contiguous sprawl of dwellings and businesses, including Orange County (which is definitely not in LA!), we are considering a place with at least the population of Australia. Death has to be unique to be mentioned. A guy holding police at bay for hours and then shooting himself in the head — about half a kilometer from my place and hence completely stuffing up traffic as it was diverted around my house — was only mentioned as it was paired with another stand-off about 2 kilometers up the road in the other direction, where nobody got shot. Deaths on the roads are not mentioned, except in extreme circumstances. This probably hit a high point in July when an elderly gentleman (82) had problems with his car and hit the accelerator rather than the brake. This may not have been a problem had he not been pointing at the Santa Monica Farmer's Market. He drove through the crowded market at 2pm on a Wednesday at speeds of around 110 kilometers an hour. 40 people were injured and ten were killed. The first I knew about it was when I could hear the five helicopters circling the building. To put this in perspective, the Farmer's Market is about three kilometers from my workplace. The next I heard was an email subsequently requesting people stay in their offices while they did a head count of people who had been in that day<sup>9</sup>.

---

<sup>9</sup> In case you were wondering, no one checked whether I was dead. I think they are still wondering who is that tall cleaner walking around the place.

The third thing that gets to me is the number of homeless in the Santa Monica<sup>10</sup> and Venice area. Walking along the Promenade you can be asked about twenty times for change<sup>11</sup>, and it gets very wearing. There are simply thousands of homeless people in the area. Some of them are quite well set up, with their pattern of sleeping and begging, and shopping trolley of ... things, often cans and drink bottles for recycling. Others are obviously sick or in mental distress: often you will meet someone talking loudly or shouting at no one, usually swearing or saying things probably to get attention, I assume from my minimal psychological understanding. Many people, myself included, find this very disconcerting, averting eyes and walking passed quickly, which probably just exacerbates the situation. I use the excuse that it is not my country after all so I need not get involved, but that is pretty lame. Maybe in Australia we are simply better at problem hiding. What do you do to solve the issue? I have no idea. I am not going to belittle the situation by suggesting that a solution is simple, but it is easy to wonder as an outsider whether spending some money on better health care, and social security may help<sup>12</sup>.

Which leads me to the final item: The War On Terror. Before the attack on Iraq was announced there was a certain amount of dissent among the populace. After the war started all commentary was stopped and the sole focus was that you had to support the troops. Yes, I agree you should support the troops and Vietnam was a salutary lesson in this matter, but that does not mean you should not be pointing out that Dubbya<sup>13</sup> is an idiot. This is probably due to the modern day sound-bite media, rather than the intelligence level of your average American. "24-7" coverage results in the same thing being reported over and over again without any semblance of critical thought. This is a world-wide issue, and does not just afflict the USA.

It is easy to put the spot light on the US: being so much larger in terms of population, they have a greater number of morons to pick from. In pointing the finger at the US, be prepared to have one pointed back. As a friend also pointed out the other day the extremist groups within the US would probably not be as militant if they had some political representation. Unfortunately the US system is even more biased towards two parties than ours is, and the left-leaning democrats would probably be considered far right in Australia.



---

<sup>10</sup> Other disconcerting things including seeing two attractive women walking down the road passed my workplace, as I was returning from lunch, one dressed as Wonder Woman and the other as Super Girl.

<sup>11</sup> I give credit to the guy with the sign reading "need money for beer".

<sup>12</sup> I am biased in that I am stunned how much the US spends on their armed services. The US defense expenditure was around \$276.7 billion in 1999 (3.2% of GDP, 15% of the total government budget, and the country accounts for 34% of the world's arms production). There is an argument that defense spending is the US way of propping up the economy: no Senator will let arms production disappear from his state.

<sup>13</sup> My favorite quote: "The problem with the French is that they have no word for entrepreneur." Unfortunately false.

## Cows End

Cows End is quite a good coffee shop just down the road from me, and it is interesting from the cross-section of people that you see there. When I first arrived in LA, after a few weeks of not knowing anyone apart from Paul, the English guy from work, the weekends became fairly monotonous for me. So one fine Friday evening I decided to go and have a couple of pints of ale at the Library Ale House on Main Street, Santa Monica to see if I could strike up a conversation. The first goal was achieved easily given the selection of around twenty beers, but the second was a little more difficult. Maybe I should have had plastic surgery before arriving. Nonetheless, just before I left due to having to drive my hire car back to the hovel I was staying in before I moved, I got into a conversation with a guy who mentioned another bar that was good. So, having dropped off the car, I walked altogether too far to this new bar: The Father's Office. It has even more beers on offer. Once there I waited for a while before being served by a snooty serving-wench (she deserves no better), then sat watching the NCAA basketball finals whilst practicing my imitation of someone who has had plastic surgery and has an important job in "the business". Sometime passed during which I waited for the snooty one, had another couple of beers, tried striking up a conversation about basketball and managed to fail convincingly, possibly due to my average looks or my unintelligible accent. Given the number of women who have told me how much they like my accent regardless of what I say, I can only assume the former.

In walk two guys who look amazingly normal and spotted me looking forlorn. After the 30 minutes in which it took them to obtain drinks from Miss Snoot, we began talking and had what can only be called a pleasant and entertaining conversation. After a while, when I felt like I had to hold on the floor to stop myself from falling off, I took my leave and we exchanged email addresses. As an aside, being woken up the next day at 6am by drunken friends at a Saturday night party, realizing I was very hung-over and I had to play a two-day Ultimate tournament was not the best start to a weekend I have had.

Surprisingly, on the Wednesday following our victory in the tournament — no thanks to me — I got an email from Brad, one of the guys from the Father's Office, and completely unexpected given LA's reputation for saying "call me" and not meaning it. Apart from pleasing me by saying the Snooty One had got to him and no one will be able to find where he buried the body, we arranged another meeting at the Father's Office to see if the service had improved. It had not. In fact that horrible she-devil had an identical twin sister with just as abjectly poor an attitude. There were less people but the service was just as slow. The beer<sup>14</sup>, however, was palatable and I managed to find out a little bit more from Brad. Summary: tall, white, male, left-handed and suffers from Gilbert's Disease<sup>15</sup>, which is exactly the same as me. He also lives about two kilometers from where I was going to live in Venice. Brad also likes throwing Frisbees. All good. Where things diverge is that he is Canadian, married and has two kids: Gail, Kayleigh and Riley respectively. Brad has a memory that works, is working in LA as a comic writer and is, hence, funny. I can live with that. With Riley arriving only ten days before we met, it was a miracle we met at all.

---

<sup>14</sup> Aptly, we had a couple of pints of "Arrogant Bastard".

<sup>15</sup> Gilbert's disease is a benign, mildly symptomatic, non-haemolytic, unconjugated hyperbilirubinaemia. The main abnormality is failure of uptake of albumin-bound bilirubin into hepatocytes. Inheritance is autosomal dominant. Now you know. It is apparently prevalent in tall white guys, and jaundice can strike with the simple consumption of ale.

The upshot of the latest drinking venture was we arranged to have a beer occasionally and go for a throw of a disc. I think I have outdone myself. On a regular basis on a Saturday morning Brad and I head at about 10am for the beach: he has been up and working and looking after children, whereas I have usually got up, just. After chatting on the way to the beach, and some amount of time involving pitching a piece of plastic around, occasionally threatening a chromed bike, a roller blading mother pushing a pram and the odd sausage dog that has wrapped it's owner in a lead, we head to the Cows End. That is one of the longest preludes I have ever written.

Coffee seems to be almost a way of life in the USA. The surprising thing is how bad the coffee subsequently is, but I digress. Cows End has a steady stream of people coming through. The place is old and as far as I know not a chain, which possibly adds to its novelty. There is a regular clientele that sit and chat for hours, people becoming through with their dogs ("Oh hi, Bully's dad. How are you Bully?"), and those on a rush to get somewhere important. It is an amiable location, and a pleasant way to spend some time watching the Venice Beach crowd walk/run/skate/ride passed and others playing with their laptops. The locals do seem rather brash to my standards, but they do have a sense of community. Interestingly the establishment does take their social place rather seriously. One day on entering the store I noticed a commemorative poster to a gentleman who had been drinking coffee there for years. He had recently passed away, and they were preparing a wake of sorts. I mean of sorts, because I cannot quite imagine a wake fuelled by coffee at 8:30am.

I have managed to find a vanilla nut blend that is palatable. Brad and I get a couple of large coffees — not extra large, we have limits — and retire to chat, only emerging occasionally to get a refill. If we manage to get out in the afternoon we do head for a beer, but that is the exception rather than the rule. It is great to talk to someone with a healthy skepticism of Americans, and it is interesting to hear the trials and tribulations of raising kids and living on contracting work, speculation and dreams. Rather selfishly it is pleasant to be able to go home afterwards, realize it is not happening to me and go back to bed. We will one day get our Gibby's Support Group off the ground. We have the t-shirts and stickers planned and only have to work out how Brad can write it off as a tax deduction. There is bound to be an actor willing to support us somewhere, even if they are in the porn industry.

### **The William Rueben Foundation for Gilbert's Disease**

#### **"Flying in the face in reality"**

[Slow, tinkling, tear-jerking piano, many minor chords playing in background...]

Every year, thousands of tall, white men are diagnosed with Gilbert's Disease: a crippling ailment that can cut a man down in the prime of his drink.

Please help find a cure so that tall men all over the world can once again hold their liquor.

Support the William Rueben Foundation for Gilbert's Disease Sufferers.

## **Politics Californian Style**

California is not only a place of sunshine, smog and funky coffee, dude, but a land of political intrigue. If independent California would rank as the fifth largest economy whatever that means,



and has over 36 million legal residents, hence the effect of political machinations is possibly more important than those in Australia<sup>16</sup>. We currently have the equivalent of the Whitlam Dismissal underway.

Let us set up some background to this, as far as I can determine. The current Governor is a lovely guy named Gray Davis who everyone despises as being arrogant and unpleasant: imagine a politician like that! To quote Dave Barry he “has the warm personal charm of a sea urchin”. Who could not like a guy who can produce a quote like this: “My vision is to make the most diverse state on Earth, and we have people from every planet on the Earth in this state. We have the sons and daughters of every, of people from every planet, of every country on Earth.” His major claim to fame is managing California during a power crisis caused by previous administrations, and being in charge of a \$38 billion budget deficit due to excessive spending in the good years mainly on the back of tech stocks. Officially, according to their constitution, California is not allowed to carry any debt — I would like to see some of our politicians do that — and has recurrent expenditures that it cannot avoid, like the funding of the University of California system of campuses. Something like 80% of the budget goes to these recurrent expenditures, which leaves little room for maneuver. To ensure no debt the government issues bonds, and the credit agencies have just cut California’s rating again to somewhere just above the Solomon Islands, which making them less attractive. The democrats would not decrease programs and the republicans would not pass the budget without spending cuts... you get the idea.

Having survived part of the Dynasty of Jeff, I could not see what all the fuss was about. Then you get to the lovely laws of California. As with their federal system, it would seem that the governor like the president of this fair land gets to call most of the shots. In California they did not like the idea of an economic despot getting into power and reaping havoc. Hence from 1893 to 1975 various acts have modified the Californian Constitution with “Purity of Elections” and recall provisions to act as safeguards against people being underhand. This means that with the signatures of 12% of eligible voters a recall provision can be instantiated, where the governor has to answer to the people. A set time after the recall notice has gone out, voters must decide whether they want to recall the governor and if so who they would like in their place. Due mainly to the tight timeframe, candidates do not require any party endorsement beforehand. During the current situation, along comes a republican candidate with a large enough bank balance and the situation as above, and hence gets the signatures. So the governor could be recalled and someone put in his place for the first time in Californian history. There were the standard court challenges that resulted in rulings allowing the recall vote to go ahead.

The oddity of the recall has spawned a profusion of candidates. 135 candidates have filed the required 65 signatures and \$3,500 fee with county registrars around the state and then met the criteria, from a total of 247 applications. Those making the cut include former Hustler magazine publisher Larry Flynt (“Vote for a Smut-Peddler Who Cares”), porn film actress Mary Carey (she plans to revive the state's economy by taxing breast implants and her slogan is, “We've had Brown<sup>17</sup>, we've tried Gray. Now it is time for some blonde.”), and billboard pinup Angelyne (she tried to get into acting by her rich husband buying billboards and placing her picture on them, and now is a pop icon). Author and syndicated columnist Arianna Huffington, an independent/

---

<sup>16</sup> Well, they are at least as important. California has a seat on the United Nations, although it has never been taken up. During the Cold War, when the USSR was busily creating countries to get more votes, the Americans got, after some kicking and shouting, three extra seats for New York, Texas and California.

<sup>17</sup> Former Governor.

democrat, announced she was running, and her ex-husband, former republican Michael Huffington, who announced he was gay after their divorce, also briefly joined the race. Arianna has subsequently got into trouble: after saying there are too many people avoiding their responsibility in paying taxes and not supporting the government school system, it came out that she paid \$700 tax in the last three years from a net worth of several million and sends her darling children to private schools. Other candidates include an Edward Kennedy, a Michael Jackson and one-time child-acting star Gary Coleman who actually plans on voting for someone else. The democrats are in a quandary as whether to list any candidates or all back their man. Like most political parties they have dissolved into a rabble and listed the Lieutenant Governor.

Some of the failed candidates are still running in some form for no reason that I can discern, including Mathilda Spak, who is 100 years old, and forming a cabinet including her boyfriend who is 25 years younger than her. You go girl! She is running on a campaign for looking after children, and nothing to do with her sponsorship by the 99 Cent Store who paid for her application fee. Unfortunately she did not manage to get the right number of signatures, even though she can count to one hundred. Lester Speight, a 6-foot-6-inch, 315-pound former pro football player and wrestler was also excluded, which is a shame. The quotes from him include "I'm gonna govern the (expletive) out of this state" and "If Gary Coleman gets in my way, I'm gonna punt him like a football — 65 yards with an eight-second hang time."

The biggest talking point, of course, is that Mister Steroid himself, Arnold Schwarzenegger, also joined the race as a republican, with a carefully managed announcement on the Tonight Show. You have to respect a man who, on having open heart surgery recently rewrote the medical books to avoid having a scar on his chest: yes, they split him down the side and had to brake all his ribs. Lucky he did not have to go through party selection. "The people are paying the taxes, the people are raising the families, but the politicians are not doing their job. ... Do your job for the people, and do it well; otherwise you are hasta la vista, baby." Oh. My. God. Makes Jessie Ventura look more plausible as governor of Minnesota. Oh, he is already. I wonder what the rest of the "Predator" cast members are doing? There is precedent with actors given that Reagan was governor of California so he is in with a chance. At least we are assured Arnie will not be President: you have to be born in the country to get that job, although there is the chance that could change.

Other great Arnie quotes include the following referring to his support of the on road fuel-guzzling tank of a car: "I'm very proud of the Hummer, because I created that industry. I went to the Hummer factory and said we should make this Hummer not only a military car but a civilian car. Now we have to find ways how to create alternative, you know, fuel for them." Arnie likes the environment as long as he can run over it. He apparently is also in favor of gay marriage as long it is between a man and a woman. I kid you not.

Arnie has attracted the support of democrats as well, including Warren Buffet —investor and second richest man in the US — as his investment and economic advisor for the campaign, along with George P. Shultz, the former secretary of State and secretary of the Treasury. Arnie is an odd mix, being a republican but also supporting pro-choice. His past is being dragged through the mud: apparently his father Gustav was a member of the Nazi party (naughty Arnold!), and he was friends with Kurt Waldheim the former UN Secretary General and former Austrian President who covered up his past in the SS.

Arnie did bump out Darrell Issa, who bankrolled the original recall effort to the tune of \$3 million. As they say in the local parlance: bummer dude. His biggest problem in trying to win is

that there are two other republican candidates. With something like a million more democrat voters in this land of hippies, a split vote is certainly not going to help him. The whole recall has required some counties have to invest in new election machinery, as they simply cannot cope with the number of candidates. The cost is currently at \$66 million and rising. Roll on October 7<sup>th</sup>. Hang on: another challenge so it could be put off until March. Nope, we are back to October. At least for the moment. You have got to love a good gubernatorial race.

## Places to See in LA

One of the great things about being in LA is that there are certainly a lot of things to see and do. The city itself is fairly charmless, as I have alluded to previously. All palm trees, roads, freeways, rundown buildings, no parks, no age, and little ambiance. Having said that there is the benefit of a very large city. Take the following examples as cases in point.

### The Turtle Racing

Another one of the joys of living in Venice is that one of the nearest local bars is a place called Brennan's. It's what you would expect from any American style bar with the exception that every Thursday night they have Turtle Racing. A brilliant idea started many years ago and continuing to this day. Outside in the pub grounds — well it hardly ever rains and the turtles would not mind anyway if it did — they have an arena that amounts to some green carpet with a small circle and a very large circle drawn on it. Over the small circle is placed a wide, squat Perspex cylinder with a handle. The turtles are placed within the cylinder and to start the race the cylinder is lifted off. The winner is the turtle that gets to the outside first. Officially you could bring your own turtle, but they have people on site who you can hire turtles from. Apparently they can tell the difference between them from the shell patterns, plus the guy who hires the most turtles has been doing it for twenty years. Your turtle then gets placed in a size category and raced against others of a similar size. The owner of the winning turtle gets to select something from a grab bag of items recently purchased from the 99 Cent Store: not a bad return for hiring a turtle for \$3 if you win. It is a pretty simple idea, though no one has trained the turtles to run in a straight line, nor to guarantee movement from them<sup>18</sup>. I think the fundamental component in all this is the alcohol consumed by the spectators.

Now there are a number of rules. Rule 1: you are not allowed to point at the turtles. You are big and they are small, and slow enough to not need intimidation. For the first three times anyone points at the turtles they will stop and restart the race. That person is fined — proceeds supposedly going to charity — \$5 for the first infraction, \$50 for the second and a shout at the bar for everyone present on the third. Rule 2: you are not allowed to cast a shadow on the "race course", with the same fines as above. Rule 3: anyone being an asshole pays a \$20 fine and gets ejected from the bar. Rule 4 which is stated after people have started placing turtles in the ring: ladies, of course, have to place the turtles into the pen without bending their knees, and of course no one would drop a turtle. Thus the ladies get to display their arse to full effect. A lovely sexist rule that had a liberal-thinking female friend totally pissed off. I must admit it seemed slightly amusing the first time, but by the third I was feeling slightly soiled myself. It did provide cheap thrills for the testosterone-loaded boys in attendance at Brennan's Bar.

---

<sup>18</sup> This reminds me of the Great Doping Scandal at the University of Tasmania Biological Society Annual Crab Races in 1990, when I were a boy. Similar sort of story: the crabs were numbered, auctioned and then raced. Some people were even drunk enough by this stage to bet on said crabs. To cut a long boring story that goes nowhere short, someone snuck their crab upstairs and injected it with adrenaline. Needless to say it won one race and then they had trouble finding it.

In any case it was an entertaining evening, and the only evening where Brennan's appears to have more than three people in it. For the record, my turtle came in second. Well, I did not win, and I am sure mine was next. It was the brown one walking around the inside of the finish line.

### **The Thai Elvis**

Goat, would you believe a good friend from Ultimate, took me to see must in Hollywood: a little Thai restaurant call Thai Palm. Along with all Californian eating establishments, it is rated as to its standards of hygiene and food preparation. It gets a "B". I have only ever seen one place get a "C"<sup>19</sup> and most strive for an "A". I think "D" means you close, but who knows. For me it is a long way to travel — along the 10 and then up through Korea Town before you get to Thai Town — especially for an average restaurant.

But this is no ordinary restaurant: dinner entertainment is provided by no other than Thai Elvis. Yes, a Thai gentleman who sings Elvis songs, quite well in fact. He also dresses up in Elvis-like suits, jewelry and has a great set of mutton-chops for an Asian gentleman. It is somewhat surreal, but a great place for a birthday if you like Elvis singing happy birthday. You can tell the restaurant because his car is parked outside (number plate "TELVIS"). And yes he actually does sing the songs. Although I was not sure initially, there was enough variation to be conclusive. The food, for the record, was not bad and quite cheap.

### **The Hollywood Bowl**

I went with another friend from Ultimate, Elissa, to the Hollywood Bowl. She had invited a whole bundle of people to go to the Bowl on a Tuesday night and see a rendition of Vivaldi's Four Seasons. A total of one person agreed to go along. So we went, taking a couple of bottles of wine and a picnic. I had to pick up Elissa in the Valley, going along the 90 to the 405, and then taking the 90 to the 405 to the 101 to a location where we took a \$3 shuttle to the Bowl. You get used to the freeways, and the seven other lanes of traffic screaming along. Waiting outside the Bowl a lady came up asking if anyone wanted tickets. We immediately thought she was scalping them, but then I do not think there is a big market in scalping classical concert tickets. In fact we were given \$100 worth of tickets, which was another pleasantry of the evening. Getting inside we set up our picnic, sat back to watch, and then stood up for the National Anthem. It was a struggle to stand given that I am not that patriotic to the USA, and I was up to my wrists in warm chicken fat, but I managed it anyway. You never know who has a handgun. We then sat back again and watched the performance.



What was interesting to me was how they set up the Bowl, and this is capitalism at work. The really cheap seats at the back (\$1), followed by the cheap seats (\$11), and are followed by the not so cheap seats to the middle back (\$15). Then closer to the stage you get the more expensive seats that we were in (\$30-50). In between those seats, towards the front were the super seats (~\$60), and the next level down contained the boxes. Closest to the stage were the super boxes. There

---

<sup>19</sup> Of course that would be the RAND café. I eat out a lot.

are probably other gradations in between but once you get over \$100 per seat, my care factor drops off.

After Vivaldi there was an intermission, where the lights came on and I was able to see where I had spread my food. The second session involved a more modern piece. Let us say that this definitely had more modern tones, and certainly a lot of Americana to it. I find it hard to describe such music. I was looking for a visual analogy that would be easier to convey. The music was not like a canvas painted completely black with a wanky title and description. Nor was it a Jackson Pollock as there was more consistency to it. Cubist work also does not describe it. The only thing I could think of was that it was like the “Dogs Playing Pool” picture, perhaps with Monet brushstrokes. A little harsh but there you go.

The evening was completed when bustling out of the Bowl, seeing all the people hawking the latest flashy thing — meaning a flashing light on a necklace — and seeing the typical buskers trying to make a living from the brisk traffic, which seems to involve a lot of activity and little talent. Apparently one guy is always there and has become the roller-blading swami of the Bowl. Unfortunately he only sits on a box, singing loudly behind his hand, while madly waving a hand puppet dog that is about twenty years old. The disconcerting thing is that it looks remarkably like a badly dubbed film, in that the dog’s movements bear no relationship to the song/ noise.

I would recommend the Bowl, but I would not recommend driving there. It will be closed soon for a complete remodeling to improve the sound quality. A reasonable idea that sounds like another LA landmark getting changed beyond recognition.

## **The Dodgers**

Everyone has to go to a LA Dodgers game, apparently. I managed to get to one on a sunny Sunday afternoon, after Goat and I managed to convince three others to join us. After what could only be considered a driving disaster — it is highly recommended to take the house number of the person you are trying to pick up when they live on a long street — we got to the game. Elissa drove down from the valley to meet me, we then picked up Goat and drove to pick up Eugene. Yes I know to the majority of you these names mean nothing, but this is for me and not you. We then drove to my place, picked up Eugene’s house number, drove back to Eugene’s and then drove to the valley — about two blocks from Elissa’s place which would have been a much more convenient place to meet — to pick up Emily from off Mulholland Drive, of “Mulholland Drive” fame. After negotiating blocked freeways, back streets, more freeways, and my uncanny ability to be in the wrong lane at every point in time, let’s just say that by the end of the day we had gotten very good at twenty questions<sup>20</sup>.

We got to the game at the end of the fourth innings. We bought tickets and then walked into the stadium. I got given kiddie trading cards on account that I looked lost and had a stupid accent. We had missed two of the three runs that were scored that day. At least I did not miss the other: Goat on the other hand was standing in a queue to get beer. The game is an interesting cultural experience. From what I can tell people do not go to the baseball for the actual game, as it was certainly fairly dull given LA’s form. Rather there are various things that happen that are traditional. Standing up for the national anthem, of course, people blowing up and hitting around beach balls, buying beer and Dodger Dogs, and eating peanuts and discarding the shells. Possibly the strangest thing was at about the end of the sixth innings, where everyone stood up

---

<sup>20</sup> My favorite would have to be Goat’s line of questioning: “Can you be bought at the supermarket?” “Yes.” “Are you on aisle eight?”

and sang "Take me out to the ball game". Traditional. Personally I prefer "you're going home in the back of a divi van", but that must be a cultural difference.

## Party City

One thing I will definitely say for people in LA is when they have a party they definitely put in the effort. I've been to a few and invariably they involve the production of food and drinks in copious quantities. The only pity is that someone has to drive home. Four parties in particular stand out. Bryan and Denise hosted two of them. Their first one was a Lobster Bake: Maine Lobster flown in from the east coast and still alive, courtesy of Bryan's parents. They are completely different from southern rock lobster. Okay, they are not. They are both close relatives of the cockroach that taste about the same, as each other ... not a cockroach. I am assuming. They were especially nice on a warm Sunday afternoon with corn, salads and the odd brew. Their second party was a beach party for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend, involving a BBQ on Dockweiler Beach just below the flight path for LAX. Denise and Bryan had organized a tent, horseshoe tossing, the bonfire wood, and the food and alcohol, including Chilly: oh mama! This was all very generous for people who were not employed at the time. They also managed to organize for me my first introduction to the Hollywood bimbo. A friend of theirs turned up with her friends, for half an hour as that was all the time she could spare. I was told at high volume that she was a model, actress and surfer. She was tall, tanned and blonde with a lovely stars and stripes bikini. Her friends were tall, tanned and dark, and short with dreadlocks, a nose stud and no vocal cords. I did not manage to catch the blonde's name. After five minutes of being blasted with how wonderful she was, and being asked about every Australian surfer she knew of, I found my mind wandering from the conversation. That was a big mistake: the worst thing you can do to one of this species is to ignore her. The next half an hour involved her trying to get my attention by employing more fanciful stories at higher volume. And touching my leg. Hang on...



Another party that rates highly with me is a Hawaiian shirt party. Entering the place involved traveling through the rain forest complete with jungle plants, mist and fine rain. You then had to walk passed the lava pit: well, hot tub with a red light in the bottom, and the ocean which was a couple of speaker playing wave sounds off the decking at the place. The bathroom was also made into the jungle with jungle noises and foliage. The crowning glory was of course the four-foot high volcano on the roof that periodically erupted. Entertainment for the evening was provided by a couple of guys in

our group, who were previously unknown to everyone except Goat. Ryan and his boyfriend PJ, who I knew, were talking quietly to each other when I approached them after leaving to grab a drink, and they confided that they could not work out whether these two other guys were an item or not. Apparently the "gaydar" was faulty. We then spent the next couple of hours speculating on their orientation based on their body language, in between picking out the ugliest man at the party. This frivolous exercise was interrupted by the party host when he walked up to me asking whether I knew either him or the other host. Oops. Admitting I knew neither of them and getting ready for an early exit, I was subsequently told I was judging the best-dressed competition. The duties of this onerous position I believe involved picking the person who the

crowd cheered for the loudest, while propping up one of my fellow judges. Let us just say she was a mess.

Finally I would be remiss if I did not mention Andy Bandit's Blackjack party. Quite frankly he needs a bigger flat: I think there were something like seventy people in a two-bedroom place. Andy likes blackjack. He has two tables of his own, one of which he ran all night. The story being he would play house rules, you could bet as much as you wanted and he also provided a large number of drinks, nibbles and also bankrolled the evening. People were betting of the order of up to \$200 a hand. What else can I say? It also had a Hawaiian theme with a prize for the most creative use of a coconut. And dancing girls. And a masseur.

My house warming / cooling is going to have a lot to live up to.



## Gymnastics

As previously mentioned, LA and the surrounds amounts to a large city. That means there is a lot going on, often more than you can comprehend. After visiting the Hollywood Bowl on the Tuesday and before the Sunday Dodgers yawn-fest, I had the pleasure on the Friday of going to The Arrowhead Pond in Anaheim. Amy, another friend from Ultimate, has the distinction of being heavily into gymnastics. So on the Friday afternoon we took the trek down the 405 to the home of Disney-things, for the World Gymnastics Championships Women's All Around Finals. Twenty-four women were competing on uneven bars, beam, vault and floor. This was the first time the Championships had been in the USA since 1991, which is quite a long time considering they happen every non-Olympic year<sup>21</sup>.

If you are ever thinking about going to Anaheim, don't. It is a barren featureless plain with a couple of large buildings being The Pond and the baseball stadium. Having taken two hours to get there we did not have time for dinner, so we purchased in-house. I was refused entry until I got rid of my evil bag and bottle of water. \$15 got me two beers, and for another \$7 I got pretzel and a "super" dog, which was final proof that people in the USA do have a sense of sarcasm.

The gymnastics, though, was fantastic! Four groups of six women would compete on each apparatus and then rotate. This meant you had to watch three or four events at once, with some finishing a lot faster than other, namely the vault immediately in front of us. The spectacle was added to by expert commentary from Amy, when she was not too busy watching to comment. Having competed at US National level herself I figure that qualifies as expert. Having also broken her neck on a vault she also qualifies for a score of 9.2 on the Sam Cringe Factor Scale. Watching the gymnastics at close quarters, I realized two things that I had not noted before. Firstly, how close their heads get to the floor on the final flip in a tumble routine, just to squeak out that extra turn. Secondly, how much you can wince whenever anyone does something on the beam. This is an unholy instrument of torture closely related to the rack, but they manage to throw themselves around with reckless abandon. How one of them could flip, twist and land

---

<sup>21</sup> A quote that Troy told me about: "Having the Americans host the Olympics is like inviting your mates around to watch you have a wank." I just felt like adding that.

from a standing start and ending facing the other way on an object that is about three inches wide is either magic or the work of Satan.

All the flips and stuff looked cool, but I was content to try folding myself up to fit in Amy's car for the journey home. For the record, the Russian gymnast won ahead of one of the US contestants, breaking the world record for the most consecutive gold medals: Three. Not bad really.