



Upon walking into Venice Beach, it is difficult to not feel almost overwhelmed by the amount of vibrant visual representation thrown at you. Brightly coloured buildings take on pastel hues and murals adorn the side of seemingly random walls. Before you have a chance to fully take in the visual landscape of the beachfront, you find yourself bombarded with predatory sellers of tours, mixtapes, merchandise and street performances.



Backing the seafront like a dividing wall, a long impenetrable row of corrugated iron shacks and the occasional concrete building line the pedestrianised road. Aside from smoking and surf shops, the majority of these are tourist-oriented merchandise shops selling slogan adorned beach clothing. Displayed by wildly exaggerated mannequins, the majority of clothing and underwear have heavily misogynistic or drug-oriented slogans and designs on them, each shop seemingly desperately trying to out-do the next; the designs more often than not often seemed there simply to shock and provoke more than anything.



This shock-and-awe approach of marketing and display arguably goes on to largely sum up the Venice Beach experience. Largely tourist oriented, public toilets and car parks impose themselves on the almost artificially wide beach. The image of Venice beach, contrary to its supposedly inclusive and free-spirited reputation, is one of near-narcissism that is arguably imposed on whoever chooses to walk down the beachfront. As a visitor, you are valued by what you can buy and who's business you choose to help uphold; its difficult to not feel that the entire beachfront experience is guided and manufactured from the moment you walk through the vehicle-blocking bollards.



The surprising aspect of Venice beach comes from the lack of higher level gentrification; there were no heavily established chain hotels, large modern houses or corporate shops, the architecture mainly consisting of the aforementioned corrugated iron shacks and occasional concrete 1950s era building. The few new buildings held minimalls full of independent stores.

Escaping up an innocuous looking side-street, a huge mural adorns the side of a shop; diverging from the usual narrative of a free-spirited bohemian utopia, this brightly coloured mural depicted at first a peaceful beach scene with sunbathers reading newspapers; however a deeper look into the corners of the mural showed depictions of a homeless man, litter, and a chain-shackled structure behind the beach overlooked by an eye-adorned sky; perhaps a critique of the high rents and restrictive city ordinances that arguably stifled the artistic origins of Venice as we know it. The mural seemed to reflect our initial experiences of Venice Beach; a beautiful location perhaps marred by the undertones of consumerism, narcissism and image obsession that seems to leak out from the rest of LA. This representation came to life further upon realising that several homeless people were staying next to the mural, their blue tarps almost camouflaged within the sea depicted within the picture. The juxtaposition of the homeless community only a street away from the consumerist, disposable culture of the beachfront was jarring yet unsurprising.



Thus, the idea of “free Venice” is thrown into the limelight; whilst the beachfront and the people within is no-doubt a visual departure from the norm of LA, the differences seem only skin-deep. Much like the rest of LA, Venice Beach has sold itself as a commodity, essentialising its own perception of history and culture into an easily consumable product. From the slogans and bright colours of the merchandise to the landscape dominated by tourist facilities and sights to see, Venice Beach seems to have boiled itself down to what it can be represented as, with low-level gentrification pushing out the European migrants and artist community that arguably created the Beach’s reputation.

Walking eastwards back into the city reveals a heavily modernised, gentrified and built up area that at first harks resemblance to much of Santa Monica. Lacking the corporate dominated 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, the area is filled with more established and middle to high-end eateries, clothing stores and surf shops. Travelling on foot through the area gives the now familiar feeling of being out-of-place as a pedestrian, negotiating the often awkward crossings and rough pavement. The murals and brightly coloured buildings give way to architecturally beautiful modern houses with prices stretching into 7 figures, and you soon find yourself stumbling onto the narrow beautiful walkways that line the canals within the city.



Previously the area was known for its low budget bungalow housing, thus attracting immigrants and counterculture artists, like the Beats. However, the cheap and attractive landscape that attracted these subcultures, has now become a highly priced gentrified area thus ensuring that poor artists, who once made this area what it is, can no longer afford to live there. The prior neglect of Venice in the 1950s caused it to be referred to as the 'Slum by the Sea'. The use of the word slum here is particularly interesting, in its reflection of this architecture in corrugated iron market stalls along the boardwalk.

Venice as a whole is covered in murals all representing the liberal attitude of the Venice lifestyle. The image stating, 'History is a Myth' reflects the idea of LA as constantly recreating itself and its image. It's hard to walk more than a block without seeing another mural reflecting the same liberal ideas that Venice is supposed to represent.



While the architecture on the boardwalk seems to be temporary and lacks security, the architecture in the Canals seems to be more European, steaming from European migrants. Despite the initial contrast between the seedier beachfront and the quintessential canal community, similarities remain. Both represent a performance. The bohemian style buildings visually contradict with their security badges hidden within the luscious plants and well-manicured gardens. They both want to be seen, photographed and admired, yet simultaneously aim to exclude with tinted glass windows and hired staff, not such free, 'hip' living after all. Once again, a performance of affluence and achievement, much like muscle beach. Meanwhile, the tourist shops on the boardwalk are temporary. Mostly run by migrants representing a multitude of nationalities, the cheap, fast fashion, fast food and quickly neglected souvenirs sold are suggestive of LA's value of temporary migrants, here utilised to sell Venice as a comity, but not appreciated.

By reflecting on local newspapers, the adverts can explicitly show this alternative lifestyle. For example, adverts for healthy eating, juice bars and yoga workshops. Rather than telling the everyday news, it seems to focus on small successes which exemplify the free lifestyle, for example the story of a gardening group showing the success of the organic community. These end up commodifying what should be organic cultures into a westernised facade. Even the name of the newspaper 'Yo Venice' shows its desperation of how it's trying to be hip. This contrasts to the Los Angeles Times which negatively reported on a shooting today in the Venice beach area. These two conflicting ideas show the difference in how Venice wants to be viewed and perhaps its seedy reality.