



Fergie performs alongside Slash at this year's Sunset Strip Music Festival, left, and, below, the crowd rocking out the Smashing Pumpkins and Sunset Boulevard with its famed billboards.

Festival photos: Eric Voake/Boulevard photo: Courtesy of Visit West Hollywood.

Party time in Los Angeles

The annual Sunset Strip Music Festival is a wild street bash that pays homage to this legendary centre of rock, **CATHERINE BEST** writes

He's almost old enough to be my grandpa, with a mop of white hair and a garish T-shirt emblazoned with the words "boobies make me smile".

Perhaps the boobies he's referring to are on the curb nearby, where two bottle blonds close to his vintage sit preening themselves.

They are wearing miniskirts and tight, busty tops that give way to long, leathery limbs, sun-weathered like a cow's hide. A man dressed like Jesus walks past and the crowd heaves with exposed flesh, black T-shirts, dreadlocks and everything in between.

Welcome to the third annual Sunset Strip Music Festival – a street party paying homage to this legendary centre of rock, where once a year the famous neon boulevard gives over to the fans.

LA's Sunset Strip carves a 2.5km trail of lights and giant billboards – second in price tag only to Times Square – through West Hollywood, bookended by Beverley Hills to the west and Hollywood to the east.

A hip celebrity hangout that gave birth to some of the greatest rock legends of the 20th century, "WeHo" and "The Strip" are a pulsating hotbed of clubs, music venues, top end shopping and sleek hotels and restaurants.

The area was once a tangle of poinsettia fields and avocado groves until the 1920s, when the Hollywood glitterati cultivated the dirt road, known as Sunset Boulevard, into a party playground.

Lying just outside the city limits, The Strip was out of the grip of the LA Police Department, and casinos and clubs soon sprouted like weeds, serving alcohol in backroom dens to elude tough prohibition laws.

Today The Strip has lost the cradle of rock status of its heyday but remains a living museum of music royalty and Hollywood high living. The Doors got their breakthrough gig at the Key Club, formerly Garrazzi's, Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, The Who and AC/DC were regulars at Whisky A Go-Go and Motley Crue and Guns 'n' Roses cut their

teeth on The Strip's party scene.

At the dimly-lit Rainbow Bar and Grill, burgers have been served up to rock gods and loyal fans for decades.

The Strip stalwart is a shrine to music legends like Slash, who was honoured at the 2010 music festival, while big-name regulars included John Lennon, Alice Cooper and Janis Joplin.

It was here that Marilyn Monroe had her first date with Joe DiMaggio in 1953 and almost a decade earlier Liza Minnelli's father, Vincente, proposed to Judy Garland.

Next door, the Roxy Theatre set Bruce Springsteen on his course to chart stardom, while over the boulevard a few doors down, notorious gangsters Mickey Cohen and Bugsy Siegel are said to have been patrons of an illicit gambling den on the site that is now the Viper Room.

The Viper Room was bought by screen A-lister Johnny Depp in 1993 and actor River Phoenix famously died of an overdose outside the club the same year.

The Strip's celebrity roll call is endless – Monroe, Garbo, Sinatra, Astaire, Bogart – if they've made it in Tinsel Town they've titivated the tarmac of this hedonistic hot spot. If WeHo isn't cleaning up after one party, like the Emmy Awards afterbash, it's preparing for another.

The landscape is in a constant flux of red carpet rollouts and marshmallowing marquees, each attracting a ubiquitous posse of paparazzi.

For the snap-happy visitor, chic bars like the Mondrian Hotel's Sky Bar provide ample opportunity for celebrity spotting amid the luscious ivy-festooned outdoor surrounds, which boasts superb views of the twinkling LA skyline. Celebrities can also be spotted perusing the boutiques of Sunset Plaza, Santa Monica Boulevard and The Avenues, which are packed with art galleries, cafes, and lines like Stella McCartney and Armani.

WeHo packs a lot into its three square kilometres and its magnetic attraction is evident on weekends when the resident population of 39,000 people almost doubles.



One-third of the population is gay or lesbian and the city has become a hit with homosexual travellers. It also stakes its claim as one of the most pet-friendly cities in California, with hotels catering to pampered pooches.

Like every party city, WeHo also has a seedier side, with exotic dancing joints giving life to the name Sunset Strip. But what can you expect with Hugh Hefner moving in with his Playboy Club half a century ago, and Larry Flynt keeping him company with Hustler Hollywood, the US's largest erotica store?

Back at the festival, man of the moment Slash is ripping up the main stage with Fergie, of Black Eyed Peas fame, who is humping the speakers in a risqué hot pants dance routine.

Out of the thick of the crush, the Greasy Weiner food cart is doing a roaring trade – promising customers "the most fun you can have on a bun".

If you go:

- Visit: www.visitwesthollywood.com
- V Australia has direct flights to Los Angeles from Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne from \$989pp return. Visit: www.vaustralia.com.au.

Where to stay:

- Le Parc Suites Luxury boutique hotel within walking distance of all the action. 733 North West Knoll Drive, West Hollywood. www.leparcsuites.com.

- The Sunset Marquis (where the celebrities come to stay). The hotel even has its own basement recording studio. 1200 Alta Loma Road, West Hollywood. www.sunsetmarquis.com

Where to eat, drink and party:

- The Rainbow Bar and Grill famous rock 'n' roll eatery. www.rainbowbarandgrill.com; Skybar at Mondrian Hotel, For city views and celebrity spotting. www.mondrianhotel.com; Cat Club, 8911 West Sunset Boulevard. <http://theroxyonsunset.com/>; Key Club, www.keyclub.com; Whisky A Go-Go, www.whiskyagogo.com

Something different:

- Lomography workshop. Learn to become one of the paparazzi – with a twist. West Hollywood boasts the world's largest lomography store, a retro movement of unorthodox analogue photography, first developed in Vienna, Austria. 7998 Santa Monica Blvd. www.lomography.com.

Soon headline act the Smashing Pumpkins takes to the stage as LA's party thoroughfare chokes under the weight of more than 14,000 wired revellers. Before long the street sweepers move in and order returns to the car-clogged Sunset Strip.

Until next year. But the party never really ends in this rockin' town.

- The writer was a guest of West Hollywood Marketing & Visitors Bureau and V Australia.