



Land of sand and ego

Wealth oozes out of every pore in this California town, but shade is its most valuable commodity

I flew to San Diego on Alaskan Airlines, sitting between an Austrian with halitosis and a Canadian with Robocop on his T-shirt. The Austrian tried to seduce me with a bloody Mary and told me his global warming conspiracy theory. The Canadian played video games on his phone and told me a San Diego must-do was to visit the Wild Animal Park. "It's an African safari adventure with lions and elephant and rhino," he said. "It's wild! You can even fly across the plains in a helium air balloon."

Hours later, I was at a friend's condo in a suburb surrounded by shopping malls and golf courses. The cookie-cutter-condo, the colour of old ladies' stockings, boasted a heated pool, jacuzzi and gym and palm trees that rustled like a hula-hula straw skirt. There were flashy sports cars parked in the driveways and women wearing black, velvet tracksuits walking pedicured poodles on diamond leashes. A teenaged girl strolled past wearing a bright pink T-shirt that said "liberation".

The following morning, a berg wind aka The Santa Ana blew. I got undressed into a bikini top and sarong and crossed the road to the mall. There were tanning salons galore and clothing boutiques for pets. Mothers with glamorous, straight-as-hay hair strutted in their stilettos and tight, glitter jeans; their teenage daughters swaggered in tow wearing

ACCIDENTAL TOURIST



Shani Raviv

mini skirts, thin as ties, around their pubescent hips.

In San Diego, everyone is hot. The only shade was at Starbucks. The only fauna and flora were the potplants on sale outside Ralph's supermarket, where shoppers shopped just because there was air conditioning. The community noticeboard was tacked with ads. A bloke called Blake looked to recruit to the navy; Kelli, a personal stylist, wanted to groom me and my pet; and someone was selling a waterbed. One notice advertised a Sunday vigil against the war but it was Monday, so I had missed it.

There was a corner café-cum-liquor store, owned by a British couple, that sold imported South African relics. On their dusty shelf I found Mrs Ball's for R40 a bottle and a box of Five Roses for

R70. I bought a R25 Bar One, for 24-hour energy.

I bumped into an elderly couple kitted out in safari outfits: khaki shorts, hiking boots, floppy hats, backpacks and walking sticks. I asked if they were headed to the Wild Animal Park but they were headed to the mall. I asked them what there was to see in the vicinity. "Nothing!" they said, in US accents. The man carried a book titled: *Learn to speak German Easily*.

I kept walking in the sun's blaze past highway lanes and intersections and malls and roads, until I came to a gas station where I sought shade under the awning of Marla's coffee stand. She whipped me up a frappe latte. I sat on a bench on the roadside, sipping my drink, and watching the cabriolets and convertibles and cyclists whizz by while I waited for the bus. Ten minutes later, I got off at a neighbouring town called Encinitas and landed up at a thrift store owned by a woman named Wilma, who wore black lace fingerless gloves and had red fingernails and wild black hair.

The store was filled with California teenage princess's last season's clothes. Wilma warned me that there was a tiger on the loose that had killed a man. Later I heard on the news that it was true.

Luckily I hadn't taken the Canadian's advice to visit the Wild Animal Park. I may have had to be airlifted out in a helium air balloon.