

## 30 Travel

It is nearly midnight in Los Angeles and outside the newly opened Soho Warehouse in the downtown Arts District a man in a baseball cap, shorts and sneakers produces a can of spray paint. In full view of the party-goers spilling out of one of the club's opening nights, he takes aim at the wall, where "Los Angeles" has been painted in larger-than-human white bubble letters. Black paint squirts out and drips down the "g". He stands back to admire his handiwork, then vanishes into the night.

The scene sums up the new hotel/club ethos in LA: find a seedy neighbourhood, embrace the street-art culture that defines the local vibe, then transform the building. In the case of Jeff Klein's hip Hotel 850 SVB that means tearing down an old meth den; or in Soho Warehouse's case moving into the premises of an old plumbing and metal supply company, then filling it with carefully curated artwork and furnishings and launching a search for "creative souls". In the Arts District, a fertile ground for some of the city's most experimental artists, you don't have to look very far.

The new club is the third Los Angeles outpost of Soho House, joining the Hollywood and Malibu venues, which attract the higher echelons of the movie business. Soho Warehouse is edgier, pulling in a younger, cooler crowd from the rawer east side of the city.

Just a decade ago, most visitors would have avoided this area altogether: wedged

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My room looks out on to an industrial-equipment supplier, to the left there is a strip club

between the unlovely LA River and Skid Row, it was mostly derelict, dirty and dangerous. Now it is burgeoning with new construction: the streets are lined with craft breweries, excellent restaurants and independent coffee shops. No Starbucks — it's far too cool for that. Instead there are one-off venues such as In Sheep's Clothing, a word-of-mouth coffee shop by day, cocktail bar by night behind an unmarked door where records spin on vintage turntables. Or Nightshade, a brazenly brilliant Asian fusion restaurant from Mei Lin, a winner of *Top Chef*, a US cookery programme.

The arrival of Soho Warehouse confirms the area's makeover. The company has long had an eye for finding a city's next happening spot — sometimes before it quite happens: think of its first Stateside offering in New York's then-edgy Meatpacking District, or later in Chicago's up-and-coming West Loop. Truth be told, Soho Warehouse has landed just outside the Arts District, but the boundary will undoubtedly shift to include it. This, after all, is what Soho House does: it changes the epicentre of cool in a city.

Soho Warehouse is the first of the brand's LA properties to offer hotel rooms. Even regular souls who do not necessarily pass the creative filter can book here, becoming temporary members for their stay, enjoying the vast sixth-floor clubhouse and rooftop pool area, with its sunset colour scheme and views over downtown and the mountains beyond. On the ground floor the former loading dock has been transformed into a large secluded garden, dotted with olive trees and overhung with jasmine. An Italian restaurant adjoins the garden while upstairs is another restaurant serving Soho House favourites such as its Dirty Burger.

The 48 bedrooms, with high ceilings and



## Luxury travel

# California cool: Soho House's new LA outpost

The private members' club has opened its first hotel in Los Angeles — a chic hang out in the city's fashionable Arts District. [Helena de Bertodano](#) checks in

exposed brick walls, maintain the warehouse feel, melding art deco elements from the building's early days (it was built in 1916) with 1970s-style vintage furnishings. A retro telephone (albeit with push buttons) and Roberts radio sit next to the bed, which is, of course, supremely comfortable. One of the chatty, friendly front-desk staff tells me that it is the same bed the Queen sleeps in; his colleague laughs and says that is not true. "But you will sleep like a queen."

My room looks out on to a welding store and an industrial-equipment supplier. To the left there is a strip club, with a neon sign advertising "nude girls", and to the right a

petrol station, where rig trucks refuel round the clock. In the distance is a pulsing artery of freeway traffic and farther still, the towers and lights of downtown.

Inside, the grittiness of the locale is celebrated rather than disguised. Pipework runs across ceilings and pre-existing graffiti has been incorporated into the aesthetic and interspersed with eclectic art; a framed handwritten note reads, "Dear love, I f\*\*\*ing hate you". And next to the dining tables are typewritten lists, revealing the contents of people's handbags — perhaps a nod to the sort of clientele they expect. "Receipt for a package that I shipped to rural Ghana"; "Three salt taffies

with weed"; "Program from this Hungarian play I saw on Saturday".

Needless to say, I am the least cool person here. Having arrived with a small suitcase of crumpled clothes, I call house-keeping and ask for an iron, such a deeply dull request I'm surprised that I'm not ejected on the spot. So far everyone I've seen is wearing wild prints and leather. Nose rings and tattoos are the order of the day. And that's just some of the staff.

A few minutes later there is a knock at my door. I open it to find a cocktail trolley outside, with a barman called Tyler offering to mix me an Eastern Standard (made with vodka, lime, cucumber and mint).



Soho Warehouse



A bedroom



The rooftop pool

On the house. “Oh,” I say, momentarily flummoxed, “I thought you were an iron.” The iron does not materialise, but by the time I’ve had my cocktail, I’ve forgotten all about it.

If I wanted to update my wardrobe, I could. Edgy designer stores abound, many of them more like art galleries than clothes shops. At Dover Street Market, where mannequins slam their heads through doors, I could buy a Walter Van Beirendonck multi-fabric jacket in pink, orange and grey for \$3,355 (£2,644).

The Arts District acquired its name in the 1970s, when artists claimed the turf, excited to be pioneering an urban wilderness. The beloved American Hotel, which once had an aircraft pinned to its side, housed Al’s Bar, a punk-rock dive that welcomed bands such as Nirvana in the 1980s. These days the vibe is less wild; old-timers grumble that it’s becoming gentrified.

Michael Burke, who owns the urban gastropub Eat Drink Americano — famous for its excellent braised short ribs, which you eat at tables fashioned out of manhole covers — has lived in the Arts District since 1996. A photographer from Liverpool, he settled here because he loved the atmosphere. It helped that it was dirt cheap. “There was nothing here back then,” he says, taking me on a walking tour of the neighbourhood late one evening. “I had to drive half an hour to Pasadena just to get a coffee. It was grimy and grungy, there were no lights. Even the cops didn’t come down here. There were drug dealers, prostitutes, brothels. See that gas station over there: a teenage girl was murdered and dumped in a dumpster round the back.”

Now the gas station is just a stone’s throw from Barker Block Lofts, one of the most sought-after places to live — a two-bedroom apartment here is on the market

for \$1,735,000. Burke lives in a former toy factory. “My kitchen floor still has the yellow factory markings.”

Warner Music recently moved into the old Ford factory, Spotify is leasing a new development, art galleries abound. The night hums with film crews, who love the location, especially for car commercials and police dramas. Local residents barely bat an eyelid now when a (fake) SWAT team bursts out of a doorway. The iconic redbrick Nate Starkman Building, with its green-arched windows and iron fire escape, was set ablaze for the finale of *House*.

Over shots of mezcal and smoked cauliflower tacos at Guerrilla Tacos, chef-owner Wes Avila, who started with just a food cart, describes how he used to party with friends in the area’s abandoned warehouses. “We had raves here in high school. There were no city services, it was really sketch [dodgy], a wasteland.” He says that Enrique Olvera, considered the master of modern Mexican food, is about to open two new restaurants on this block. Does he worry about the competition? Hell no, says Avila, who is coming to London next year to do a pop-up. “You should see the lines here on a Saturday night. The only competition is with myself.”

Unlike much of Los Angeles, the area is eminently walkable, splashes of overhanging pink bougainvillea on Mateo Street making it surprisingly picturesque. A large chicken coop sits in a garden full of citrus and pomegranate trees, the fruit hanging

heavily off the branches. It is part of Manuela, one of the city’s top restaurants, which has made its home in an antique flour mill. The wheatberry, white nectarine and whipped feta salad is seasoned with herbs from the garden.

Everywhere you look there are pockets of creative lunacy; graffiti and murals daubed not just on walls but on pavements, rubbish bins, telegraph poles, even tree trunks. The only place artists haven’t yet managed to paint is the sky, but that will surely come.

Of course, not everyone is thrilled with the arrival of the club. Until Soho House took it over, the building was being used as rehearsal studios by musicians. A comment from one disgruntled local in Curbed LA, a property blog, sums up what many feel: “If ever there were a single, symbolic move that captured what’s happening in the increasingly posh neighborhood, musicians being booted from their rented studios by an expensive, members-only club with a rooftop pool is probably it.”

However, Soho Warehouse is going out of its way to do the opposite. As well as inviting local artists to create pieces all over the club, it also gives an opportunity for those priced out of the neighbourhood to regain a foothold by becoming members. Mr Cartoon, a tattoo and graffiti artist best known for doing Eminem’s tattoos, is at the club’s opening party. “I had a studio here for 15 years, but it blew up so much that I couldn’t afford it any more. Now I’m back.”



## Need to know

Helena de Bertodano was a guest of Soho Warehouse (sohowarehouse.com), which has B&B doubles from \$217 (£172) a night. Virgin Atlantic has returns to Los Angeles from London from £320pp

## Three more hip hotels in LA

### Hotel 850 SVB

You are in excellent hands in the newest addition to Jeff Klein’s hotel empire. With just 23 rooms, 850 SVB, below, is the last word in the home-meets-hotel approach. An unprepossessing façade (it was once a meth motel) leads into one of the most luxuriously comfortable of LA’s low-key, high-end boutique hotels. Guests breakfast in the sitting room, which feels like someone’s private home, or on the rooftop deck, with its views of the Hollywood Hills. My split-level room under the eaves has a small balcony overlooking the hallowed entrance to San Vicente Bungalows, Klein’s exclusive recent addition to the LA club scene. It’s better than watching Netflix; the tall man in the shades laughing with a friend looks a lot like Armie Hammer. And is that really Emma Stone stepping out of a 4x4? All the room lacks is a discreet telescope to verify sightings.

**Details** B&B doubles cost from \$357 (£283; hotel850svb.com)

### PaliHotel Westwood Village

The new PaliHotel Westwood, a 55-room boutique hotel, is next to the Hammer Museum and many great restaurants. My room, decorated in grey and straw colours with a scribble on the wall in lieu of art, overlooks the garden courtyard with bay windows. The fat, curved, padded headboard makes me feel as if I am lying in a dog basket — a very comfortable dog basket it must be said. Every room has a Smeg fridge and a Paddington-style suitcase at the top of the wardrobe.

**Details** B&B doubles cost from \$231 (palisociety.com)

### The Charlie, West Hollywood

You’ll find this former farm, bought by the actor Charlie Chaplin in the 1930s, down a quiet street in West Hollywood. Chaplin remodelled it to create a clutch of cottages interspersed by rose gardens and little pathways in tribute to his English upbringing. Among the 13 self-catering units with Hollywood names, from Oscar to Marilyn, is Charlie, with a tiny door. The actor was only 5ft 8in and wanted a door small enough for him, but which would make his friends bow down. Our suite, Steve, came with a wooden floor, a contemporary bed and red chairs in the kitchen. It was perfect, just like having our own home in LA.

**Details** Steve costs from £242 on booking.com or visit thecharliehotel.com

