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Ron Campise

A child rides a horse through Griffith Park.

Griffith Park: The Urban Oasis

By Brenda Rees, PencilNews Correspondent

LOS ANGELES – It isn't a theme park, but there are rides, thrills and numerous wild creatures.

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MSNBC COVERAGE

IT ISN'T A movie studio, but on any given day you can see rock stars and heavenly bodies.

It isn't a sandy beach, but from its high peak on clear days, you can see the ocean and a panoramic view of the city.

It's Griffith Park, situated right smack dab in the middle of Los Angeles and one of the city's best-kept secrets. Covering more than 3,000 wooded acres, Griffith Park is the largest urban park in America – bigger than Central Park in New York or San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. It's located just west of the 5 Freeway and south of the 134 Freeway between northern Los Angeles, Burbank and Glendale.

A man climbs a tree as a crowd gathers around him.



Ron Campise

Frequented by locals who use the extensive jogging, biking and hiking trails, Griffith Park is also a perfect way for tourists to see another side of Los Angeles that they might have overlooked. In fact, after visitors are done with the major attractions of the area, Griffith Park – with its numerous hiking and horse trails – might offer a refreshing alternative to the crowds.

There's something for everyone at Griffith Park – like touring a world class zoo, taking a train ride, exploring the old west and hearing your favorite band performing outdoors on a warm summer night. In fact, there's so much to see here, that you might have to pencil in another day to do it all.

Here's a rundown of some of Griffith Park's man-made and natural attractions:

· **The Autry Museum of Western Heritage**
4700 Western Heritage Way, Los Angeles (323) 667-2000
or www.autry-museum.org

A ranger at Griffith Park talks with some young parkgoers.



Brenda Rees/PencilNews

While most kids probably don't know the name Gene Autry, this museum is more about preserving the legacy of the American West rather than a shrine to an old-time cowboy movie star.

In addition to touring the galleries of historical artifacts and photos, kid-friendly exhibits help families learn about the Old West

through hands-on activities.

The new Discovery Gallery features an interactive

experience where kids can explore the history of a Chinese American family. Through toys, storybooks and period wardrobe, kids will discover where it was like to be a child growing up in Chinatown in the 1930s – they can even role play in an antiques store, a Chinese restaurant and visit an art gallery.

· **The Greek Theatre**

2700 N. Vermont Ave, Los Angeles (323) 665-5857 or www.nederlander.com

The outdoor amphitheater has played host to numerous musical acts throughout its 71-year history including musicals, operas and popular performers of the day. During World War II, however, the theater doubled its duty as a barracks for the military.

Today, concertgoers are treated to warm summer evenings under the starry sky listening to great music performed in a natural acoustical setting. The Greek Theater's season – which features mainly pop and rock acts – run usually from June to October.

· **The Griffith Observatory**

2800 E. Observatory Road, Los Angeles (323) 664-1191 or www.griffithobs.org

A group of people look out over the city of Los Angeles from the Griffith Observatory.



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Each year, more than 2 million people make the trek up the southern hill of the park to visit the Griffith Observatory. It's one of the top tourist attractions in the city – and on clear days, the views it offers can be spectacular. It's also a

great spot to snap a photo of the famous Hollywood Sign.

In the observatory itself, kids can tour the Hall of Science museum and pretend to be an earthquake by jumping next to a Richter scale. On clear evenings, guests are welcomed to take a peek through the observatory's telescopes. Once a month, local astronomy clubs set up telescopes on the observatory's front lawn and offer visitors a free look at the moon, Jupiter, comets or any other heavenly body.

Planetarium shows run throughout the day at the observatory, and nearby the laserium offers older kids and teens a wild light show performed along with popular rock and hip-hop music.

· **Hiking Trails**

Hikers pass through the rocky hills of Griffith Park.



Ron Campise

Some of the more popular hikes in Griffith Park are the small walks around the Bird Sanctuary (Off Vermont Canyon Road) or Fern Dell (off Western Avenue entrance to the park) that features a tumbling brook. More adventurous hikers will enjoy the 2 1/2 mile hike from Fern Dell to the Observatory.

Still, the Mt. Hollywood Trail is a favorite hike because it begins at the Griffith Observatory parking lot and ascends up to Mt. Hollywood. The paths are clearly marked. On your way to Mt. Hollywood, don't miss Dante's Peak, a lush colorful oasis in the middle of scrub and brown brush. Park lovers have planted and continue to tend this green garden that is a great place to stop for a well-needed drink of water.

The Sierra Club leads free hikes in the park year-round. Call (213) 387-4287 for more information. Remember that the park closes at sunset, so plan your hiking accordingly! The folks at the Griffith Park ranger station (213) 913-4688 have other good hiking suggestions.

· **Horseback riding**

It doesn't matter if you are a beginning or an expert rider, there are many places to saddle up around Griffith Park with many private companies operating on the northern Burbank side of the park. Some offer evening treks that end at a nearby Mexican restaurant so you can munch down on chips and salsa while reliving the experience.

Horse trails, like hiking paths, are easily marked and horse guides enjoy bringing groups to some of the higher peaks for a fantastic vista of the city as a reward for a job well done – for both human and horse!

One good place to inquire about horse riding tours is the Los Angeles Equestrian Center(480 Riverside Drive, Burbank (818) 840-9063 or www.laequestriancenter.com).

· **Los Angeles Zoo**

5333 Zoo Drive, Los Angeles (323) 644-6400 or www.lazoo.org

More than 2,000 birds, reptiles, and mammals from around the world are on display at the Los Angeles Zoo including the new Red Ape Rain Forest where you can spy orangutans scrambling up, down and overhead. A big glass window allows the animals to come right up and give YOU the eye or try to offer you a piece of their orange.

Elsewhere, the Chimpanzees of Mahale Mountains is another newer habitat where chimp families scamper on rock-like ledges and canyons. Again, a huge glass wall enables you and the chimps to size up each other.

This summer, the Zoo will open it's new Winnick Family Children's Zoo where kids of all ages can feed, touch and see up close a variety of animals including goats and alpacas.

· **Merry Go-Round**

Off Crystal Spring Drive near golf course, Los Angeles (323) 665-3051

The Merry Go Round is one of those old-timey rides that keeps whirling and whizzing along. Built in 1926, the Merry-Go-Round boasts 68 horses with every one a jumper.

Each horse is finely carved with jewel-encrusted bridles, detailed draped blankets, and decorated with sunflowers and lion's heads. The Merry Go Round has one of the largest band organs accompanying a carousel on the West Coast – it plays more than 1,500 selections of marches and waltz music.

· **Griffith Park and Silver Spring Railroad, Griffith Park Pony Rides**

On Crystal Springs Drive, Los Angeles (323) 664-3266

At the miniature train ride, guests can climb aboard either the Freedom Train or Colonel Griffith for a choo-chooing good time. The track stretches over a mile and takes guests past pony rides, through a lush green meadow, through an old Western town and past a Native American village.

If you want something more fast-paced, nearby the SR2 Simulator ride realistically simulates the excitement of driving a racing car, riding a roller coaster and flying in acrobatic airplanes.

And finally, little kids can get their first taste of horseback riding at the pony rides concession. Youngsters (weighing under 100 pounds) are given safe rides around an oval track. There's also a miniature covered wagon ride.

· **Shane's Inspiration Playground or <http://shanesinspiration.org>**

Off Crystal Spring Drive near golf course

Kids get some exercise at Shane's Inspiration Playground.



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Founded by Catherine Curry-Williams and Scott Williams, this playground is the first one of its kind in the United States – it's a boundless playground that enables kids

with physical disabilities to play side by side with able-bodied kids. Ramps are wide enough for wheelchairs; there are specially designed swings and slides; and even a track area for

wheelchair, bike and scooter races. Soft foam padding surround the play equipment, so injuries from any falls will be minor.

The Williams founded their organization – that hopes to bring more boundless playgrounds to other parts of the country – after the early death of their son, Shane who was born with a physical defect. If he had lived, the Williams contend, he would never have been able to play in a traditional playground. Until now.

· **Travel Town**

5200 W. Zoo Drive, Los Angeles, (323) 662-5874 or www.lacity.org/RAP/grifmet/tt

Located in the northwest corner of Griffith Park, this transportation museum preserves and celebrates Western railroad history.

Wander through a sizeable collection of steam and diesel locomotives, trolleys, passenger equipment, and freight cars. If you come on the first Sundays of every month, you can either tour the inside of a passenger car or hop aboard for a real live engine ride.

A model miniature train club has set up an impressive n-scale track inside a nearby building so weekend guests can watch tiny trains zip around mountains, cities and farmlands.

Also, once a month, volunteers haul out a huge Thomas the Tank Engine play set for a free play day for kids.

Begin your visit to Travel Town with a ride on the miniature train ride that gives you an overview of the area's train collection.

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