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By **FELICITY THISTLETHWAITE**

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Virgin Holidays: Los Angeles and San Diego as you've never seen them before

When you think of Los Angeles you think of the Hollywood hills, sunshine and the A-list elite - right?

But there's another side to the sprawling city that could endear you to the home of celebrity far quicker than the crowds around the Walk of Fame.

Stepping out onto the tarmac at LAX, escaping a dreary autumn in England, the sunshine was like a welcome old friend.

Flying Virgin Upper Class was a treat in itself, but the exploration trip truly began after navigating security, picking up our bags and jumping into a waiting SUV.

The palm-tree-lined streets of LA are exactly how they look in all the movies.

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Where to stay in LA?

Huge houses swept past as we drove toward our first stop in the City of Angels: Andaz West Hollywood.

The hotel is on Sunset Boulevard in West Hollywood and is overlooked by a plethora of eye-waveringly beautiful homes in the hills.

The staff, when pushed, point out Johnny Depp's palatial pad and the Chateau Marmont next door - a star-spotting hot spot.

Effortlessly cool, the hotel oozes the laid-back attitude LA embodies from the off.

A glass of wine as you check-in? Yes please.

The hotel manager, Henning Nopper, has been part of the Hyatt family since 1999 when he worked as a Banquet Manager at the Grand Hyatt in Seattle.

And it's clear his enthusiasm for the job isn't waning yet as he personally introduces the group to his award-winning team.

Nopper fills me in on the heritage of the hotel over a lobster roll or two. Famously, he tells me, room 1015 was where Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards chucked a TV out the window in 1972.



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What to do in LA?

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As an introduction to the Southern California city, Andaz West Hollywood was certainly no bad start.

There are a whopping 3.9 million residents of Los Angeles and 45m tourists visited the city in 2015.

How many do you think stuck to the traditional Hollywood stars bus tour, tourist-trap steak houses and over-priced shopping outlets?

Well that's all about to change with the introduction of Virgin Holidays' North America experiences package.

Experiences will allow those travelling to the USA and Canada to easily explore like never before.

Having tried it out, it would be almost criminal to go to LA now and not take part in Diane and Lisa Scalia's Melting Pot Food Tours.



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Virgin Holidays: Tamales for breakfast was the order of the day

East LA street food tour

Sisters Lisa and Diane Scalia came up with Melting Pot Food Tours back in 2008.

They, like many true Los Angelians, worried tourists coming to the city were missing out on the wonderfully rich culture and street life happening in East LA.

The tour starts in Boyle Heights: a neighborhood of almost 100,000 residents east of Downtown.

If you Google the area as an outsider, it might sound scary. Headlines slamming anti-gentrification and condemnation of “outsiders” are top of the search.

But behind the headlines are real people fighting to make a living. And what Lisa and Diane are trying to do is help those people help themselves by showing off the best of the best food, drink and culture in the area to tourists who wouldn't usually venture out this way.

We take the tour a matter of weeks before Día de Muertos - Day of the Dead - a huge celebration in Mexico.

The streets are lined with painted skulls, pictures of Frida Kahlo and incredibly intricate clothing to celebrate the Mexican ancestral holiday.

Submerged into the heart of the community as we take part in the walking-eating tour, it's clear the sisters are close friends with hundreds of members of the neighbourhood.

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Our first stop was for a breakfast tamale - a dough-based wrap steamed in a banana leaf - at Tamales Lilianas.

Then Lisa and Diane guided us through three floors of the stunning El Mercado de Los Angeles, a vast Mexican marketplace.

La Gloria Mexican Foods and Luceros Bakery were the final two stops in Boyle Heights on our whirlwind tour.



Virgin Holidays: This bakery is in the El Mercado de Los Angeles



Virgin Holidays: Lisa (right) is one of the sisters running Melting Pot Food Tours

Farmers market tour

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Armed with plenty of Frida Kahlo portraits and full of delicious food, the sisters decided it was time to take the group to LA's Original Farmers Market.

A landmark "unlike any other in southern California", they say.

Artisan butchers, bakers, LA's finest cheese counter and even an international spice merchant endorsed by Oprah Winfrey.

A corned beef sandwich with pickle was first on the menu from Magee's Kitchen. As history would have it, Blanche Magee thought farmers heading to the market to sell their goods might like to have lunch. So she filled a picnic hamper and started feeding them.

On the Farmers Market website it reads: "Today, folks still line up for outstanding roast or corned beef, tempting turkey and marvellous ham platters."

Then it was time for a beer at E.B's Beer and Wine bar - named after Market founder Earl Bell Gilmore.

Sadly, that's where Lisa and Diane left the tour after a long day of food tasting and a second-to-none guided tour of 'real' Los Angeles.



Virgin Holidays: The community was preparing for Day of the Dead, celebrated in November



Virgin Holidays: Los Angeles is a city easy to get lost in

Where to eat in LA?

Dinner at Rossoblu in Downton LA was like stepping over the threshold into the world of the Kardashians.

The LA you see in the movies was right here in the quiet, dark streets of Downtown Los Angeles - an 'up-and-coming' trendy area.

Fairy lights adorn the Instagram-ready garden outside while the inside is every bit as *Sex and the City* as you can imagine.

Raw wood and slate were paired with casual leather seat but the most exquisite glassware. It was clear the venue has tried to appeal to the luxury laid-back LA lifestyle.

The meal was incredible with a mixture of pastas, meats and impressive fish dishes like a stream to our table.

San Diego

The next day it was time to leave the hustle and bustle of A-list heavy LA behind and head for the quiet, arty shores of San Diego.

On the road trip down to the city we stopped off at Temecula

Valley. Think Napa but less showy and more welcoming.

Top tip: if you visit but one vineyard, it has to be Monte De Oro.

Ask to speak to Ken Zignorski, Managing Partner and General Manager of Monte De Oro and possibly the nicest man walking this planet.

After a stop-off at the vineyards, we headed down into San Diego - one of the most economically and culturally diverse cities in Southern California.

While it might be famous for its miles and miles of white-sand beaches, there is plenty more to see in this fine city.



Virgin Holidays: Temecula Valley was quiet, calm and perfect for a glass of wine



Virgin Holidays: This view, from Kona Kai Hotel in San Diego, was exquisite

Where to stay in San Diego?

The Kona Kai Resort and Spa is a small nugget of tranquility and calm in a city that has plenty of restaurants and bars to keep any tourist craving the busy life going.

Set on the Kona Kai Marina, every room has an impressive view of the hundreds of boats moored up.

Watching the sun set on the beach at one of the many gas-lit bonfires is a highlight of the resort.

What to do in San Diego?

A visit to San Diego wouldn't be complete without dropping in on Moniker General and Liberty Public Market.

Ranked one of the Top 20 food halls in the US, you simply have to stop off and enjoy the Mess Hall Bar, Grape Smuggler wine and tapas bar, and Pi Pizza Bar, dishing out Roman-style pie by the foot.

Still not full? Head down to La Jolla and drop into Galaxy Taco. Headed up by celebrity chef Trey Foshee, the restaurant pays homage to Mexican culture and cuisine.

Travellers looking for something a bit different, head down to You & Yours Distilling Co.

Positioned in downtown's East Village the distillery has a wonderful tasting bar where you can try out the vodka and gin.

You & Yours Distilling Co. also provides weekend tours, distiller-led educational programs and tastings.



Virgin Holidays: La Jolla's Galaxy Taco is unmissable - you must go on a trip to San Diego



Virgin Holidays: La Jolla is much-loved by the people of San Diego, especially this beach

How to book the tours?

Enjoy a seven night tour of West Coast USA with Virgin Holidays, including Virgin Atlantic flights from London Heathrow direct to Los Angeles.

You'll have four nights at the Andaz West Hollywood with room

only accommodation and then a further three nights at the Kona Kai Resort and Spa in San Diego, all for £1295 per person.

The price is based on two adults travelling and includes care hire and all applicable taxes and fuel surcharges which are subject to change. Virgin Holidays is a member of ABTA and is ATOL protected.

To book:, 0344 557 3859 or visit one of our individual retail stores or one of the 110 stores located in Debenhams and House of Fraser stores nationwide or visit www.virginholidays.com

Melting Pot food tours start from £45 per person. Wine tastings in Temecula start from £20 per person.

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