

LOS ANGELES

ITS DOWNTOWN HEART IS BEATING AGAIN

Dressing up on a budget

By Patricia Borns
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

It was my first trip here and what did I do? Not the Getty, not Walt Disney Concert Hall, not Hollywood. I went shopping.

Sprawling over 43 miles of San Pedro Bay, the Port of Los Angeles has the highest shipping container throughput in the country, and women's apparel ranks among the top five goods landed there. It's

a material world, and I was a material girl with a half-empty suitcase to fill.

"LA is where many retail trends originate," says resident Christine Silvestri, whose publishing career (and wardrobe) took a turn for the exciting when she switched to fashion and founded Urban Shopping Adventures. When budget is no barrier, Silvestri takes shoppers to Melrose Place at the west end of Melrose Avenue, where the stores are in the Diane von Furstenberg and Fred Segal stratosphere. Segal in particular is a lightning rod for hot new designers.

Between Beverly and West 3d, Robertson Boulevard was an off-the-radar fashion mecca for celebrities that has become a paparazzi stakeout. Kitson is its re-

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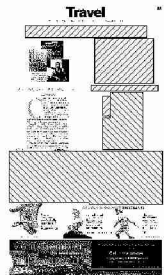
tail god, with Ralph Lauren, Chanel, Lisa Kline, and European stores like Odd Molly on two densely packed blocks. Shoppers lunch under the market umbrellas of The Ivy, the see-and-be-seen restaurant where sightings have ranged from Dustin Hoffman to Lindsay Lohan's car wreck.

But aspirational shoppers — you want the look but cannot pay \$400 for a halter dress — should head to LA's Fashion District. Bounded by 7th, Spring, and San Pedro streets and the Santa Monica Freeway, the area pulses with wholesale and retail merchants

covering 100 city blocks. At its heart are three wholesale towers, California Market Center, Cooper Design Space, and New Mart, whose showrooms open to the public on the last Friday of the month. (California Market Center has retail stores on its lobby level. Shooz, the district's best shoe retailer, and The Fashion Bookstore, with the world's widest collection of couture-related reading, are here.) Time it right, and you can buy samples of limited-run, beautifully made clothes by BCBG Max Azria or Rory Beca that sell at stores like

Fred Segal for hundreds of dollars more.

For the retail shopper whose frame of reference is Marshalls, nothing prepares you for the Fashion District except a cushiony pair of shoes. A well-organized website matches your interests to specific vendors — but on the ground, chaos rules. Like most initiates, I made my first sortie on Santee Alley, a jumble of 150 retail stores likened by some to a Tijuana market. The long blocks teem with bodies moving in ceaseless waves. Hawkers call from all directions. From cheap socks to True Reli-



gion jeans, merchandise competes for the eye. After a few hours, my hopes of finding fashion-forward copies good enough to pass for high-end had waned to. What was I thinking?

Joann Smyth, an LA jewelry designer who mastered the city's equally mystifying Jewelry District, sympathized. "It would take me a month to figure out the Fashion District."

But what if you only have days? Silvestri to the rescue. The fashion insider not only tours the district, she lives a few blocks from it on Spring Street, the epicenter of LA's downtown revival. The former Wall Street of the West is rich in 1920s bank buildings being redeveloped as luxury lofts that sell as fast as the paint dries. Sixty thousand people live downtown.

Handing me a bag of bottled water, chocolate, and a \$20 coupon for Border Grill, Silvestri led the way to Los Angeles Street and Marc Laurent. Many California boutiques buy from this constantly refreshed shop whose owner, Chantal, has her finger on the young pulse. Think racks of European-designed blouses, striped tanks, and Audrey Hepburn-styled shifts tagged at \$39 — but who knows what a little bargaining can do.

Corrida wholesales fine French linen shirts, blouses, and tunics. They sell to the public if you buy three or more. No problem. A few doors from Laurent, **Vain** is full of feminine, trendy clothes that bring out your inner girl. The designer copies are inspired by Paris but pull from all over, including LA's own.

Store manager David Almanza, a stylist for the film and TV industries, gives customers the benefit of his knowledge and eye. While I considered a Dolce & Gabbana copy that retails for over \$500 (Vain price \$189), Almanza had another customer layered up in no time, tempting her out of her comfort zone with some great belts: "This is an ex-

act copy of Gucci for \$35. I'll give it to you for \$29." Sold.

"How many things did I get? Five?" said a young woman taking her haul to the cashier. Her new Vain wardrobe cost about the same as a pair of Gucci jeans at Neiman Marcus.

For decking out on the cheap, **Fashion World** has good-looking synthetic leather bags that are designer copies, not counterfeits (animal print cross-body bag, \$10). In fashion lingo, copies are "inspired" by name designers, while counterfeits duplicate everything down to the logo. **Mythology Co.** imports real etched-leather purses from Peru (\$75) and jewelry crafted with glass beads and semiprecious stones (\$19.99 on sale). Co-owner Pamela Vilchez always has something unexpected at **Kukuly's**. Single, Peruvian feather earrings with coral and crystal charms (\$25) were selling out when I was there. Finish your look at **Mi Mundo Fashion Mart** with an under-\$20 statement necklace or \$4 strand of costume pearls.

Men, the district is thin on your apparel, but Silvestri has you covered. "I've taken quite a few male clients to **Roger Stuart Clothes**, and some leave with two or three suits, including shirts and ties," she said. Old-school values are the mark of this store's Italian designer, Piero Dimitri, winner of three Coty awards (fashion's former Oscar equivalent). The prices range from \$129 to \$999 for a canvassed, hand-sewn, classic or slim-fit style that would cost \$600 to \$2,000 retail.

over in your future, continue to Maple Avenue where the 60,000-square-foot Michael Levine warehouse lords over 200 fabric and notion vendors supplying the fashion and interior decorating trades.

I might have left LA without doing one culturally redeeming thing, if not for Leia Steingart, a recent college grad. Steingart told me that the city's finest cul-

tural assets sell great gifts. A \$7 cab ride from the Fashion District, these treasures are scattered on and off a somewhat antiseptic Grand Avenue.

MOCA, where Steingart minds the store, has one-of-a-kind artist-made books and wonderful old show catalogs. While you're there, grab a \$3 hand-squeezed peach-ginger lemonade at Lemonade LA. Under the rooftop pyramid of the **Los Angeles Public Library** are not only books, but also book-lovers' T-shirts ("The Naked Lunch," "Catcher in the Rye") and great notebooks for scribblers.

Finally, I followed Steingart's tips to the **Japanese American National Museum**. The gift store celebrates the Japanese-American experience with an incomparable book selection and exquisite merchandise, whether a jacket of vintage kimono silk costing upward of \$300, or \$10 tins of custom-blended tea named for the five immigrant generations. Its Chado Tea Room serves these blends.

As I shopped my way here, the neighborhoods changed in colorful procession, with a common theme. Outside the museum, brewpubs and frozen yogurt shops join the first- and second-generation businesses. In the Fashion District, loft spaces are bringing new faces to the sometimes-sketchy streets. Downtown has found its glue.

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If you go . . .

How to get there

A free airport shuttle bus runs to the Metro Green Line, connecting with the Blue Line into the city (\$1.50). DASH buses cover downtown (25 cents). Take 'E' bus for the Fashion District.

What to do

Urban Shopping Adventures
213-683-9715

www.urbanshoppingadventures.com

For three hours and \$36, Christine Silvestri shares Fashion District tips worth their weight in excess luggage fees.

Marc Laurent

934-A South Los Angeles St.
213-489-6606

Corrida

916 South Los Angeles St.

Vain

940 South Los Angeles St.

Fashion World

932 South Los Angeles St.
213-489-5861

Mi Mundo Fashion Mart

926 South Los Angeles St.,
Suite 1
213-622-7072

Mythology Co.

926 South Los Angeles St.,
Suite 2
213-623-6984

www.mythologyco.com

Kukuly's

915 Santee St., No. 11
213-489-0993

Roger Stuart Clothes

729 South Los Angeles St.
877-SUITS-4-U

www.rogerstuart.com

MOCA Store

250 South Grand Ave.
213-626-6222

mocastore.org

Los Angeles Public Library

630 West 5th St.
213-228-7000

www.lapl.org

Japanese American National Museum

369 East 1st St.
213-625-0414

www.janm.org

Where to eat

Daikokuya

327 East 1st St.
213-626-1680

www.daikoku-ten.com

The line is out the door for this noodle shop's tonkotsu ramen with a broth recipe so secret, it's made off the premises.

Lunch and dinner, \$8.50-\$12.95.

Angelique Café

840 South Spring St.
213-623-8698

www.angeliquebistro.com

A lucky find off the Fashion District: simple but true French fare with patio and rooftop dining. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner, \$8.95 to \$14.95.

Information

www.lafashiondistrict.org



LEAVE YOUR CREDIT CARD

Come see where Angelenos in the know go shopping, and for what, at www.boston.com/travel.





A mannequin (top) at Vain, necklace at Mi Mundo Fashion Mart, shoppers in Santee Alley.



PHOTOS, ABOVE AND LEFT, BY JONATHAN LEVITT FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE, RIGHT, BY PATRICIA BORNIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE



PHOTOS BY PATRICIA BORNS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Most visitors to the Fashion District start on Santee Alley, a jumble of 150 stores. Urban Shopping Adventures' Christine Silvestri, below, can guide you to places like Marc Laurent on South Los Angeles Street, a popular, constantly refreshed boutique.

City center

Find shopping, food, and drink in LA's revitalized downtown.

- Shopping trip
- Cocktail trip
- Visited on both trips

