

## Olympic Boulevard

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Around the world in... 8 miles. Each day, my commute takes me along the east-west corridor that traverses Los Angeles from the coast to downtown, I travel through a myriad of ethnic neighborhoods and feel as though I have circumnavigated the globe.

I begin my journey in Beverlywood, home to Middle Eastern Jews committed to keeping their Sabbath. Although synagogues abound within walking distance, the orthodox are proscribed from pushing strollers and even carrying wallets to shul since they are not permitted to perform "work" outside of their homes on Saturdays. But telephone and electric wires already encircling the neighborhood cleverly bring the outside "in", allowing the religious to push the pram to temple!

I enter Olympic Boulevard at Doheny which is overshadowed by colossal "Persian palaces". Small 2- and 3-bedroom bungalows have been remodeled by creative architects who have dismantled all but one wall of the old structures in an attempt to skirt zoning laws and property re-assessments. Quaint cottages have been replaced by ostentatious and often tasteless homes evocative of Saddam's gaudy residences.

The eight-lane asphalt band soon leaves Beverly Hills where everything truly is greener. All roads leading into the exclusive oasis seem to take the traveler from chaos to calm, as commercial disarray is replaced by manicured lawns, vibrant flowers and towering palms. In an overt and successful attempt to out-do the Joneses, the prevailing tranquility is shattered by the noise of roaring lawn-mowers, fuming hedge-trimmers and sputtering weed-eaters.

Fairfax crosses Olympic and takes the explorer into a district predominantly inhabited by the Russian Hassid who are readily recognizable in their heavy woolen coats and broad-brimmed fur shtreimel hats worn despite the brazen sunshine. The Farmer's Market has historically been the centerpiece of the neighborhood, housed on the south side of the CBS Studios. But the market is not a conventional assemblage of fruit and vegetable vendors; rather it is an eclectic jumble of Asian tea, French cheese, German sausage and Columbian coffee stands. Cousin Lilly practically lived at the market. Deathly afraid of cars, she relied upon an erratic system of busses as she ventured about our town of over 8 million residents. Strangely and coincidentally, whenever we happened to drive by 3<sup>rd</sup> and Fairfax, we were sure to see Lilly waiting patiently for the next bus!

The Fairfax District recently welcomed an ultra-modern shopping center into its midst. The Grove is home to such high-end retailers as Nordstrom, Abercrombie & Fitch, FAO Schwarz, and Victoria's Secret. Skeptics were sure that the venture would flop in an area which was traditionally home to bargain-shoppers more comfortable at Ross, Marshall's and Loehmann's. Yet, the outdoor mall with its 14 theater screens and choreographed water fountains is a resounding success.

Crossing Fairfax and then San Vicente, I pass Midway Hospital, inconsequential in comparison to the iconic institutions of Cedars Sinai and UCLA's Medical Center, but memorable to me. I last saw Bert there, just before he died. He was an avuncular gentleman of Viennese descent who loved to drop names and gossip. Thickly accented, he would tell of the famous soap opera star who was dating the British consul and the Saudi sheik who had an affair with a princess

from Liechtenstein. Never short of a story or a connection, I relied upon Bert for a never-ending supply of “connected” business referrals.

The road now meanders through an extension of the Larchmont neighborhood into Koreatown. Craftsman homes have been modified by immigrants determined to bring their Asian influences to bear. Roof corners are upturned pagoda-style and look particularly incongruent atop the bougainvillea-covered adobe walls. Street signs, billboards and storefronts are covered with Korean characters, only occasionally subtitled in English. My connection to the area, however, is not international. Koreatown is home to Phyllis, my mother’s “oldest” friend. Actually, age-sensitive Phyllis takes offense at that characterization, but Mother is proud to tell everyone that she has known Phyllis now for nearly six decades, since they shared ushering jobs at the local movie theater.

The high-rises of downtown soon beckon in the distance; the evening sun glistens off gracefully curvaceous steel and glass structures. I cross Western Avenue and then Normandie. We used to come this way when Grandpa still owned the apartment building on Irolo. Tenants came and went, reflecting the cultural ebb and flow as Italians were replaced by Hispanics and eventually Vietnamese. So, too, do the looming billboards change: Today, I see oversized advertisements for California’s “happy cows” grazing beside Antonio Banderas in “Once Upon a Time in Mexico”.

And then the stark, yet brightly colored deconstructionist architecture of Frank Gehry stands before me. Responsible for the flowing titanium curves of the Bilbao’s Guggenheim Museum and now the Walt Disney Music Center, Gehry epitomizes the diverse flavor and non-conformist traditions of Los Angeles. The Loyola Law School campus is his creation of unfinished interiors, exposed ducting and skylights that allow glimpses of radiant skies. My journey ends here with Byron, who greets me each night. A name reserved for English literati, this Byron incongruously comes from Guatemala and barely speaks the language of the lord, but greets me with a warm and welcoming smile as I enter the parking lot.