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MUSEUMS

A window on the past opens wider

After a \$275-million rebuilding, the Getty Villa surrounds you in the ancient world and modern amenities.
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No matter if Herakles has fallen off your holiday card list. Never mind if you don't know an *alabastron* from a *loutrophoros*. Odds are you will soon find yourself at the Getty Villa on the edge of Malibu, maybe trailing a loved one, maybe squiring out-of-towners. After an eight-year closure for renovation and litigation, the villa finally reopens Saturday.

But where do you start?

Here's what you need to know. First, Herakles is dead, so no worries there. Second, just by crossing the threshold, you'll be one up on J. Paul Getty. Though he dreamed up the villa in about 1968, the old man spent most of his time in England and never got around to visiting the completed project. He died in 1976, two years after the villa first opened to the public.

But be warned: Though admission is free, you do need a time-specific reservation and \$7 in cash for parking. And though more tickets may be released, as of press time, all of the available reservations had been snapped up through July 31. So you may have time to digest this philistine's guide before putting it to use.

Making an entrance

Once you've made the Getty turn off, Pacific Coast Highway, drive along the Roman-road flagstones that climb the lushly landscaped canyon and look for the parking structure on the left. It's three levels, topped by a meadow, just to keep things looking pastoral.

Once you're parked, head for the entry pavilion and start looking up. If you don't take the elevators, it's about 50 yards of walking and 96 stairsteps to the arrival balcony or, as the architecturally inclined like to say, "the big reveal."

From here you'll see that, as sure as Theseus slew the Minotaur, you're in the middle of someplace extraordinary, someplace that cost \$275 million to redesign and rebuild. Spread before you lie the museum entrance (to your right at about 2 o'clock), the restaurant and shop (to your left at 11 o'clock), and the outdoor theater, fanned out at your feet. In fact, the most direct path to the museum entrance is to step down the descending levels of the theater.

Before the villa closed for this renovation in mid-1997, a restaurant stood where the outdoor theater is now. And that's just the beginning of the changes. Scanning the site from here, you get a glimpse of the challenge the villa's redesigners had: The 64-acre Getty property is steeply sloped, with well-heeled, noise-wary, traffic-averse, litigation-ready neighbors all around.

Facing this tricky topography and the property's eccentric history as a 20th century copy of a 2,000-year-old Roman country house, the answer of architects Rodolfo Machado and Jorge Silvetti was to half-bury everything in the hillside. This gives the whole place the feeling of a well-catered archeological dig, minus the dust, plus a few thousand plants and up to 1,200 visitors per day.

In the museum

In 48,000 square feet of gallery space on two floors — so, about the size of your neighborhood Ralphs — the villa displays 1,200 pieces.

And, yes, 30 of them have been named by the Italian government in its legal battle to reclaim artifacts that it says were smuggled out of Italy. But bear in mind that visitors are seeing just 2% of the Getty's antiquities collection. Even if everything you see were to vanish overnight, the curators would have an additional 42,800 less-sexy baubles to fall back on. (The Greek government has made noises about seeking the return of four items too, but hasn't taken the legal steps that Italy has.)

Twenty-three rooms are dedicated to the permanent collection, and five more are set aside for temporary exhibitions such as the villa's initial shows on glassmaking in antiquity, 19th century photography of ancient Mediterranean sites, and the villa's renovation.

The museum's focus is on three kinds of people: the Greeks, who dominated the Mediterranean from 900 to 31 BC; the Etruscans, who sustained a distinct culture in the hill towns of what is now Italy over about the same time; and the Romans, who refined Greek ideas (renaming Herakles Hercules, for instance) as their empire rose to eclipse the Greeks and then fell, all between 753 BC and AD 565. In other words, this is all history that happened about the time of those almost entirely accurate films "Gladiator," "Troy" and "Alexander." Questions?

The museum begins with an atrium and a quartet of little rooms holding mostly vessels made of silver, glass, bronze, marble and terra cotta. (Ancient vases come in at least 16 shapes, each with a name, including, yes, the *alabastron* and the *loutrophoros*.)

From there, since we've established that you're not a friend of Herakles, you may want to start with the TimeScape Room, on the right from the atrium, near the elevators. This space, which uses shiny new technology to outline the times, peoples and places covered by the art collection, makes a fine launch point.

As you explore the rooms around the square inner peristyle garden, you hit such themes as monsters, minor deities and mythological heroes, along with the showcase room known as the Temple of Herakles. That's the one with the domed ceiling, curving, ochre walls and the inlaid floor of alternating gray and yellow marble triangles. Oh, and a statue of Herakles, mythic son of Zeus.

Still, looking at the floor is not such a bad idea. Apart from a few with marble mosaics underfoot, most of the villa's floors are done in gleaming terrazzo, Machado and Silvetti having devised a different pattern for every room.

Upstairs, in addition to temporary exhibitions, you find coins, gems, jewelry and more, including the Getty's first mummy. He's a young man, about 18, who died about AD 150. His name is Herakleides, and in the portrait painted on the linen that wraps his face, he wears a mustache and a golden wreath. He was buried, for reasons unknown, with a fine-feathered friend — an ibis. The Getty bought Herakleides in 1991 and, in belated recognition of the fact that no museum has ever gone broke showing mummies, is displaying him now for the first time.

The two biggest rooms upstairs are a matched pair, one dominated by a row of busts of men in antiquity, the other devoted to portrayals of women and children. For a respite, head to the corner reading room, a clubby little shelf-lined niche that offers four chairs and a bench.

The theaters

In a clear nod to Dionysus (god of wine, vegetation and theater), there are three. The first is the 450-seat outdoor Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman Theater, which will serve as the venue for about 40 classical dramas and concerts a year. (In deference to the neighbors, only the spoken word can be amplified, not instruments or other sound sources.)

Next, if you follow the obvious route, you'll pass the 250-seat indoor auditorium, to be used for concerts, film screenings and play readings. Just inside the museum, there's a screening space with 28 seats where visitors can catch the villa's 10-minute get-acquainted video.

The outdoor theater would be a good place, by the way, to casually remark upon Broadway's regrettable disdain for the work of Euripides. His "Hippolytus," written in 428 BC about an innocent young man and lustful older woman, will be the first outdoor drama presented at the revived villa, in September.

Food

Nothing too fancy. Instead, a cafe will offer self-service casual Mediterranean fare — soup, salad, panini, pizza and such, with beer and wine. The priciest dish is an organic shrimp risotto at \$14.95. It'll be open from 11:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., with seating for 375, indoors and outside. You can also take box lunches to public seating areas beyond the cafe.

Or if it's raining, you may get a chance to head upstairs to the smaller Founders Room and its panoramic view of the grounds. Most of the time, Getty officials say, the Founders Room, which seats about 50, will be used for special events such as luncheons for donors and parties for corporate sponsors such as Merrill Lynch (which underwrote the villa's current photography exhibition). As with the Getty's Brentwood campus, no weddings, no bar mitzvahs.

Gardens

Sooner or later, you may start thinking, "Wait a minute, this isn't an archeological dig or a museum. It's a Mediterranean flower, shrub and tree show with a few quaint buildings in the way."

Well, there are four gardens. Those highly manicured courtyards next to the museum galleries are known as the inner and outer peristyle gardens. The inner garden is square and smaller, with nine statues. The outer is a long rectangle, with more than a dozen statues, that points toward the sea.

Both are arrayed around reflecting pools, with ivy, pomegranates, laurels and roses, lots of lavender in the inner garden, lots of sweet violet in the outer one. There are a handful of benches, where it would be entirely appropriate to sit and wonder: "What animal would I prefer to be buried with?"

Then there's the herb garden, full of ingredients common to the Mediterranean kitchen, and the walled east garden, accessible from the inner peristyle area, notable for its bright-hued mosaic fountain.

Altogether, more than 300 flowering plants have been used on the site. In addition, landscapers added 1,200 trees to the 1,500 that stood already, including many olive, cedar, cypress, oak and sycamore. Many of the plants were chosen because they are thought to have been prevalent in the ancient Mediterranean, but as you move toward the perimeter from the center of the grounds, the California natives begin to take over.

Merchandise

The main store, which stands next to the restaurant, takes about 3,000 square feet. Managers plan to limit themselves to items related to classical antiquity, but that still leaves plenty of room for improvisation, including the Alexander the Great action figure (\$9.95) and a reproduction Greek bowl, made in Sicily, priced at a cool \$3,500.

The Getty has produced four grown-up books and two children's books to coincide with the reopening, their prices ranging from \$10.95 to \$65. Beyond that, the staff has laid in works from classical authors from Aeschylus to Plutarch. Also on the site, set up like a newsstand near the facilities for school groups, will be an Explore Store, with kid-friendly items.

Kid stuff

The museum only looks as if it's closed on Wednesdays. In fact, those are the days school groups have the run of the place. Facilities for them include two classrooms.

But there are plenty of educational offerings through the rest of the week, including the Family Forum, which is not a faith-based think tank but a "hands-on discovery room," where kids can take inspiration from the ancient vases and draw with erasable ink on molded resin forms. If they duck behind a shadow wall, they can strike poses to throw silhouettes to match the figures they've just seen. And there's a simulated kiln to show how ceramics are fired.

The home stretch

Look, but do not venture, farther upslope, beyond the main visitor area and the galleries, and you'll see a second cluster of buildings. This area, known to some insiders as the north campus, is generally closed to the public. It houses four conservation labs along with staff offices, a classroom for the UCLA/Getty master's program on the conservation of ethnographic and archeological materials, and a 20,000-volume research library in the ranch house that held the first J. Paul Getty Museum when it opened in 1954.

As you gaze that way, or perhaps as you begin the downhill journey back to your car, you can make big points with friends, family, security guards and dedicated docents by casually remarking:

"And to think, it all began with a fake."

This is true. Getty made his first foray into antiquities collecting in July 1939. Unfortunately, as the Getty Trust's own antiquities handbook notes, the terra cotta sculpture of a reclining female that he bought from Sotheby's turned out to be a 19th century imitation. Plucky billionaire that he was, he kept it at.

And here we are, reaping the rewards.

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Getting into the Getty Villa

Where: Getty Villa, 17985 Pacific Coast Highway, Pacific Palisades

When: Reopens Saturday. Its regular hours will be 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Thursdays through Mondays, except for major holidays.

Price: Admission is free, but reservations are required (no walk-ins), and parking is \$7 per car, cash only.

Info: To get tickets, which are for timed entrance, call (310) 440-7300 or visit www.getty.edu. (Groups of nine or more should call rather than use the website.)

But be ready to wait. Though Getty officials say they may release more tickets once they have a better sense of how crowds behave, the Getty website at press time showed the villa sold out through July 31.

Getting there: The only way in for visitors is from the northbound lanes of Pacific Coast Highway. As you head up the canyon, look for the first parking building on the left, the South Parking Structure, with 248 spaces on three levels. On busy days, you might be directed to the central structure, which has 112 spaces directly beneath the villa.

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