

ACING IT IN LA

The funky new Ace Hotel gives California native **Serena Renner** cause for second thoughts about Downtown Los Angeles.



Los Angeles is a place I used to avoid. Growing up a couple of hours north, to me LA meant bumper-to-bumper traffic after concerts and Dodgers games; mazes of interstate freeways; fake boobs and Botox; and some of the worst crime and poverty in the United States. Trips revolved around avoiding rush hour and speeding as fast as possible to San Diego. But earlier this year, something happened to make me think twice about my former foe. The Ace Hotel Downtown Los Angeles, the newest property to wear the Ace emblem of authentic awesomeness, opened in the old Broadway Theater district. I called my friend Hannah in San Diego to help me investigate this oxymoron.

Driving down Broadway, we spot the beaux-arts Orpheum Theater first. Its bubbly cursive letters evoke 20th-century nostalgia, while headline acts like Widespread Panic and Rufus Wainwright demonstrate its modern appeal. Less than a block further on, we make out an even more ornate exterior: a red, white and blue marquee crowned by a lacy onion dome window. This is the United Artists Theatre, and next door, the new Ace Hotel.

As a handsome young Latino man with long hair welcomes us in, hip 30- and 40-somethings filter from the Stumptown coffee bar and LA Chapter restaurant into



From left: The reception area is part gothic theatre, part warehouse record store; The hotel is next door to the United Artists Theater; Have a drink overlooking LA at the roof-top pool area; A spacious medium room.

the high-ceilinged, chessboard-tiled lobby that's part gothic theatre, part warehouse record store meets Hogwarts library.

"Do you have a room preference?" the woman behind reception – who's wearing a white button-up and skinny silver tie – asks. "Umm, the best available," I reply. She nods with a knowing smile and hands me the keys for a room on the 11th floor.

The hot Latino grabs our bags and leads us into the elevator. We learn he's originally from LA and has just moved back after spending several years out of state. "This is a brand new city," he says. Ushering us down the hallway, he shares details about the hotel's former life: as part of the United Artists film studios headed by Charlie Chaplin; offices for Texaco; and then a Christian congregation where TV Evangelist Gene Scott gave sermons in the adjoining cathedral-like theatre, also restored by the Ace.

We enter our room and are stunned by the giant backward 'Jesus Saves' sign greeting us from behind our chicken wire-lined window. "Speaking of Jesus..." our escort laughs, leaving us with the view. The room is spacious and has the industrial feel of a modern apartment.

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Hannah and I flop onto the bed, covered by a vintage '70s-style wool blanket, and prop our feet on the windowsill. A paper globe light hangs from the concrete ceiling, and a wooden construction site dominates the foreground outside. Probably a new set of artist lofts, Hannah and I deduce, a tinge of jealousy in our voices.

We take turns with the fragrant Rudy's Barbershop toiletries in the marble-steel-and-glass bathroom, which awkwardly has no door. It has started raining but this doesn't dampen our desire to check out the enticing city that's lighting up behind our glowing religious broadcast.

We catch a cab out the front, driven by a guy named Kurt who tells us he's from Armenia but lived around the world before settling in LA. We ask him about Más Malo, the place we have chosen for dinner. "Not good," he says, nearly translating the restaurant's Spanish name. "But Bottega Louie across the street is great."

We take Kurt's advice and narrowly snag a table at the airy, whitewashed Italian eatery, with its pâtisserie counter outlined by a rainbow of macarons. Two waiters, one working his first day on the job, take our order. "I'm excited to have

you here," the trainee says. Hannah and I are equally excited about the menu and eagerly list sautéed kale sprouts and portobello fries, a prosciutto pizza with burrata, and two glasses of red wine.

The place is packed with an eclectic mix of couples, and girlfriends like us catching up over drinks. The crowd is well-dressed but seems down-to-earth, not the shallow Holly wood scene I imagined. We start on a delicious chocolate soufflé for dessert when an African American man wearing a yellow feather boa and a green light-up hat marches through the restaurant like it's Mardi Gras. "Oh, that's Frank," our waiter says. "He comes in every day and uses the bathroom, twice. We should change the name to Bottega Frankie's."

At that moment I realise something I'd always known about L.A. but hadn't fully appreciated: it's one of the most diverse cities in the US, and even gentrification schemes like the one surrounding us can't keep out characters like Frank. On our way home, we stop at Seven Grand, a popular whiskey bar opened by renowned nightlife developer Cedd Moses, then make our way back to the Ace. A few blocks away, we run into Kurt the cabbie again at a taco stand. He offers us a plate along with some unsolicited wisdom: "God gives you money once. If you don't manage it right, it's gone."

I think about these words as I sit in the Ace's Moroccan-inspired rooftop bar, adorned with bohemian pillows, polished wood-slab tables and fire pits. Young creative types are drinking barrel-aged Old Fashioned and Negroni cocktails served on draught; their faces brightened by the illuminated steeple of the United Artists Theater. These Americans may well be enjoying their first big break in the city, but the Ace Hotel is helping give Downtown LA a second chance. ✈

DETAILS

ACE HOTEL DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES
929 SOUTH BROADWAY, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA, USA
acehotel.com/losangeles

- **THE IT VERDICT** "This stunning restoration features all the unique design touches and homey amenities that make the Ace so well-loved. And it's at the heart of one of America's most exciting neighbourhood revival stories."
- **NOTES** Serena paid \$240 for a medium room.

ALL IT REVIEWS ARE CONDUCTED ANONYMOUSLY AND OUR WRITERS PAY THEIR OWN WAY – SO WE EXPERIENCE EXACTLY WHAT YOU WOULD.