

OPINION



Clogged Arteries

By JOE FASBINDER
SPECIAL TO WESTSIDE TODAY

"Lies, damned lies and statistics," soliloquized America's most celebrated author, Mark Twain. He credited the bon mot to someone else, British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli.

The statistics these days come from the American Automobile Association: The just-passed Fourth of July weekend would break all travel records, with about 3 million Southern California residents picking the holiday weekend to get around somewhere. That's about 1.3 percent more than those commuted in and out of Los Angeles in the last record Fourth of July, back in 2002.

And most of them drove. Many of the other unlucky few decided to go to LAX.

Let's start with the legendary driving artery-clog that makes up the untidy mess of exits and entrances to the nooks and crannies of the Westside's own international airport.

Going through the airport at about noon, only one parking lot was blocked off. With cops standing by to make sure you don't go looking inside on your own. Because someone might be lying about free parking spaces.

Traffic was snarled, but traffic is always snarled at LAX.

And there was heightened security, according to the people who are on the job to protect travelers. But there was little evidence of that security inside the sprawling terminal. It was disappointing to not see someone in a flak jacket carrying an M-16. And there weren't a lot of extra people who planned to travel by air just standing in lines, ready to be examined and probed physically and electronically. Lines were just about what they'd be on a normal day. Unlike the freeways.

Final statistics were not available early, but the 1.3 percent increase in freeway and air traffic manifested itself best on the Westside's vaunted freeway system. The 10, coming into Santa Monica, was bumper-to-bumper midday. But heading the other way—smooth sailing. Much could also be said for the heavy traffic on the 405 going in either direction.

That Triple-A approximation of slightly more than one new driver out of every hundred cars coming in or out of Southern California this year seemed to yield numerous rank amateurs engaged in Southern California sports such as trying to cut into the turn lane and going a safe and decent speed in the carpool lane, with a blinker on, and a stack of cars behind going on for a half mile.

Some of those cars made it to Venice or Santa Monica Beach. But the vast majority of the drivers couldn't find a place to park. At least, they couldn't

find a place to park that didn't have a steep price tag.

That didn't stop anybody.

Beaches on the Fourth looked partially empty during a drive by midday.

You notice families who have staked out vast expanses of sand for barbecues, and as you get closer to the water, in wafts the unsubtle scent of sunscreen. People have come to this most crowded spot (maybe Disneyland has it beat) on the craziest time of year, to sit on the sand and not soak up sun. Maybe it was the Marina Del Rey Fireworks that brought them in. I don't think so.

Some came to ride the waves. Many more came to sample the joys of the Venice Boardwalk, where resides California Alternative Caregivers, which services about 75-100 people on any normal day. With medical marijuana.

Adam, who didn't want to give his last name, said that's about the average size and the Fourth of July hasn't affected Venice very much, despite the cattle-packed crowds of people, all shapes and sizes, on the boardwalk. I asked Adam about getting a quick prescription. He said I'd have to go to a regular doctor to get that. He has a list.

It's all rather moot. It's kind of hard to tell if any person on the Venice Boardwalk is stoned at any time of day.

Many people beat the traffic predicament by riding along on steel rails, mass transit trains paid for by generous taxpayers. The Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transport Agency estimates that each week, about 348,158 board the train that takes you from the part of town where people keep disembodied pig's heads in butchery windows, to the land of frolic, fun, medical marijuana and occasional street gang members.

Nobody aboard seems to notice. The cars heading off to the beaches of Southern California are crammed with people of all types and odors, most of them very earthy.

It's alcohol and urine and sweat among so many jolly people that gives the overall assemblage the esprit de corps so many of the riders have. Even if it does smell like a dead mackerel. In a sealed room. And it's drunk. And it puked.

The Fourth is over. The gunpowder is spent and nurses are trading stories of the most amusing fireworks injuries suffered by people of varying levels of stupidity and/or intoxication. Most explosive mishaps didn't get treated at all. I mean, who wants to go to the hospital with burns from setting off a bottle rocket from one's ass? (which came from a famous TV show, in reality.)

The Triple A is done for this Fourth of July season. Bracing for records of people to go home from LAX and on the highways of Southern California. Maybe they'll all come back next year.



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