

Understand Southern California

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Growing pains are par for the course on this Pacific coast of dreams, an ongoing social experiment and multicultural mosaic.

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From Native Californians and Spanish missions to water scandals, earthquakes and race riots, here's how SoCal evolved.

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Find out why people here work so hard – and play even harder.

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What would SoCal be without 'the Industry'? But it's not just all about Hollywood's A-list.

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Pop culture? Yes. But modern composers and cutting-edge contemporary arts too. Come see SoCal's creative side.

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It's a New World of architecture, from glamorous art deco to wildly unpredictable postmodern designs.

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Eat like an *Iron Chef* judge and tippie sun-kissed wines, then go find fresh seafood shacks and gourmet-food trucks.

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Meet some of SoCal's native wildlife and its most famous migratory visitors, from gray whales to monarch butterflies.

Southern California Today

Today's Southern California is the culmination of the efforts of generations of big dreamers. From Los Angeles, the fantasies spun by Hollywood have come to dominate the digital transmissions and cultural trends of the entire planet. Meanwhile, SoCal's iconic images of tanned surfers and golden sands endure, despite the all too real challenges that this densely populated, racially diverse and economically unequal area now faces.

Best in Print

The Tortilla Curtain (TC Boyle)

Mexican-American culture clash and chasing the Californian Dream.

My California: Journeys by Great Writers (Angel City Press) Insightful stories by talented chroniclers.

Where I Was From (Joan Didion)

California-born essayist shatters palm-fringed fantasies.

Hollywood Babylon (Kenneth Anger)
'Tell-all' about the scandalous lives and times of Hollywood's early stars.

Best on Film

Sunset Boulevard (1950)

Chinatown (1974)

Boyz n the Hood (1991)

LA Story (1991)

The Player (1992)

LA Confidential (1997)

Sideways (2004)

Best Music

California Dreaming (The Mamas and the Papas)

LA Woman (The Doors)

Straight Outta Compton (NWA)

Los Angeles (X)

California Love (2Pac)

California (Phantom Planet)

All I Wanna Do (Sheryl Crow)

California Soul (Fifth Dimension)

Surfin' USA (Beach Boys)

California Dreams vs Reality

Even if you've seen it in movies or on TV, Southern California still comes as a shock to the system. Venice skateboarders, Malibu millionaires, Deepak Chopra-quoting new age yogis and Rodeo Drive-pillaging trophy wives aren't on different channels; they all live together here, a place where at least the pretense of tolerance for other people's beliefs, be they conservative, liberal or just plain wacky, is the essential social glue.

Until recently, the most divisive political hot-potato topic was same-sex marriage, when a state constitutional amendment to ban it was struck down for good in 2013. Still controversial elsewhere in the USA, medical marijuana is old news for Californians, who approved a state proposition allowing its use back in 1996 – although the proliferation of marijuana clubs, Mexican cartel intervention and federal raids are raising eyebrows.

Growing Pains

SoCal is not a finished work. The nightmares faced by the region in the 1990s – race riots, the Northridge earthquake – already belong to a different age. Today's issues revolve around growth: in an area that has an economy bigger than Canada's and is the headquarters for a huge range of industries, from space probes to Disneyland to the movie and TV industry, how to manage an expanding economy and population without sacrificing the environment is the biggest problem.

With burgeoning humanity comes horrific traffic and skyrocketing costs of living and real estate. Although slowly improving, public transport is still woefully inadequate in most places, so everyone hits the tortured freeway systems, which move ever more slowly. Sheer human impact is a palpable force, especially given a recent multi-year drought and prolonged wildfire seasons that drain the state's coffers and natural resources.