

Leg 1 - Los Angeles

Day 2 – Tuesday 21st December 1999

Day 2: Today we went on a 'Grand Tour' of Los Angeles with VIP Tours, a company that picks you up from your hotel and at the end of the day drops you back at the door.

Our tour guide "Munday" was a young Negro man with a smile and sense of humour that is not the norm for most of the people we had met so far in LA. Most seem not to enjoy life or if they do, don't tell their face they are having a good time.

Heading away from LAX we headed to Fisherman's Village on the coast, a sort of rundown version of Fisherman's Wharf at Mooloolaba or the one being demolished at Southport. The main feature of the area is the marina with trailer sailor sized boats and power 'stink' boats.

Next a short drive to Venice Beach the place of weirdos and show ponies just like you see in the movies and on television shows who appear on the weekend, particularly Sunday we are told. Today was a mixture of relatively sane people selling junk in their stalls at a flea market.

From here we drove through a section of Venice with canals, small units and tiny streets as we headed toward Santa Monica up through the Hollywood area to look at some of the homes of the rich and famous. While many of these homes cost from \$1 million to \$65 million USD, the outside structures in the main area are old and probably hide the beauty of the interior fittings.

The drive through Rodeo Drive was fascinating seeing the label names on clothing, footwear, accessories and perfume stores not to mention the types of cars parked in the streets or passing on the road. A person could do a lot of damage to their credit card in this short stretch of shops. We passed the hotel where they filmed 'Pretty Women' and the surrounding shops back memories of the movie with Angela Roberts and Richard Gere.

Lunch was at 'Farmer's Market' which was established during World War II and sells anything from food to trinkets. What impressed me the most was the size and quality of the fruit such as apples and oranges etc and at prices so much lower than back in Australia?

'Hollywood' should be renamed 'Grubbywood', nothing like I expected. It's sleazy and so unlike the television images we view about the hotels, theatres, walk of fame, sunset strip and as for the people. No thanks.

Beverly Hills, Hollywood, Mann's Chinese Theatre and homes are, in my opinion, so over-rated however everyone has their own point of view, that's what makes the world go round. UCLA campus is huge, I would say we could group most Australian universities in one location and we would nearly equal their area. UCL has around 33,000 staff and costs \$30,000 a year to attend.

The freeway system has been designed to move as many cars in the shortest amount of time. The drivers are courteous, give way to pedestrians who obey the walk lights and where cars can turn left or right against the lights using caution. The only word against their freeways is the rough surface but then again, you can't expect everything.

The city centre of LA is modern and clean with many high-rise buildings but lacks architectural imagination. Not far away is Olvera Street where LA was born in 1781 and has Spanish origins. Here you can shop in street stalls filled with many different types of goods, a great place to visit and browse.

The journey through China Town was uninspiring; China Town in Fortitude Valley (Brisbane) has more character. At some stage I would like to walk through Melrose Avenue as we were told the quality of goods here is of a very high standard and the process reasonable.

All in all the 'grand Tour' is worth the ¾ of a day and the price per person or was it Mundy our guide that made our trip enjoyable. One of the main features of LA is the way certain areas of LA surrounding districts are either really clean, modern and well kept while others have rubbish in the streets, shabby homes or buildings, lack grass and trees and seem to lack community spirit. Not an inviting environment to live in I am sure.

The dry weather, long grass and ground cover were the elements for a brush fire which started today in La Canada up in the mountains behind LA. Fires fanned by high winds quickly took hold and there are around 500 fire fighters involved in putting them out. Planes and helicopters are also dropping water or fire retarding substances on the flames night and day.

Day 3 – Wednesday 22 December 1999

The main event for today is a visit to Renaissance Composites at Santa Monica Airport to have a talk to the designer of the "Berkut Kit Aircraft" with its famous canard design reaching speeds of up to 350 mph depending on which engine has been installed.

Before talking about the factory at 3025 Airport Avenue, our adventure really started trying to get the 'Big Blue Bus' to the airport. It is so hard trying to adjust to standing on the correct side of the road for the bus and grouchy bus drivers who are very rude when answering questions about the correct bus to catch. Thank goodness we had a hotel magazine "Where" which has several maps. Don't go outside your hotel without it unless you go everywhere by taxi as LA is designed for cars. Munday told us that every family has an average of 3 cars and they expect this number to increase to the stage that by 2005 the average speed should be around 10 mph.

Back at Santa Monica Airport and having to walk the perimeter (Robyn was not happy given it was hot and dry) because the airport is tower controlled, has a Museum of Flying, huge amount of office space in the industrial park, flying schools, corporate jets and air service workshops.

When we finally walked along Airport Avenue a stop for lunch at the Spitfire Grill restaurant was needed and apparently it showed as the staff quickly provided us with ice water and coffee before taking our orders. All food dishes are called after famous aeroplanes, was very tasty and plenty of it. It was good sitting in the outdoor area next to the airport watching the small aircraft coming and going including a full size mustang with its V12 engine, wow what a machine.

We spent a fair amount of time at Renaissance Composites and were able to walk through the factory to see how the fibre glass moulds for each section are treated and laminated. A very

interesting feature of the nose is the electrics used to raise and lower the nose wheel once you have climbed into the cockpit.

The comfort of the leather seats, acceptable leg room (although for the pedals were too far away but that can be adjusted), the instruments, electric trim controls on the single joy stick similar to a play station. Add in the digital panel and it really makes you feel like having the need for speed. Current versions have the two seater in tandem configuration however I saw the drawings and model for the 4 seater which is well underway. One of the reasons for its speed is the retractable wheels which fit neatly into the wings, however it was pointed out that the narrow wheels restrict its landings and takeoff to well maintained airports of 1000 feet or more, a bit of a problem at Caboolture.

With a price tag starting at \$60,000 USD for the full kit and around \$2,000 for freight to Australia puts this kit plane out of reach. Apart from the price and runway restrictions, it takes around 2,000 hours to build and the only Australian owner building one is currently having it built in America so it can go back to Australia with USA registration to overcome any problems with CASA.

Finally it was time to leave the airport and head to 'Century City' to do some window shopping before heading back to the hotel via Santa Monica and you guessed it, catch the "Big Blue Bus" again.