

# LOST







# ANGELES

BEYOND ALL THE GLAMOROUS HOLLYWOOD SITES, THERE'S ANOTHER LA TOURISTS DON'T OFTEN SEE. IT'S A PLACE WITH GRAND ART DECO BUILDINGS AND MID-CENTURY BUNGALOWS THAT HAVE HOUSED THE CITY'S DREAMERS, ARTISTS AND NEWCOMERS FOR DECADES. **JESSICA PRUPAS** MEETS THE COUPLE WHO WANT TO SHOW EVERYONE THIS "OTHER" LA - BEFORE IT DISAPPEARS

PHOTOGRAPHS: MATHEW SCOTT



# IN DOWNTOWN LA, THERE'S A BASEMENT THAT NOBODY SEES.

Ninety-nine percent of Angelinos won't have even heard of it. But it contains the last remnants of a 1920s-era speakeasy. It's a ruin now, but most of the original mural still decorates the crumbling walls, all colourful scenes of men and women on the razz. The bar hatch remains, as does the graffiti – hilariously lewd scribbles drunkenly drawn on every surface.

It's amazing, and I'm grateful to Richard Schave and Kim Cooper for taking me there. They run Esotouric, a company that takes visitors and locals to little-known historic sites you definitely won't find on a tourist map. Places that, despite being as crucial to Los Angeles' history as the Walk of Fame or the Hollywood sign, get passed over time and time again.

But Richard and Kim have a problem: a lot of the places on their tours are in danger of disappearing. In rapidly changing LA, the sites Kim and Richard love – and teach others to love as well – are constantly being threatened by a perfect storm of gentrification, political complacency and greed. "They've strangled creativity," says Richard. "The only people who are happy are the developers and they will never have enough money."

That's why Kim and Richard have, by necessity, become urban preservationists and activists. When they're not running tours, they're running digital



Clockwise from above: Century-old graffiti scribbled on the basement walls of the Hotel Barclay, which hosted a betting ring; a mural left over from a 1920s speakeasy in the basement of the Hotel Barclay; Kim and Richard in the lobby of the King Edward

awareness campaigns that focus on specific historic sites that have come under threat. Over the years, they've amassed a large community through Esotouric's blog, where Kim and Richard trace their preservationist crusades like detectives in a pulp noir novel. They've also built close relationships with local housing activists – like Sylvie Shain, a tenant of Hollywood's historic Villa Carlotta apartment block. When new owners planned to gut the building and turn it into a hotel, Kim and Richard helped launch a historic preservation and tenants' rights campaign. It was a success: hotel plans were scrapped and

Sylvie was allowed to move back into the building. "Kim and Richard have been tremendous contributors to the preservation of the city of LA," Sylvie tells me.

But the couple's coronation as figureheads for LA's historic preservation was, essentially, an accident. Kim and Richard met when they both attended the same small arts programme at a California university. According to Kim, it was not love at first sight. "We had a strong, almost mystical reaction of hating one another," she tells me.

They reconnected years later through a mutual friend and found they had plenty of complementary interests. Kim was obsessed with true crime and hoping to write a book in the genre; Richard, who was working towards a computer science degree, was taken by the nascent powers of Web 2.0 and blogging. He suggested that Kim start a blog where she'd post about one true-crime story per day. Often, the stories she'd write about would take place in Los Angeles and her readers became interested in visiting in real life the places she'd describe. "We started hearing from readers all saying the same thing: you're writing about the neighbourhoods. We're Angelinos. We've never been to these neighbourhoods. Will you give us a tour?" Kim remembers.

So Kim and Richard began offering tours of their city's little-visited corners and neglected historic sites. But the more they did each tour circuit, they noticed a troubling trend. "We had these routes we ▶









**THE GROUND FLOOR OF THE HOTEL BARCLAY HOSTED RAUCOUS GILDED AGE SHINDIGS, WHILE THE GUEST ROOMS WERE THE SITES OF GRISLY MURDERS**

and temporary labourers. Eventually, as poverty rose in the area and businesses moved out of Skid Row, the hotels were essentially abandoned, their owners allowing them to sit vacant for decades.

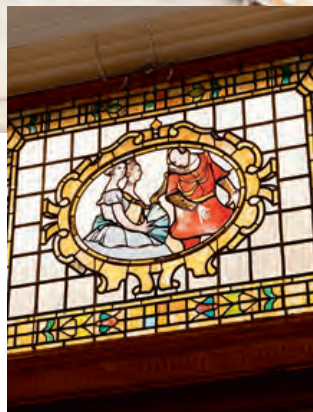
It's here that I first meet Kim and Richard. They're an unusual pair at first blush: he's dressed like an urban cowboy in a Stetson hat and cargos; she's sporting a black, witchy-chic dress and coat, too warm for the sunny LA day. They show me around the neighbourhood, wending through Skid Row's secret corners and private buildings like modern-day Hardy Boys. The speakeasy is in the basement of the Hotel Barclay, a grand Beaux-Arts building that stands six imposing storeys tall on the corner of Fourth and Main Street. Like most

hotels in the area, the Barclay has seen its fair share of intrigue. The ground floor – with its original stained glass windows and intricate plasterwork still intact – hosted raucous Gilded Age shindigs and distinguished, ladies-only parlour parties. Its guest ▶

were doing over and over, and we quickly saw that stuff was disappearing,” says Richard. “We needed to be a beacon and say, ‘Wait, they’re not allowed to cover that sign up, it’s a landmark.’”

Although, Kim tells me, Los Angeles has “one of the strongest historic preservation ordinances” in the country, they are often left unenforced by local government, and so the burden falls on the building’s owners or local activists to ensure LA’s historic buildings don’t fall into disrepair – or, worse, are illegally demolished.

Today, one of Kim and Richard’s biggest campaigns centres around the historic hotels of Skid Row, a 20-block district in downtown LA. Iconic residences like the Hotel Barclay, the King Edward and the Cecil Hotel (famously the subject of a Netflix true crime series) were built around the turn of the last century to house the city’s working travellers



From top: The original sign outside the Hotel Barclay; a stained glass window in the Cecil Hotel; Kim and Richard leading a tour around Hollywood





rooms, meanwhile, were the sites of grisly murders and theatrical suicides – like when, in 1920, a man named William Edward Collier fatally swallowed cyanide in front of a hotel employee after his wife asked him for a divorce.

Around the corner, the King Edward stuns: its elegant lobby gleams with fat faux marble columns, Grecian mosaic tile floors and a wraparound staircase whose red-carpeted steps lead up to a sprawling mezzanine. It was built in 1906 by master architect John Parkinson who, after finding early-career success in Seattle, lost his investments in the Panic of 1893 and became destitute. As the story frequently went, Parkinson decided to start over in a newly booming California. He settled in Los Angeles, where he rebuilt his architecture empire brick by brick. Looking at it now, you can see this narrative in the King Edward’s design – its unapologetic opulence feels like all of Parkinson’s ambitions made real.

Skid Row, and Los Angeles more generally, was once a magnet for strivers and people seeking second chances, and soon it will be again: with Kim and Richard’s help, the AIDS Healthcare Foundation – the world’s largest AIDS organisation – has purchased the King Edward, the Barclay and several neighbouring hotels with the intention of converting them into affordable housing for people in need. Once totally desolate, the Barclay is now filled with people; soon the King Edward will be, too. In a neighbourhood with one of the highest populations of unhoused people in the country, this will have a huge impact.

Kim and Richard couldn’t be more thrilled with Skid Row’s new trajectory. A cornerstone of their



From top: The King Edward is an Art Deco marvel; the lobby in the King Edward

**CITY OF ANGLES**  
**LA'S SECRET SITES**



**VEDANTA SOCIETY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA**

Hidden in Hollywood Dell, dig out this whitewashed temple and monastery for spiritual talks, yoga classes, and a bookshop where you can get to grips with this ancient Indian philosophy.



**BRADBURY BUILDING**

Legend has it that architect George Wyman consulted a Ouija board before taking on this commission, a Victorian behemoth built in 1893 that is now one of LA’s oldest commercial buildings.



**DUTCH CHOCOLATE SHOP**

Step past a nondescript lobby and you’ll find this perfectly preserved restaurant and sweet shop dating back to 1914. Shoppers would dine among tiled walls depicting scenes of Dutch life.



**AUTOMOBILE CLUB OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA**

The auto club’s historic headquarters is a stunning example of the Spanish Colonial Revival architecture style that was popular in the state in the 1920s.



**MONASTERY OF THE ANGELS**

Founded in 1924, this is a surprising oasis of calm located right below the Hollywood sign. Be sure to stop by the gift shop, where the nuns sell their famous pumpkin bread.

ADDITIONAL PHOTOS: VEDANTA SOCIETY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, GETTY IMAGES, HUNTER KERHART, SHUTTERSTOCK, WESTERN DOMINICAN PROVINCE





**THE UNIVERSALITY OF LA'S PROBLEMS IS WHAT RESONATES WITH PEOPLE ON THE TOURS**



work as preservationists is ensuring Los Angeles remains an accessible, affordable place so that the world's artists and dreamers can still find a home here. "The stories that we tell are about a city where all sorts of weird people were able to do whatever their hearts desired," says Kim. "Find each other and do awful things to each other – and wonderful things, and fall in love and, you know, change the world, come up with new ideas, make records that people still listen to."

The next day, I join one of Kim and Richard's public tours. This time we're in the nucleus of LA's dream factory: Hollywood. With a ragtag group of mostly Angelinos – including some housing activists that have worked with Kim and Richard over the years – I'm shown around the

From top: The Alto Nido apartment block features in films like *Sunset Boulevard*; Richard outside the famous Hollywood Tower

neighbourhood's famous Mid-Century bungalows and apartments, places that have long offered refuge for the city's creatives. The sun-dappled, Spanish-Colonial façade of the Chateau Alto Nido is instantly recognisable to film fans as the home of screenwriter Joe Gillis in *Sunset Boulevard*. Across the freeway, the Hollywood Tower apartment complex – which served as inspiration for Disney's Twilight Zone Tower of Terror rides – looks uncanny, like a spire-topped castle that was air-dropped from Normandy to the corner of Franklin and Vista Del Mar.

Next to the old Capitol Records Tower – where the eponymous record company was once headquartered – we see the Yucca Argyle Apartments, a typical 1950s complex that still contains some of Hollywood's last remaining rent-controlled units. Plans to build a large mixed-use tower in the area with market-rate apartments were tabled a few years ago, which, if realised, would mean that the Yucca Argyle would be demolished. We hear about the artists and activists who have made the building their home over the years, and about the long-time residents who are refusing to move to make way for the new development, despite being threatened with eviction.

It's a story that, coming from London, I'm all too familiar with. Richard tells me that the universality of LA's problems is what resonates with people on their tours. "We have had people from Shanghai on our bus that are like, you could literally give this bus tour in Shanghai, you'd just need to do the translation."

Before the tour ends, a resident of the Parva Sed Apta Apartments – another iconic Tudor-styled complex that was

made famous as the place where author Nathanael West wrote *Day of the Locust* – offers to bring us to the roof of the building. From there, we can see across east Hollywood and beyond, to the Hills and the Hollywood sign that lords over the city, as if to remind you where you are wherever you go.

I think about something Richard said earlier. "I want to fight for Los Angeles as a sane, liveable space because I knew Los Angeles when it used to be affordable and more equitable. It produced the world as we know it." Here, looking out on the city that's being forever immortalised, I get the feeling that he's right.

■ [esotouric.com](http://esotouric.com)  
 ✖ Fly to Los Angeles