

Feature



L.A. Fashion Confidential Gail Wolfenden-Steib*

The L.A. Fashion District is a great place to find fabrics for this season's costumes. Here are eight inside tips and tricks for making your first visit productive and enjoyable.

My first trip to the Los Angeles Fashion District was completely overwhelming. I was not prepared for the sensory overload I experienced or the local culture. The image of a deer in the headlights comes to mind when I look back on the trip. I was too overwhelmed to even make a purchase.

Today I have years of experience under my belt and have a few basic pointers to share that will make the first time visitor's experience enjoyable and hopefully profitable.

About the District

There are thousands of businesses in the 90-block L.A. Fashion District. Generally, stores and products (women's wear, men's wear, kid's wear, etc.) are grouped together in close proximity.

Formerly known as the Garment District, it is home to the largest selection of textiles and notions in the United States. There are nearly 200 wholesale and retail textile stores selling trim, beading and fabric for apparel, crafts and home decor. Shoppers can find nearly every type of fabric, running the gamut from novelty to exotic silks and European upholstery. Prices range from 99 cents to thousands of dollars per yard.



Textile and notion stores are generally centered within four blocks, from 8th Street down to Olympic Boulevard, between Maple Avenue and San Julian Street. Santee Alley is an actual alley, located between Santee Street and Maple Avenue, from Olympic Boulevard to 12th Street.

There is a zoomable map at: <http://www.fashiondistrict.org/page.aspx?id=126> that gives you an overview (see detail left). You can also order a free printed map to take along through a link on the page.

General business hours are Monday - Sunday, from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Saturdays are the busiest days, as many stores that are wholesale-only will sell to the general public. Sundays, only about 30% of the stores are open. Santee Alley and many stores around Santee Alley are open 365 days a year. Individual store hours may vary

Tip #1: Parking

In my opinion it is worth paying one of the many lots in the area rather than feeding a meter Monday through Saturday. Metered street parking is free on Sundays.



My favorite lot is located above the shops at 9th Street and Wall. They are a self-park and usually have a reasonable charge (Christmas season sees the weekend rate jump up to \$8 some years but normally it's around \$5). They do not take your keys (something that a few of the smaller lots might do on busy days) and they do not double park. There is also an attendant patrolling the area on bike. Elevators allow for easy accessibility.

Tip #2: Restrooms

Look for public restrooms on the Fashion District Map. A few clean facilities downtown are easily accessible. Bring a supply of quarters, as the majority of places will charge between twenty-five and seventy five cents to use the rest room.



Michael Levine's Upholstery at 919 S. Maple Ave. and their regular fabric store across the street (right), have clean, maintained facilities. Starbucks on 9th Street and Santee is also reasonably clean but they reserve the use for customers.

Some of the most frightening facilities I've seen have been inside some of the small shops (we are talking no doors and new life forms) so be sure to plan ahead. I always pack wet wipes or hand sanitizer just in case.

Tip #3: Luggage



Rolling luggage is a must when shopping in the Fashion District if you are planning any sizable purchase. Store employees will watch your bags at the front if you can't maneuver the aisles.

There are street vendors that sell inexpensive rolling duffel bags in the \$20 range. Long, narrow bags work better than short and wide. The larger your wheels the easier it is to maneuver curbs. Exterior pockets are great for small purchases and for holding water bottles.

Tip #4: Bring a friend

Shopping as a team is easier. I prefer to have a friend guarding my bags than a stranger. It's also helpful when you need to use the facilities (though Michael Levine's Upholstery is large enough to bring your bags into the bathroom with you).



Tip #5: You have to play 'Lets Make a Deal'

The first price you are given in a store is not their best price. Don't act too interested and be prepared to walk away.

Do your homework before you go downtown. You can always go back to a particular store later. Check out the prices that other merchants offer for the same or similar fabrics. On a recent trip, a vendor started at \$12 for a knit fabric with a flame motif (ok quality—no one else carried it). When I walked out of the store I paid \$4 per yard for 10 yards.

You will usually get a better price if you buy in volume. The only exception to this seems to be at the \$1.99 stores: there I've only walked away without paying tax despite buying in volume.



Be as pleasant as you can through the process and don't insult folks with a ridiculous low offer. I try not to say 'I'll only give you x dollars'. Approach it with an 'I'm sorry that's out of my price range on this project' or 'what kind of price can you give me for x yardage?' At this point they'll usually ask what I am willing to spend. I'll

give a price slightly lower than I want to spend and we'll work up from this point.

Tip #6: Avoid holidays

Ok—this sounds like a stupid comment but having gone to the district on Rosh Hashanah in the past, this is something to think about. More than half the vendors were closed.

It isn't like going to Joann's—store hours are flexible on any given day (except for Michael Levine's). It also becomes a zoo after Thanksgiving when people start to Christmas shop at the last minute. Just because it's not a legal holiday doesn't mean it's not observed.

Tip #7: The Santee Alley

Santee Alley (right) is one of the most popular shopping areas in the LA Fashion

District, best known for its festival-like atmosphere and amazing bargains. Santee Alley's over 150 stores and vendors sell everything from apparel for the entire family, accessories, toys, perfume, gift items and much more!

I highly recommend hitting the alley in the morning. By the afternoon it's usually packed with people and stifling. Some prices are set in these stores but you can do a little bit of negotiating for multiples.



Tip #8: Bring cash!

This is the most important tip on the list. If you want the best possible price on any item be sure to pay with cash! Not every vendor will accept checks, credit or debit cards. If they do take plastic you will most likely be charged tax. Tax isn't always added onto the price when you pay cash. If you need a receipt be sure to ask for one. There are ATMs available—most merchants will be able to direct you to the closest one.



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LA Fashion District Short List of Vendors

Lucky Fabric	305 E. 9 th St. #107 & 102	(213) 689-1570	\$1.99 yard fabrics—lots of floral prints
Silk City	305 E. 9 th St. #120	(213) 627-0881	silk chiffons, Asian silk brocades
Kash Cool	416-418 E. 9 th St.	(213) 489-3010	\$1 serger cones, zippers
Journal Fabric	419 E. 9 th St.	(213) 624-0524	better quality fabrics, silk dupioni, bridal fabrics – haggle for best prices
Carmel Tex	432 E. 9 th St. #1	(213) 629-5255	better quality silks and rayons, bargain home decorator fabrics out front
Mike's Fabrics	821 Wall St.	(213) 624-3038	natural fibers (mainly cotton and wool) at amazing prices
S & A Fabrics	850 Wall St.	(213) 627-0980	wide variety of fabrics, great prices, helpful staff – this kind of service is rare
Downtown Trimming	905 S. Maple Ave.	(213) 688-8884	nice people—lots of beaded appliques
Michael Levine Inc	919, 920 S. Maple Ave.	(213) 622-6259	will swatch and ship—huge retail store—no haggling on prices
Fabrics & Fabrics	760 Crocker St.	(213) 488-0909	the place to go for silk lining with every color imaginable
FIDM Scholarship Store	919 S Grand Ave.	(213) 624-1200	fabrics donated by designers and clothing companies, mostly \$1.00/yd