Health & Safety

IF YOU GET SICK AWAY FROM HOME
You will need to complete the medical form before leaving for Los Angeles. You should make sure that your existing health plan provides all the coverage you need. LA has two of the best hospitals in the nation: Cedar Sinai and UCLA Medical Centers. In fact, people travel to LA because they’re sick. Be sure to carry your medical identification card with you at all times.

If you suffer from a chronic illness, consult with your doctor before your departure. For conditions like epilepsy, diabetes, or heart problems, wear a MedicAlert Identification Tag (800.825.3785 or www.medicalert.org) which will immediately alert doctors or emergency personnel to your condition and give them access to your records through MedicAlert’s 24-hour hot line.

Pack prescription medicines in your carry-on luggage. Carry written prescriptions in generic—not brand-name—form, and dispense all prescription medications from their original labeled vials. Also bring along copies of your prescriptions in case you lose your pills or run out.

GENERAL SAFETY
While tourist areas are generally safe, crime is still a problem, and U.S. cities tend to be less safe than those in Europe or Japan. Always stay alert. Ask the hotel front-desk staff or the tourist offices if you’re in doubt about which neighborhoods are safe.

Avoid deserted areas, especially at night, and don’t go into public parks at night unless there’s a concert or similar event that will attract a crowd. For example, it’s perfectly okay to drive into Griffith Park after dark to visit the observatory or see a show at the Greek Theater, but save any exploration beyond the parking lot for daylight hours. If you are near the Coliseum or Sports Arena in South Central LA, try not to venture far from the venues.

Avoid carrying valuables with you on the street, and don’t make a big display of expensive cameras or other electronic equipment. Hold onto your pocketbook or run the strap across your chest, and place your billfold in an inside pocket. (I carry my cash, cards, and ID clipped together in a front pants pocket and a relatively useless wallet with a few dollars in my back pocket. And I will be wearing my $19.95 Timex watch!) In theatres, restaurants, and other public places, keep your possessions in sight. You should place your purse between your feet—never on the back of your chair.

Remember that hotels are open to the public, and in a large hotel, security may not be able to screen everyone entering. Always lock your room door—don’t assume that inside our hotel you are automatically safe. It’s never a good idea to prop a door open while getting ice, visiting next door, and so on.

Also, don’t accept offers from strangers to help with your baggage—it could be the last time you see your luggage. The exception would be uniformed- and-namebadged hotel employees. Tip $1 per bag.
Find out if your cell phone service provider covers LA, either directly or with roaming charges. Most major companies should. You don’t want to be without the ability to communicate in an emergency.

After years in decline, gang-related violent crime has recently been on the rise, prompting aggressive new anti-gang initiatives from Police Chief William Bratton. Gang-related street violence is centered in certain neighborhoods, South LA, Compton, and Watts should be avoided, particularly at night.

Of the Metro lines, the Red and Green lines are the safest and more heavily patrolled. The Blue Line has a poorer safety record and can be sketchy after dark. Avoid riding in empty cars, and move with the crowd when going from the station to the street.

EARTHQUAKE SAFETY
Very minor earthquakes occur frequently in Southern California; most of the time they’re so slight that you won’t notice them at all. If you do feel a stronger tremor, follow basic safety precautions.

If you’re indoors, take cover in a doorway or under a table or desk—whichever is closest to you. Protect your head with your arms. Stay clear of windows, mirrors, or anything that might fall from the walls. Do not use the elevators.

If you’re in an open space, move away from buildings, trees and power lines. If you’re outdoors near buildings, duck into a doorway.

If you’re driving, slow down and pull over to the side of the road, avoiding overpasses, bridges, and power lines, and stay inside the car.

Expect aftershocks. If you feel a smaller quake following a larger tremor, take cover again.

DRIVING SAFETY
Driving safety is important, too. There is at least one agency in the LA area, Rent-A-Wreck, that will rent you a vehicle (most companies will not rent to those under 25 years of age). I don’t recommend it; you find yourself in a dangerous situation in a matter of seconds.

However, if you do choose to rent a car, ask your rental agency about personal safety, and ask for a traveler-safety brochure when you pick up your car. Ask for written directions to your destination(s) or a map with good routes and police stations clearly marked. (Many rental agencies offer the option of renting a cell phone for the duration of your car rental if you don’t have one or your’s does not work in LA; check with the rental agent when you pick up the car.) Try to arrive and depart during daylight hours. Again, be aware of everything and everyone around you.

Recently more crime has involved cars and drivers. If you drive off a major highway into a doubtful neighborhood, leave the area as quickly as possible. If you have an accident, even on the highway, stay in your car with the doors locked until you access the situation or until the police arrive.

You need be aware of the practice of “bumping,” where you become involved in a slight rear-ender, either from behind or in front. Either put on your flashers, motion the other driver to follow you, and drive to a well-lit public place (a good idea even for a vehicle behind you with blue lights) or lock your doors, call 911, and do not turn off your engine. You may have been set up for a
robbery, or worse. At least one source suggests the nearest police precinct, well-lit service station, or 24-hour store.

Parking can be a problem, particularly Downtown along Melrose Avenue’s trendy Westside shopping streets, and in Beverly Hills and Westwood. Anywhere else is less troublesome, but watch out for restrictions—some lampposts boast as many as four placards listing dos and don’ts. Sometimes it’s better to shell out $5 (or more) for valet parking than get stuck with a $30 ticket for parking in a residential zone (or more for a vehicle that has been towed).

Always try to park in a well-lit and well-traveled area, but take note of parking regulations or hours of operation (in the case of a deck or lot). Never leave any packages or valuables in sight. If someone attempts to rob your or steal your car, don’t try to resist the thief or carjacker. Report the incident to the police department immediately by calling 911. This is a free call, even from a pay phone (if you can find one).

LA is a car-based community with more than 5,000,000 cars traveling the freeways each day. The freeway system can be confusing, especially since each stretch can have two or three names (often derived from its eventual destination, however far away) as well as a number. You can side-step LA’s freeways when traveling between Hollywood and the coast, driving on surface streets (like the locals do). But for longer distances, the freeways are unavoidable. The busiest times (and the ones most likely to produce gridlock) are between 7:00 and 10:00 in the morning, and 4:00 and 7:00 in the afternoon. Keep in mind that LA residents are not good at handling inclement weather, and your travel time will surely double during even a light drizzle. The busiest roads are Highway 101 and the 405 freeway, with particularly hellish confluences at the Downtown four-level interchange known as “the Stack,” the busiest junction in the entire U.S. However, each major road presents its own challenges, from rapid accelerations to sudden decelerations to hairpin turns to narrow lanes to uneven pavement to big trucks.