

CALIFORNIA

GO NOW *Beverly Hills*

90210 on a budget? Yes, it's possible

By Bill Fink

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

OK, I'm a cheapskate, I admit it. I like free stuff, or expensive things on dramatic discount.

So you'd think Beverly Hills would be the worst place in the world for me to visit. It has the most expensive shops in the world, snooty hotels and restaurants priced for Hollywood stars. And yet, I discovered that with a little planning, and some alternative activities, even someone like me can cheaply have a good time in Beverly Hills.

A less-than-pricey place to start is the Avalon, a boutique hotel about a mile south of Rodeo Drive, on the edge of town. The Avalon has the decor and vibe of a W Hotel, or the Standard on Sunset Strip, but at a lower price. I skipped its Italian restaurant and walked to the nearby 24-hour Pavilions supermarket for grub.

Returning with my shopping bag, I ignored sidelong glances from hipsters in the lobby lounge and snacked on my balcony overlooking the glowing swimming pool surrounded by couches with couples sipping happy hour martinis (at \$9, I guess a deal for the locale).

About six blocks north is Aqua Lounge, where for a \$10 cover I watched two bands, one with four dudes wearing Arnold Schwarzenegger masks and costumes. A well-behaved crowd dressed in studded leather nodded along to thrash metal while relaxing on plush couches.

It would be easy to spend days window-shopping in Beverly Hills without spending a dollar — but because shopping makes me nauseous, I looked for other cheap activities to fill the next day, starting with a picnic.

At the European Sausage Kitchen, a friendly neighborhood joint, I munched some free samples before settling on German salami and pickles. There's nothing quite like strolling the streets of Beverly Hills gnawing on a sausage. For a good picnic spot, sit in the park between Beverly and Canon, and watch women walk poodles whose tiny canine outfits probably cost more than my entire wardrobe.

If you go

With the recent recession, even the most exclusive establishments are quietly discounting their goods and services. Hotels offer attractive packages, restaurants serve budget prix fixe menus at the counter, and bars offer a plethora of happy hour specials. See www.lovebeverlyhills.org, or www.laweekly.com.

WHERE TO STAY

Avalon Hotel: 9400 W. Olympic Blvd., (310) 277-5221, www.avalonbeverlyhills.com. Rates start at \$162 per night.

WHERE TO EAT

European Deluxe Sausage Kitchen: 9109 W. Olympic Blvd., (310) 276-1331. Great selection of international sausages, including the popular South African biltong jerky.

The Cabbage Patch: 214 S. Beverly Blvd., (310) 550-8655, www.cabbagepatchbh.com. Good lunch spot with "farm fresh organic fare." Large portions of sandwiches and salads for about \$9; the yam wedges rule.

Joss Cuisine: 9919 Santa Monica Blvd., (310) 277-3888, www.joss cuisine.com. Upscale Chinese food in small new location; great daily lunch specials for \$11.

Kiyokawa: 265 S. Robertson Blvd., (310) 358-1900. Outstanding sushi restaurant every bit as good as more famous Beverly Hills spots, but at a fraction of the price.

WHAT TO DO

The Paley Center for Media: 465 N. Beverly Drive, (310) 786-1091, www.paleycenter.org. Wednesday to Sunday. Call for times.

Greystone Mansion and Park: 905 Loma Vista Dr., (310) 285-6830, www.greystonemansion.org. Park open 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; mansion tours on the first Saturday each month or by special arrangement.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences: 8949 Wilshire Blvd., www.oscars.org. Tuesday to Friday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; weekends, noon-6 p.m.

For entertainment, I went to the center of things, the Academy of Motion Pictures. Despite the free admission, there wasn't a single other visitor as I toured the movie poster displays, and an elaborate multi-media exhibition. Prior



Robert Brantley Photography

The 46,000-square-foot Greystone Estate in Beverly Hills, which has served as the location for dozens of television shows and films, offers stunning views of the Los Angeles Basin.



Chris Carlson / Associated Press 2009

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Beverly Hills offers an elaborate multimedia exhibition.

to Oscar time, the academy holds discount showings of nominated films in its posh theater.

Keeping with the Hollywood theme, I visited the admission-optional Paley Media Center, which provides access to its archive of virtually every TV show ever made, sort of a YouTube without the copyright infringement. I sat in a cubicle with headphones on, watching the pregame of the 1963 Super Bowl — interspersed with some sweet retro ads — and laughing at the primitive graphics in old newscasts. The lobby hosts rotating media exhibits, while special events pack in crowds for panel discussions with TV stars.

I spent the afternoon touring the Greystone Mansion overlooking Beverly Hills. This little known estate has served as the location for dozens of television shows and films, including "There Will Be Blood," loosely based on the Doheny oil baron family who built the place. The manicured gardens offer beautiful views of the Los Angeles Basin (smog permitting). Admission to the grounds is free, while guided mansion tours are \$15.

Some of the best "something for nothing" deals in Beverly Hills are the regular series of gallery openings and store/street "open houses" with free drinks and hors d'oeuvres. I walked the Canon Street event where a dozen shops provided

tasty treats and friendly greetings to visitors. I sipped wine at the Celebrity Vault photo gallery while checking out cool oversize shots of 1960s pop stars.

My Canon Street meandering led to a high-end jewelry store. The owner gave me wine and cheese and guided me to their "budget" section with jewelry in the \$3,000-\$10,000 range. I nodded politely and munched on my free snacks.

The saleswoman let me handle their two most expensive diamonds, one \$1.5 million 10-carat piece, and a 30-carat pink diamond retailing at an astounding \$8.4 million. With more than \$10 million in my hands, I turned to the security guard at the open door.

"So, how fast can you run," I asked him.

He smiled and patted his concealed sidearm. "About 2,000 feet per second. How 'bout you?"

I politely handed the jewels back across the counter.

It didn't matter. I had my own set of inexpensive Beverly Hills "gems" (local attractions I'd happily visit again), no loan application required.

And I didn't have to dodge any bullets.

Freelance writer Bill Fink last wrote for Travel on Mammoth Mountain. E-mail comments to travel@sfgchronicle.com.

TASTING ROOM *Winery Collective*

Wine country — near the wharf

By Janny Hu

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

It's easy enough to sample a variety of wines and wineries in Napa or Sonoma — not so much in San Francisco.

Enter the Winery Collective, an urban tasting room/wine bar that seeks to bring a bit of Wine Country to the Fisherman's Wharf area.

With its red brick facade, woody interior and friendly service, Winery Collective is reminiscent of a pub, albeit with a much heftier tab.

The vibe: Its location next to the Cannery is either a selling point or a drawback, depending on perspective. But, like much of the surrounding area, there is plenty to see and buy. One of the first things you notice upon entering is the wall of wine — dozens of bottles stacked in cubicles that run the length of the store. The tasting bar is opposite, and there's a display selling various wine accessories up front.

Old wine barrels doubling as countertops add a rustic feel. For a tasting room that encourages groups to enjoy flights or even full bottles in store, though, you can't help but wish for a little more comfortable seating — as in something to lean back against — rather than the bar stools, benches and ottomans that dominate.

The team: While the Winery Collective is owned and operated by more than two dozen boutique wineries across California, the driving force is Bryan Kane, who oversaw the business from its conceptual stages in 2007 to its opening nine months ago. Kane is also the co-owner and winemaker at Vie and Sol Rouge, two wineries that figure prominently on the tasting menus.



Michael Macor / The Chronicle

This wall of wine is one of the prominent features at the Winery Collective next to the Cannery.

The wine: The Collective includes wineries as far north as Lake County, east to the Sierra foothills and south to Santa Barbara — many of which do not have tasting rooms and are sold direct to consumers. Labels include Copain, Donum, Tercero, Shannon Ridge and Eric Kent.

The experience: The menu is ever-changing and expansive, but also expensive, even for a wine bar in a heavy tourist area. There were three flights offered when we went: "Touring California" (\$15), the cheapest and only flight combining whites and reds; "It'll be all White" (\$20); and "Reserve Reds" (\$25). Each flight included four or five wines from various labels. Tasting fees are not refunded with purchase.

Still, our host was enthusiastic and accommodating, whether it was substituting wines on the tasting flights, or serving a large group that walked in just minutes before closing.

The extras: Some nearby restaurants, including McCormick and Kuleto's, Ana Madera and Blue Mermaid, will waive corkage fees if you bring a bottle purchased at Winery Collective.

Rating: ★★

If you go: Winery Collective, 485 Jefferson St., (415) 929-9463. Open daily 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.