

WANDERLUST



LOCAL MOTION

The next generation of homestays offer more than a place to crash—they're a crash course on a city as seen through the eyes of its denizens. Come, be a neighbor.

By Jenna Scatena



WHEN I FIRST CAME TO L.A. as a tourist, it sucked,” says Giorgia Ori, walking alongside rush-hour gridlock and looking every bit the opposite of a tourist in her silk black jumper and army jacket. “But I’ve figured out the trick,” she adds. “You have to actually *live* here for the city’s secrets to open up to you.”

I’ve been following the 25-year-old photographer through downtown L.A. for more than an hour, watching as she canvasses the neighborhood in search of the perfect shot. She bounces from block to block, steadying her camera in front of whatever catches her eye: a faded mural, an empty bus stop, the torn mesh net surrounding a construction site. I’d expected a 20-something’s introduction to travel Instagramming, full of overexposed Valencia-filtered sunsets and latte art portraiture, but instead she’s teaching me to see the city differently.

We stop in front of the City National Plaza, a 52-story glass-and-steel eyesore from the 1970s. “See those gorgeous clean lines—and the light?” Giorgia says, angling the camera in my hands. I fumble with the settings, trying to recall what she’d just told me about aperture and shutter speed. “The trick is to look where no one else is looking,” she says. “That’s where the beauty is.”

It’s sage advice, which I’ve paid for using the Airbnb app on my phone. Giorgia is one in a growing circle of mostly young, well-connected creative types who moonlight as tour guides for the company’s new Experiences service, one that for \$139 promises a three-day arts immersion in which I’ll learn to see L.A. through the lens of a local photographer.

It’s part of an evolution in an industry that’s hitting its stride. Vacation rentals are an \$85 billion business, with new host sites cropping up all the time, each one servicing the growing number of travelers who crave access and authenticity. Companies like Airbnb, which this past November rolled out hundreds of its locally curated experiences in cities around the world, are rephrasing the question travelers ask when booking a trip. It’s no longer simply, “Who has a cool apartment I can stay in?” Now it’s, “How can I try on their life?”

But whose life, exactly? A week before leaving my home in the Bay Area for L.A., I scrolled Airbnb’s list of experience hosts, hoping to find the perfect fit. Did I want to be an acrobat on Muscle Beach with a Speedo-wearing Hollywood stuntman? An

evolutionary astrologist in Topanga Canyon? A ceramist, a rock musician, a reality TV writer? The possibilities, like the city itself, were dizzying. But in the end I settled on two: a photographer and a florist. For a few frenzied days I would bounce around L.A., from local host to local host, to see if I could shed my out-of-towner skin and learn what it feels like to be an Angeleno.

IT’S 3:15 THE NEXT MORNING, and I’m tailgating a strange van into the derelict parking garage of the Los Angeles Flower Market. I’m here to meet my host Spencer Falls, a florist with soft, denim-colored eyes and a surfer’s nonchalance. We’ve come to shop for fresh flowers, which we’ll arrange into bouquets and sell from the back of his vintage van at \$40 a pop.

A freight elevator lowers us into the market, the largest of its kind in the country, stretching a full city block in a part of town that tourists rarely visit. Though it’s open to the public during the day, the wee hours are reserved for trade. “Follow me,” Spencer says, and the next thing I know, we’re wheeling a rusty cart through the stalls, grabbing bunches of calla lilies, chrysanthemums, ranunculus, and serrated fern spears. Spencer knows the vendors by name, inquires about their families. “I could spend all morning in here,” he says, and I believe him.

Spencer grew up in New Zealand, the son of

Clockwise from this page: Spencer Falls, owner of The Unlikely Florist; his flower-shop-on-wheels is a 1980 camper van; selling bouquets along Abbot Kinney; his garage floral studio in Venice.



“To find the real residents, you have to be invited to someone’s house.”

—SPENCER FALLS, FLORIST



of an apple farmer, before moving to California a decade ago to pursue a career as a stage actor. Last year he started his floral company, The Unlikely Florist, to help pay the rent but also get a much-needed dose of nature in the middle of an urban overload. “Like a lot of people in L.A., I suppose I think of myself as an artist first,” he says. “The great thing about this city is that if you have enough conviction and enough talent, you can live a creative life here.”

It’s a dreamy sentiment, as innocent and honey-hued as the mums poking out of the cart. And one I find oddly nourishing as I drive back to my Venice Beach vacation rental in the predawn darkness.

The following afternoon, I show up at Spencer’s garage turned floral studio near the Venice canals to bundle bouquets. We start by plucking leaves from the stems and tossing them into the compost bin. In



Clockwise from left: Giorgia Ori captures the color of the trees at Barnsdall Art Park; her camera of choice is a Nikon D5200; shooting the L.A. traffic at 5 p.m. from Griffith Observatory.



“The trick is to look where no one else is looking. That’s where the beauty is.”
—GIORGIA ORI, PHOTOGRAPHER

between, we sip Merlot. I ask him how he likes the neighborhood. “Venice has just the right amount of urban for me,” he says. “But it’s changed a lot from when I first moved here. There used to be speakeasies and underground parties. Now it’s all bars and restaurants catering to tourists. To find the real residents, you have to be invited to someone’s house.”

Maybe it’s the afternoon wine, but already I’d begun to think of myself as not one of *those* tourists. After all, I’d given up high-thread-count sheets and concierge service to sightsee the living rooms and garages of

the locals. My pursuits were nobler, almost anthropological. I was looking where no one else looks.

A FEW HOURS LATER, I’m standing in front of a downtown gallery waiting to meet Giorgia and feeling a little nervous. She’d invited me to join her at Photo LA, one of the industry’s biggest galas of the year, attended by the city’s top photographers, gallerists, and curators. My thoughts begin to race: I shouldn’t have worn these jeans. How will she introduce me? How should I introduce myself?

Giorgia arrives and we creep past the VIP line and thread our way through the crowd to the bar, which is serving Champagne and street tacos. She tells me about the exhibit, about the textural differences between velvet and rice paper and the importance of tempo in photography—“smoke, birds, a person running ... the idea is to create a sense of time.” I’m nodding my head and taking mental notes in the event that someone actually tries to engage me.

We stop to look up at one of her photographs on display—a geometric pattern of obscured nude selfies, inspired by the mosaic tiles in Italian kitchens. Some people mistake me for a gallerist, and I don’t correct them. Giorgia interjects and introduces



TOP 5
TALK OF THE TOWN

The best way to find out how to live like a local is to talk to one. Bartenders, shop owners, and even the person standing next to you at the bus stop are all good sources for recommendations on where to go. Don’t be shy: Go ahead and ask them a simple question. At worst, they’ll blow you off and you’ll never see them again. But at best, you’ll get a lead on something unseen by most tourists and (perhaps) a new friend. Here are some conversation starters to get to the heart of a place.

- 1.**
Where’s the best cup of coffee in the neighborhood? The best dive bar?
- 2.**
What’s your favorite block?
- 3.**
What’s the one tourist attraction that’s really worth it?
- 4.**
What kind of changes have you seen in the area since you’ve lived here?
- 5.**
Where’s the best place to chill outdoors?

me as her photography student, a generous description.

Before long, the event winds down and we’re back outside the gallery, the downtown streets alive with sound and movement. It’s a Thursday night in Los Angeles, and I’m a photo student about town and with a slight Champagne buzz. Before I can ask Giorgia what’s next, she informs me she’s late for a meet-up and has to run. “Ciao!” she says over her shoulder, “text me later!” and is gone.

I’VE SLIPPED INTO THE ROUTINE of waking up to the Airbnb app prompting me with my next mission. On my final morning in L.A., it reads, “Abbot Kinney Bouquet Slingin’ with Spencer starts in 30 minutes. Ready?” Over the past few days, the reminders have made my scattershot itinerary feel like an urban scavenger hunt.

When I arrive, Spencer is standing next to his van, wearing a suede welder’s apron and rose-hued sunglasses, wrapping the last of the eucalyptus bramble in twine. Spencer snaps a photo of an arrangement and uploads it to Instagram, announcing to his followers that he’s open for business.

Pedestrians idle by, cloaked in flowy scarves and clutching coffee cups. Some stop to pick through his bouquets; others keep walking. He fits right into the aesthetic of the neighborhood’s curbside culture, save for the parking ticket pinned against the van’s windshield. “Sometimes the meter maids take flower bribes,” he tells me. “But not today.”

For the next hour, I camp out in the van, the hood popped open, a warm winter breeze filtering through. Spencer’s friends—his real friends—drift in and out, killing time. They share their stories of what brought them to Venice, talk about chasing dreams, ocean swells, ex-girlfriends.

When my time is up, I bid farewell to Spencer, then wander down the street to a funky cafe. I wait in line with my tatted Venetian neighbors for a baklava croissant—as I’ve done every morning since I’ve been in L.A. On my way out the screen door, the barista says, “See you tomorrow.” And it’s with a sneaky sense of pride of passing as a local that I call back: “Yep, tomorrow.” —>



Family Bliss, Found

How do you keep everyone happy on vacation, from the wee members of the family to the eldest? The answer is easy to find at Aulani, A Disney Resort & Spa—an oceanfront resort nestled by the calm lagoon of Ko Olina in Hawai'i.

At this family-centered haven on O'ahu, a place for barefoot adventures and soul-nourishing relaxation, everyone is free to pursue their own bliss. Little ones have Aulani's Beach House, a complimentary supervised kids' club where guests ages 3–12 can explore Hawaiian culture, art, and music. And everyone has a place to splash or lounge at Waiolohe Pool, an 8,200-square-foot wonderland with its lazy river, waterslides, and infinity pool. It's all about following your joy, with dozens of ways to do it at Aulani.

Discover more at DisneyAulani.com.

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Travel

RENT A LIFE

Three alternative stays that let you try on the local lifestyle



CAMP LIKE A VINTNER


The hosts at Pianetta Ranch and Winery in Paso Robles, California, tell guests: “You bring the tent and we’ll provide the wine.” Just 50 yards from the vineyard, this camping perch is a great way for vino lovers to indulge and linger with winemakers. They also offer wine-and-cheese pairings, mimosa brunches, and home-cooked dinners and will build your campfire using Syrah and Cabernet branches. *From \$60/two people; hipcamp.com.*



CHART THE COURSE WITH SAILORS




Captains Karl and Jessica Kruger chart the course for a night in their floating home, a 61-foot Monohull sailboat filled with art from their journeys. You’ll sail the waters of Puget Sound from Orcas Island, Washington, learning about marine life and stopping over on Stuart Island to see a totem pole made by a master Lummi carver. *From \$365; getmyboat.com.* →

**JOIN THE TRIBE**

The Yellowhorse family helps you set up your campsite inside the Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park in Arizona and then takes you on a tour of local protected sites, including Ancestral Puebloan ruins and petroglyphs. At sundown, you might get lucky and find some of the other tribal residents serving Navajo tacos while you huddle around a campfire. *From \$50; hipcamp.com.* 

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