



Asian Fusion

L.A.'s Little Tokyo is where history meets "Hello Kitty."

Nestled in the heart of downtown Los Angeles, not far from the developing Grand Avenue area, **Little Tokyo** packs more art, design, culture and history into a few city blocks than Universal Studios could hope to capture on any film set or backstage tour.

The neighborhood has long been a center for Japanese-Americans in southern California. And an increasing number of artists, locals and savvy travelers have discovered its blockbuster mix of careful preservation and contemporary museums and shops. First-generation immigrants from Japan, known as *issei*, originally settled the spot more than a century ago; many worked for the Pacific Electric Railway. Though denied citizenship and barred from owning property, the *issei* created a community and found success in agriculture, fishing and retailing. The U.S. deportation of more than 100,000 Japanese-Americans to internment camps during WW II may have contributed to the postwar exodus of the *nisei*, or next generation, to the suburbs. But Little Tokyo remains a significant symbol of the Japanese-American experience, thanks in part to revitalization in the 1970s.

Today, Angelenos are drawn to this enclave for its authentic sushi and noodle spots, secluded gardens and temples, and kitschy-cool markets displaying everything from touristy samurai swords to Japanese electronics, hipster T-shirts and anime books. "Whenever I go to Little Tokyo," says longtime L.A. resident Joseph Milbury, "everything becomes more peaceful. Sound seems muted and the pace slows down. And the fresh *mochi* ice cream is awesome."

During spring's **Cherry Blossom Festival** (www.cherryblossomfestivalsocal.org), with its colorful parades, performances and pageants, and August's **Nisei Week** (www.niseiweek.org), Little Tokyo is particularly lively. But whether you're thirsting for a sake bomb or a spiritual sanctuary, the neighborhood offers a Japanese-flavored taste of Los Angeles year-round.—MEAGHAN MULHOLLAND

ARTISTIC TOUCH A one-of-a-kind memorial, **Go for Broke** (160 N. Central Ave.; www.goforbroke.org) honors the many *nisei* who fought courageously with the Allies in World War II. And tour the street named for **Ellison Onizuka**, the first Japanese-American astronaut, who perished on the space shuttle Challenger in 1986. For a more complete listing of Little Tokyo's many public artworks, check out the University of Southern California Libraries' guide to L.A. public art: www.publicartinla.com/Downtown/Little_Tokyo.

LIVING HISTORY The renovated **Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist Temple**, built in 1925, houses the **Japanese American National Museum** (369 E. 1st St.; 213/625-0414; www.janm.org), the only repository in the United States dedicated to the history and heritage of Americans of Japanese ancestry. JANM recently added an 85,000-square-foot pavilion by Gyo Obata, the architect who designed the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C.

BARBARA MCGREGOR

COOL FACTOR To the north, behind the JANM, the **Geffen Contemporary** (152 N. Central Ave.; 213/621-2766; www.moca.org) is an arm of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA). It displays experimental works in a converted warehouse space reimaged by renowned architect Frank Gehry in 1983.

ANIMATED FASHION Pop into **Popkiller Second** (343 E. 2nd St.; 213/625-1372; www.popkillersunset.com), one of a growing fleet of über-hip shops in the 'hood selling vintage and modern clothing and shoes, plus distinctive artist-made T-shirts.



URBAN ESCAPES The **Japanese American Community and Cultural Center** (244 S. San Pedro St.; 213/628-2725; www.jacc.org) hosts a variety of activities, including kabuki performances, in its 880-seat theater and houses art exhibitions in the Doizaki Gallery. Next, unwind at the award-winning **James Irvine Garden** on the grounds of the



JACC or at the **Garden in the Sky** on the third floor of the New Otani Hotel (120 S. Los Angeles St.; 213/629-1200; www.newotani.com/garden.htm). All provide oases of tranquility from the city landscape with ponds, waterfalls, rock formations and meandering paths.

PLAYTIME Called "the nation's pre-eminent Asian American theater organization" by *The New York Times*, **The East West Players** can be found at the David Henry Hwang Theater in the Union Center for the Arts (120 N. Judge John Aiso St.; 213/625-7000; www.eastwestplayers.org).

The theater company stages works written and performed by Asian-Americans.

NOODLE AROUND First Street serves up authentic and affordable ramen noodle shops such as **Suehiro Cafe** (337 E. 1st St.; 213/626-9132), which offers a variety of traditional dishes, including egg, beef and pork udon, for around five or six bucks.

Little Tokyo is located between 1st and 3rd streets, with Alameda and Central to the east and Los Angeles Street to the west. Between the Civic Center, Chinatown and the Wholesale District, the neighborhood is accessible from points throughout the city and on the DASH bus route.

GETTING THERE

Daily nonstop flights to Los Angeles are available on Alaska Airlines from Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, and from Washington Dulles International Airport on American Airlines, United Airlines and Virgin America (effective Oct. 24). JetBlue Airways also offers daily nonstop flights to Long Beach from Dulles.

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