**Venice Beach, California**

White sand, sunshine, deep blue, clean froth-capped breakers rising high and crashing in a dance of foam. It’s a beautiful scene, but it’s not unlike hundreds of other glorious sun-drenched beaches around the world. Apart from its perfect Mediterranean climate, what sets Venice Beach, California, apart from other tourist meccas is its two and a half kilometer Boardwalk―and unique characters like Happy the Hippy.

Featuring a bike path, skateboard ramp, restaurants, sunglass stalls – the Boardwalk is famous for its body builders and its medical marijuana dispensaries. Souvenir kiosks mix with elegant boutiques selling top brands. Walk-up snack stalls and juice and liquor bars compete for your dollars with classy restaurants serving world-class seafood delights and exotic dishes from all over the globe.

Bring plenty of dollar bills to tip the entertainers. From jugglers to jesters, break-dancers to broken glass walkers, mime actors to musicians, there are plenty to delight. Have your fortune read. Let an artist paint a temporary – or permanent – tattoo. Have you ears, nose or lip pierced. Even have your name written on a single grain of rice.

On the Westside, you will find a unique assortment of arts and crafts, handmade jewelry and quirky odds and ends including rock sculptures and precious stones. Original paintings range from abstract to classical landscapes, birds, flora and nudes.

On the east side, you’ll find clothing stores, surf shops, skate shops, sunglass stores and shoe stores. Whether you want a plain Venice Beach souvenir T-shirt, or one with a political message, joke, delicious dame or lewd image, every kind of T-shirt under the sun is on offer here. There is probably more diversity in demographics and retail on the Venice Beach Boardwalk than anywhere else in the world!

Beggars perch on stools or sit cross-legged on the pavement behind held or propped signs with crudely painted messages pleasing for handouts. Some of the sob stories are original and amusing. One beggar’s sign pleads on one side for food for his starving children while the reverse, likely to be visible to a benefactor only after they make their donation and pass on, declares his need for donations to pay the excessive taxes and substantial child support demanded of those earning high incomes. Another asks for food for his thirteen starving children, but confesses on the reverse side that he has no family and spends all donations on marijuana, cocaine and beer.

Near the end of the Boardwalk, Happy the Hippy beckons with a beaming smile, begging a twenty dollar bill to hear his story. I gave him five and he entertained me for nearly an hour. Shabbily attired, with long uncombed blonde hair, weathered face and a huge gummy grin displaying only a smattering of misshapen yellow teeth, Happy lives with his family in a big old bus. His family consists of a son, two daughters, son-in-law, baby grandchild and a large dog. His ‘house’ is fitted with bunk beds, wardrobes, basic kitchen facilities, and a pot-plant garden on the dashboard.

Happy claims to have been a millionaire land owner in a past life, but he says he gave his property in Oregon to his ex-wife in a divorce settlement. She apparently promised to pay him a princely sum each month to keep him in the style to which he had become accustomed. He says he never received a cent.

He claims to have driven the bus from Las Vegas to Venice Beach at 5 miles per hour, and to have collected hundreds of thousands of dollars in fines for outstaying his welcome in his favorite parking spot. He says he regularly throws himself on the mercy of the court, claiming to have been locked in to the compound while trying to change a punctured tire, fix a broken axle, or repair an engine fault. Apparently pretty much any excuse will do, as long as it supports his claim to be unable to comply with law, despite his very best efforts.

At the end of his tale, he points to the waist-coated and bow-tied waiters darting between diners in a sidewalk café and declares he would never take on such menial and poorly paid work. He’s making five times their daily wage just by talking. Some days tourists toss him a hundred dollar bill just for singing a song –out of tune – or reciting a verse. He claims it’s not uncommon for him to earn a thousand dollars in a day during tourist season, and his only expense is a little fuel to move the bus from time to time. The parking fines remain unpaid and he always self-represents when called before a judge.

On your return walk, take care to dodge the roller skaters weaving in and out among crowds of tourists of every race and from every part of the world – mostly scantily attired in swimsuits or beach shirts. Be generous to the buskers strumming banjos, ukuleles or guitars; fingering flutes and blowing tin or wooden whistles; or singing anything from Hare Krishna chants or mournful soul to jazz, country, or hip-hop.

Venice Beach is a ‘’must-see’’ destination during your visit to California.