

Landing In Long Beach

The adventures of an East Coast guy in a West Coast town

OF COURSE, in an infinite universe, anything is possible, but the undead—wailing ghosts, binge-eating zombies—are a hard sell for me. I'll grant that the idea is interesting enough, and I love me a good scare, but upon hearing a bump in the night, it's a pretty big leap to go from a bird smacking into a window to the spirits of the dearly departed rendezvousing for a rub-'n'-tug.

That being said, walking along the M Deck hallway of the *Queen Mary* is like stumbling into *The Shining*. There's that scene where Danny is three-wheeling through the supposedly empty

The luxury liner turned luxury hotel RMS *Queen Mary*—its otherworldly Art Deco splendor is reputedly soaked with ghosts entirely independent of Stephen King—is the must-do crown jewel of Long Beach, California, a city that, until I visited, I took for merely one of the gazillion Los Angeles suburbs searching for their own identity. My sincerest apologies; "LB" is its own city. And if it is searching for anything (except for perhaps an exorcist), it is for the recognition that it isn't Los Angeles.

My home base was the Westin Long Beach Hotel, which turned out to be fortuitous all the way around: The beds are palatial, the heated pool is actually heated (I've had issues with pools in the past), the concierge is a godsend, and their bar makes some of the best margaritas around. (That's a point of pride: The margarita is to the west what the mint julep is to the South.) Moreover, staying here puts a lot of the city's best offerings within walkable reach, especially if you want to eat them—boy, did I have fun putting on weight in this town.

Breakfasts at the Omelette Inn, happy hour at SIP at the Renaissance, a dinner or two at Parkers' Lighthouse, and only a block over from the Westin is Pine Avenue and its

domino line of eateries offering some of the best cuisine SoCal can whip up. And in this town, with the food comes friendliness by the truckload. Before I sat down for some fantastic



Greek grub at George's Greek Café, out of nowhere came a grizzled Mediterranean who was all hugs and "opa!" As it turned out, it was George. This phenomenon isn't restricted to Pine Avenue; the same thing happened several miles away while I was going over the menu at McKenna's on the Bay. I was trying to figure out what a "sand dab" was when in swooped Mr. McKenna himself to explain it was a kind of fish. And delicious.

Next door to George's is Alegria Cocina Latina, where I had an in-depth conversation about flamenco dancing with two drop-dead

flamenco dancers (and it would have been so much better to have had that conversation *before* I got suckered into taking the stage for a little sangria-fueled heel-pounding). And then there was L'Opera, where I got my very own operatic serenade from a girl whose wisp of a frame belied a lungs-of-steel voice that plastered me to the far wall. It was like standing next to a club loudspeaker set to "puree" and feeling the sound waves blast out.

With all the wholesale gluttony going on, it came as a relief to at least one otherwise dedicated gym rat that Long Beach tends to spread its inedible charms over a wide area. With the *Queen Mary* and Aquarium of the Pacific (I hadn't been to one of those things since I was kid) on one side, the titanium white beaches on the other and a good chunk of California real estate in between, I forwent the perfectly serviceable bus network and rented a bike.

Long Beach is all but pancake flat, and pedaling between the sand and the city not only burned off a few calories, it put the outlying must-

sees within easy reach, particularly the MOLAA, the Museum of Latin American Art. Admittedly, up until that point the closest I had ever gotten to "Latin American art" was a really good tequila, and when it comes to museums, I like my artists very, very dead. Contemporary art spaces like the MOLAA that are dedicated to—gasp—the living are a stretch, but it turned out to be pretty fun. There was an interactive show that invited attendees to crawl in and around the exhibits and a sculpture garden bordering on the ethereal. And while I mean no slight to the artists, the MOLAA is one of the few museums I would visit again strictly for the café. (Great—more carbs).

Biking my way back to the city center, I was brought to a halt by a stretch of Fourth Street between Cherry and Junipero Avenues nicknamed Retro Row. If you are in any way into midcentury modern *Mad Men* décor, from the tasteful to the tacky, this is Nirvana. Exploding with stores chock-full of vintage pillbox hats, Dansk furniture and all things tiki, it was in a spot called



but were scandalous in their day and were among the first conspicuous, and mass-marketed, acknowledgements of same-sex desire.

And when it came to the acknowledgement of my same-sex desire, Long Beach made it easy. By that loaded phrase, I mean the gayborhood is compact and easy to find, running mostly along East Broadway between Alamitos and Cherry Avenues. (Club Ripples, considered LB's top club, is far beyond this section of the city. Get a cab.) This little strip of asphalt is a great example of how a community can maintain its own character when right next door is a mammoth gay mecca. What struck me, despite Long Beach's Gay Pride being the third largest in the U.S., was how laid-back, low-key and tight-knit the bars are. Every bar is a neighborhood bar and everybody knows your name, or at least the first one. Walking eastward from the Westin, things in Long Beach start with a queen: Mary (as opposed to the *Queen Mary*): Hamburger Mary's, the finest drag dining LB serves up (it's a club after the nighttime shows), and then run through every shade of the rainbow flag, which flies prominently. Falcon, the Brit, Paradise, Broadway Cocktails (bartender Carl is so cute; he's a blush-prone Wolverine), Mine Shaft (ask for Reeve—nice guy), and the Sweet Water Saloon (swinging doors included), are all within walking distance of each other. It practically screams "pub crawl!"

As for the ghosts of the *Queen Mary*? Not so scary. Not even the famous White Lady, but things that don't exist do tend to be on the shy side. And as for that cold, fingernails-dragging-across-my-scalp feeling I had in the liner's Grand Salon, it was the air-conditioning. Had to be the air-conditioning.

STAY

Westin Long Beach Hotel
westin.com/longbeach

EAT & DRINK

Alegria Cocina Latina
alegriacocinalatina.com

George's Greek Café
georgesgreekcafe.com

L'Opera
lopera.com

McKenna's on the Bay
mckennasonthebay.com

Omelette Inn
omeletteinn.com

Parkers' Lighthouse
parkerslighthouse.com

SIP at the Renaissance
siplongbeach.com

BE MARY

Broadway Cocktails
562-432-3646

Club Ripples
clubripples.com

Falcon
falconbar.com

Hamburger Mary's
hamburgermaryslb.com

Mine Shaft
562-436-2433

Paradise Piano Bar
paradisepianobar.com

Sweet Water Saloon
562-432-7044

The Brit
562-432-9742



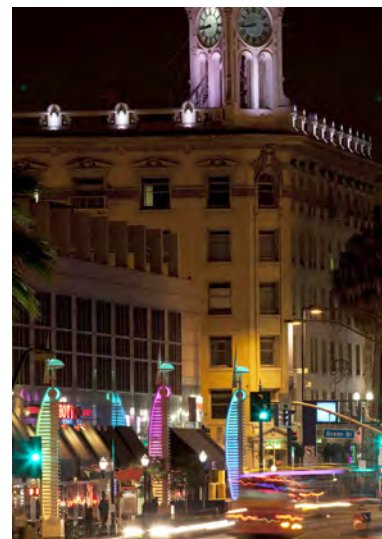
Overlook Hotel when—dun-dun-DUNN—the pre-ax-murdered (and then post-ax-murdered) Grady girls show up and invite him to come and play with them...forever...and ever...and ever... It rocked.

SEASIDE STROLLING

(from top) The beautiful and "haunted" *Queen Mary*; the First National Bank's clock tower is listed on the National Register of Historic Places; strolling along Long Beach



ART COMES TO LIFE IN LONG BEACH
Whether its MOLAA (top) or the Aquarium of the Pacific (here) or the lively downtown vibe, LB delivers!



PHOTOS: LONG BEACH CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU

Inretrospect (get it?) that I found something that blew my mind. I didn't think any of it still existed: gay pulp fiction from the 1950s and '60s. These were over-the-top/under-the-table potboilers whose chapters were as close to a gay porn film as the age ever got—and whose cover art got even closer. With brow-raising titles like *Stud Force*, *Hot Pants Homo* and *Where Eagles Pair* (a particularly jaw-dropping (!) and mind-blowing (!) "exposé"—wink, wink—of the professional racing circuit—I'll never regard the term "pit crew" the same way again), they're stuffy by today's standards in that they have plots,