

TRAVEL



Long Beach, Calif., is a popular tourist destination that has a “Weetzie Bat” vibe. [CONTRIBUTED BY CYNTHIA J. DRAKE]

Tour ‘Weetzie Bat’s’ L.A.

Author Francesca Lia Block offers her glimpse of California

By **Cynthia J. Drake**
Special to the American-Statesman

Some people come to Los Angeles to have an encounter with a big star, and here’s mine: Francesca Lia Block, of “Weetzie Bat” fame, is sitting next to me in the passenger’s seat.

“Weetzie Bat”? If you’re a woman of a certain age (ahem, between about 30ish and 50ish) who embraced punk rock or “alternative” culture in the ’80s and ’90s, you might be familiar with the five-book cult classic series known collectively as “Dangerous Angels,” which celebrated the 30th anniversary of “Weetzie Bat” this year.

For me and so many other young girls coming of age in places other than L.A., Block painted a glittery dream that fueled our adolescent plans for escape. She was simply my

favorite writer, hands down. I checked her books out of the library in my tiny Michigan town so long I never wanted to return them — and occasionally didn’t (naturally, this was pre-Amazon, so I couldn’t just pop online and buy them).

Earlier this year, in a brave moment, I asked Block if she’d be willing to take me to some of “Weetzie Bat’s” haunts in L.A. to see how they’ve changed. Her response: “I haven’t been to a lot of those places in a long time, and many are gone, but we could try and have an adventure at the very least! I’m excited to do this.”

I booked my plane ticket and kept spontaneously squealing until I set foot in L.A. one mid-November afternoon. And here I am, navigating the streets with Block and chatting happily like old friends.



The apartment where author Francesca Lia Block lived during what she describes as one of the happiest times in her life, located near Canter’s Deli in the Fairfax District of Los Angeles. [CONTRIBUTED BY CYNTHIA J. DRAKE]

Block’s Shangri-la

Block began her series with this memorable paragraph, which became like an anthem for my life:

The reason Weetzie Bat hated high school was because no one understood. They didn’t even realize where they were living.

See L.A., D12



NEXT WEEK
SPRING FLING
Last-minute ideas for spring break fun



INSIDE | D11
A MATTERHORN VIEW ISN'T GUARANTEED, BUT IT IS WORTH IT

March blooms with festivals across the state

By **Mauri Elbel**
Special to the American-Statesman

Texas celebrates everything from spring blooms and St. Patrick’s Day to rodeos and rattlesnakes this month. Here are a bunch of festivals in the Lone Star state worth traveling for in March.

Dallas

Now-April 12: Ring in spring at Dallas Blooms, the Southwest’s largest spring floral festival, blossoming now at the Dallas Arboretum and Botanical Garden. Themed “Sounds of Spring,” the spring festival showcases an explosion of color from 100 varieties of spring bulbs and more than 500,000 spring-blooming blossoms, including tulips, daffodils,

Dutch iris, hyacinths, azaleas and cherry blossom trees. Pose for pictures with six majestic musical topiaries including a harp, guitar, saxophone, bass, violin and piano. Each week showcases a different genre of music, and there are live bands each weekend. More at dallasarboretum.org.

March 8: The pipes are calling everyone to Fair Park in Dallas for the 38th Annual North Texas Irish Festival, which celebrates Irish and Celtic cultures with a family-friendly festival filled with music, dancing, whiskey tastings, horse displays, Celtic storytelling, shepherd’s pie, Irish stew, kids activities, chef demonstrations and 13 stages of entertainment. One of the

See FESTIVALS, D11



Ring in spring at Dallas Blooms. [CONTRIBUTED BY DALLAS ARBORETUM]

L.A.

From Page D10

They didn't care that Marilyn's prints were practically in their backyard at Graumann's; that you could buy tomahawks and plastic palm tree wallets at Farmers Market, and the wildest, cheapest cheese and bean and hot dog and pastrami burritos at Oki Dogs; that the waitresses wore skates at the Jetson-style Tiny Naylor's; that there was a fountain that turned tropical sodapop colors, and a canyon where Jim Morrison and Houdini used to live, and all-night potato knishes at Canter's, and not too far away was Venice, with columns, and canals, and even, like the real Venice but maybe cooler because of the surfers.

Most of Block's writing came directly from her real-life experiences in L.A. in the 1980s. "Literally, this is my story — my friends and I, the things I love, the people I love," she tells me as we walk on the Santa Monica Pier talking about her "Weetzie Bat" writing process in her 20s.

She's since written 20 other books, both fiction and nonfiction, but the "Weetzie" books are still the ones for which she is best known.

"There wasn't really any idea of, 'I'm going to be an L.A. writer' or 'I'm going to be a magical realist writer,'" she says. "I was just going to write things that I loved and the way I saw the world. But I don't mind being pigeonholed as a Los Angeles writer. I'm very proud of that."

In the ensuing three decades, Los Angeles has, of course, changed. The Tick Tock Tea Room and several other beloved diners and shops that Block name-dropped in her books are no longer in existence, replaced in some cases by nondescript condominiums, strip malls or even empty lots.

If you'd like to take your own unofficial "Weetzie Bat" — themed tour of some of the remaining book-related stops in L.A., here are a few of the places that still resonate with a little bit of magic — plus a few additional suggestions I collected along my journey.

Where to eat

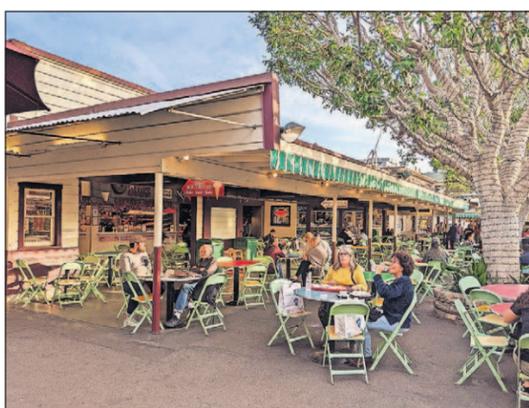
The descriptions of ritual meals, from a humble diner snack to post-bar eats, along with special Weetzie-prepared concoctions, dance on the page of Block's books. I remember wondering exactly what an Oki Dog was and what it tasted like (spoiler alert: I couldn't make it past a few bites).

If you want to try it for yourself, head to Oki Dog (860 N. Fairfax Ave.) and order up the original, a tortilla encasing two hot dogs, a few scant slices of pastrami and bathed in chili cheese, all for \$3.52. If there were a food that represented the polar opposite of what people typically associate with California cuisine, this might be it — you understand Dirk admonishing Weetzie for eating them in the book.

My most enjoyable meal took place at Canter's (419 N. Fairfax Ave.), a 24-hour Jewish diner with orange vinyl booths and plastic-wrapped fruit, where the waitress called me "sweetheart" every time she stopped by. Weetzie craved bagels and flaky potato knishes from here, and I can see why this haven of comfort and familiarity appealed inside this city that leans



Venice Beach remains a popular tourist destination with a "Weetzie Bat" vibe. [CONTRIBUTED BY CYNTHIA J. DRAKE]



The Original Farmers Market in L.A., one of Weetzie's hangouts. [CONTRIBUTED BY CYNTHIA J. DRAKE]



Mel's Drive-In, West Hollywood, is a popular post-bar hangout. [CONTRIBUTED BY CYNTHIA J. DRAKE]

toward the superficial. I was partial to their fluffy black-and-white cookies.

Canter's is in the Fairfax neighborhood, where Block lived for a brief time in the '80s. "This was a very happy time in my life — probably one of the happiest. I had just found out Weetzie was being published. We just did fun stuff all the time," she told me.

For a serious deep dive into Weetzie trivia, you can also order up coffee from the original NORMS (470 N. La Cienega Blvd.), where Weetzie's dad, Charlie Bat, nervously awaited her birth at the hospital down the street.

Noshi Sushi (4430 Beverly Blvd.) and El Coyote (7312 Beverly Blvd.), both briefly mentioned in the books, are also still open for business, for your Japanese and Mexican cravings — El Coyote's red glow casts warm shadows over the collection of tchotchkes and artwork, a dizzying visual treat.

Where to stay

Block set her 2005 "Weetzie Bat" reprisal "Necklace of Kisses" at the Pink Hotel, where a now-40-year-old Weetzie escapes to meet an enchanting cast of characters. It's loosely based on the Beverly Hills Hotel (9641 Sunset Blvd.), and it's also where she once attended her high school prom, she told me. With room rates ranging from \$650 to \$1,000 per night, I opted for a slightly less expensive spin on the Weetzieverse.

Though not mentioned in the books, Mondrian Los Angeles (8440 Sunset Blvd.) first opened in 1985 and features a subtle "Alice in Wonderland" theme throughout (think whimsical light fixtures, mismatched furnishings, a swing in the lobby and an oversize painting of Clint Eastwood blowing a bubble at the reception desk), not to mention one of the most currently popular nighttime spots in West Hollywood: SkyBar. It makes an ideal home base for your Weetzie adventures.

Where to wander

Many Weetzie sights are also on a traditional L.A. tourist's checklist: the Hollywood sign, Grauman's Chinese Theater and Marilyn Monroe's star (planted right in front of a McDonald's) all take their place in Block's introduction to her beloved hometown. Check these off — and others — with a hike or bike tour from Bikes & Hikes LA (bikesandhikesla.com). On my electric-assisted bike tour, we also visited the Witch House and the Greystone Mansion — two places Block mentioned to me as being worthy of exploration because of their unique history.

If you're up for a hike, explore the trails in L.A.'s canyons, the domains of Cherokee Bat: Laurel Canyon (where Jim Morrison used to live), Beachwood Canyon (offering access to the Hollywood sign, where Block later placed her novel "The Hanged Man") and Topanga Canyon.

West Hollywood has retained its character as a trendy, LGBTQ-affirming community filled with funky boutiques, bars and restaurants since the Weetzie days and is worthy of a day's explorations. Bands still perform most nights at the legendary Whiskey a Go Go (8901 Sunset Blvd.), while Rage (8911 Santa Monica Blvd.) and Revolver (8851 Santa Monica Blvd.), where Weetzie and Dirk went "duck hunting," are still bringing the fun in Boystown.

Block used to work at a long-gone boutique on Melrose Avenue, dressing a window mannequin she named Weetzie ("Melrose at that time was so cool — it was all these little boutiques, and artists and musicians would buy stuff there," she said. Most memorably: her jacket sale to Iggy Pop), but signs of counterculture life still persist.

Drive out to the coast to hit up Santa Monica Pier, where you can ride on the carousel Block remembers riding as a child. Later, she'd visit

here with her friends in her teens and 20s and listen to live music in the evenings, dropping a few coins into the mechanical fortune teller with "dead marble eyes" (her favorite, Esmeralda, is long gone, but Zoltar is still here). "To me, this was very romantic," she told me.

Then it's down to Venice Beach, where surfers still slide on

waves and sidewalk vendors hawk clothing, as in the days Weetzie would let Slinkster Dog pull her down the boardwalk on roller skates. Smile and wave at Harry Perry, a legendary character who roams this territory, playing his electric guitar atop Rollerblades. "He is a trip," Block says, noting that he inspired the Genie character in "Weetzie Bat."

More Slinkster must-dos

Though a sprawling, upscale shopping district called the Grove currently shares the footprint, the Original Farmers Market (6333 W. Third St.), where Weetzie scoped out interesting souvenirs and created her own multicultural food crawl, still stands defiantly against the wave of modernity, with its clunky old cash registers (and even, to my delight, a working pay phone).

For years, Hollywood in Miniature (6411 Hollywood Blvd., Suite C), a tiny scale model of Hollywood built in the late 1930s, had disappeared since it first came onto Block's radar sometime in the '80s. She wrote about it in "Weetzie," playing with the idea of perspective, and seeing Hollywood sealed in another time. In fact, My Secret Agent Lover Man passionately declares to Weetzie: "You are my Marilyn. You are my lake full of fishes. You are my sky set, my Hollywood in Miniature, my pink Cadillac. ..."

Nowadays, you can see the miniature landscape at the Hollywood Heritage Museum's storefront on Hollywood Boulevard. Spot bygone landmarks like Schwab's, and then snap a pic of the tiny sky set at the Paramount Studios miniature nearby.

Though it's not a Weetzie hangout, I also spent a memorable afternoon exploring Long Beach, 45 minutes south of L.A., touring the beautiful street murals and falling in love with Retro Row, perusing the coolest collection of vintage records, clothing and random gems (my favorites: a 1979 Sport & Shave Ken doll and a pair of custom rainbow roller skates at Moxi Roller Skate Shop). Definitely Weetzie-approved.

Plan Your Dream Vacation with Insight Vacations® and AAA Travel

Join us...

...for an **informative event** featuring Insight Vacations® where they will present their exciting itineraries and introduce you to their way of travel.

Exciting show features include:

- Free admission and informative presentation
- Light refreshments
- Limited-time special offers on a variety of destinations
- Exclusive Member Benefits
- And more!

RSVP today!

Saturday, March 14, 2020 at 3:00 PM

Georgetown Event Center
1 Chamber Way
Georgetown, TX 78626

ASK ABOUT OUR
EARLY
PAYMENT
DISCOUNT
OFFER

Contact a AAA Travel Agent for details and to RSVP.

CALL: 512-335-5222 VISIT: 13376 Highway 183 North, Ste. 108
Austin, TX 78750

Certain restrictions may apply. AAA members must make advance reservations through AAA Travel to obtain Member Benefits and savings. Member Benefits may vary based on departure date. Not responsible for errors or omissions. Your local AAA club acts as an agent for the various tour providers listed and is a motor club with a principal place of business at 1225 Freesport Parkway, Coppell, TX 75019. CST 1016202-80. Copyright © 2017 Auto Club Services, LLC. All Rights Reserved.

INSIGHT VACATIONS®
The Art of Traveling in Style