

Taking in the Beautiful Vista



Out of the Home and Into a Downtown Oasis

Published: Friday, April 24, 2009 4:27 PM PDT

DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES - I don't know about you, but the very thought of walking west on Second Street from the Civic Center and through the dark and dingy Second Street Tunnel has never been my idea of a good time. The only possible reason to head that way on foot is if you're a fan of the taco joint that magically pops up in the parking lot on the corner of Bixel Street several nights a week.

But suddenly, that lonely strip is worth every step, thanks to the spectacular Oz that's been constructed a half mile down the street: The Vista Hermosa Natural Park, right at the corner of First and Toluca streets.

Spring has sprung, and after being cooped up for months on a big project, I've got a wicked case of the fever. This 10.5-acre park has been the perfect place to find a cure, the urban oasis of my West Coast dreams. (Truth be told, I also dream about the beach, but no way am I going to wake up and fight the freeway every morning to enjoy it.)

Vista Hermosa's origins are rooted in long-standing controversy, but what matters now is that it can be counted among Downtown's greatest treasures. A day hasn't gone by since I discovered it that I haven't been there, sometimes twice a day, usually with one of my dear neighbors (thank you George and Bernie) and/or my hula-hoop in tow.

At Vista Hermosa, birds congregate and chirp gaily; the smell of sage wafts in the air as you climb the steps into the main area; the hills on the half-mile trail are at the perfect incline to get your blood rushing; the grassy center begs for a yoga class, or, better yet, a picnic. There's a playground area with a sweet little slide and a (faux) turtle that make even the cutest toddlers even more adorable. Next to that, a lovely, tranquil waterfall almost drowns out the surrounding street noise.

Every detail of the place is eco-conscious in design and execution, a self-contained watershed right smack in the midst of urban traffic and sprawl. From various vantage points you can salute that trifecta of Downtown architectural perfection: the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion and the Walt Disney Concert Hall. (If you could only see the fountains at the John Ferraro Building, it would be heaven.) Vista Hermosa deserves its name because it provides some of the best angles of Downtown. Take special note of the back-to-back benches perched high on a hill at the eastern edge of the park.

Perhaps more remarkable than any of the above is the fact that even the bathrooms in this gem of a park are improbably, spotlessly clean.

My excuse for the discovery of a park that opened last July is that I was away most of the second half of last year, but given the blank stares in response to my raves about it to various Downtown denizens, it still seems a well-kept secret. Aside from a few love-struck teenagers and the occasional jogger/walker/dog owner, the place is virtually empty in the mornings. In the afternoons, there's a bit more foot traffic languishing about. The soccer field at the southern edge of the park appears to be the most lively element, with games breaking out almost every afternoon and on weekends.

When I arrived on Bunker Hill five years ago from the East Coast, I felt the absence of just two things: The first, a mondo grocery store within walking distance, was mercifully addressed about two years ago (and enhanced by a proliferation of farmer's markets in Downtown proper). The other was the absence of a place to walk that didn't require my getting in the car, one where I could stroll uninterrupted by traffic or stoplights. With Vista Hermosa, now that problem has been solved, too.

I keep a running list in my head of fantasy party locations, places where if money were no object and I made the rules, I'd host a spontaneous bash for a thousand of my closest personal friends and anyone who happened by. The plaza outside the Oscar de la Hoya High School at the World Trade Center is one such spot. (It offers an awesome view of Disney Hall, and a great wide-open space for a crowd.) The park at the top of the Disney Hall steps is another. (If you haven't been there, especially now that the trees are in bloom, don't wait another minute for that, either.) Then there are the pathways surrounding the fountains of the John Ferraro Building; how much fun it would be to sip cocktails at dusk as the fountains burst into action. The little park adjacent to the Bunker Hill Steps at the side of the Citigroup Center has great views of the Central Library and would be another perfect place to gather.

Vista Hermosa upstages all of these fine places. Note to the owner of that enormous white house that gleams at the top of the park — we'll all be over for a barbecue, soon.

In other words, whatever you're doing right now, you should head on over immediately, grab a bench or a seat at one of the picnic tables, and finish reading this newspaper there. If you see a short, dark-haired woman hooping her way around the half-mile trail, muttering "I love Downtown Los Angeles," that'll be me. In fact, drop me a note. I'd be happy to walk over there with you and show you the place myself.

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