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## Behind the Shutter: Dotan Saguy on capturing - and saving - Venice Beach's weirdness



Jenna watches over two giant boa constrictors that their owner, a street performer she barely knows, entrusted to her CREDIT: DOTAN SAGUY

By Chiara Palazzo

14 MAY 2018 · 7:00AM

Venice Beach, the bohemian home of freaks and outcasts once known as "the slum by the sea", is rapidly changing.

Over the past few years alone, Venice has become one of the most expensive neighbourhoods in Los Angeles and has been called the "corporate campus" of messaging app Snapchat.

Photographer Dotan Saguy has spent hundreds of hours documenting what he believes to be the last days of this "Bohemian Paradise" and has now collected his account of this endangered culture in a new book that will be presented at Photo London next week.

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"It's a fascinating place with a very distinct vibe," Saguy told The Telegraph.



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An oiled-up body builder wearing nothing but a speedo enters the stage of the Mr Muscle Beach contest CREDIT: DOTAN SAGUY

"There's a cult of the weird and a freedom of spirit there that makes odd occurrences happen much more frequently than anywhere else I know. To tourists this circus-like atmosphere might be amusing but to me it quickly became addictive to the point that each time I couldn't go out shooting I'd feel like I was missing out," he said.

Venice Beach, on Santa Monica's south side, was built as a tourist attraction by tobacco magnate Abbot Kinney in 1905. Its canals fell into neglect in the 1950s and resident poet Lawrence Lipton once described it as "a jerry-built slum by the sea". It's the birthplace of modern skateboarding and has been an haven for artists, street performers, surfers and the generally weird until recent times.



A man, who goes by the name of Jingles, appears to be giving this young mother-to-be a paper flower. He has been preaching for animal rights and a vegan lifestyle for many years from his booth on the Venice Boardwalk. CREDIT: DOTAN SAGUY

"The more I photographed Venice the more I got to know its people, and that's when I realised the place I had fallen in love with might be living out its last days," he said.

Saguy, who is originally from Israel and lived in Paris and New York, moved to Los Angeles in 2003. "I remember visiting regularly either to bike or play tourist. When I got the street photography bug around 2013, my perception of Venice changed. That's when I started truly appreciating how amazing this place was.

"It's funny how the camera can slow you down and put you into a meditative mood. Your eyes suddenly open-up to a whole culture that had been there all along."



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A group of young skateboarders gather to smoke marijuana in the early morning sun in front of the iconic Touch of Venice mural on Windward Avenue. These youths come from various parts of the country to live the bohemian lifestyle on Venice Beach for a few days before moving on to their next destination. CREDIT: DOTAN SAGUY

"When I take pictures I either try and shoot so the subject doesn't notice me at all or I build a relationship with them ahead of time so they're so comfortable with my presence that they forget about me and my camera. Either way the shots are never posed."

Among the people Saguy got to know is Jenna, a South Carolina native who moved to sunny Venice in 2010, whom he captured as she was watching over two giant boa constrictors entrusted to her by their owner - a street performer she barely knows.

Jenna, a single mother, suffers from failed back surgery syndrome, acquired from a violent car accident she had as a teenager. She and her young son Jackson can be found most afternoons on the beach.



Five-year-old Jackson watches a boa constrictor while another slithers toward his mom Jenna, relaxing nearby in the sand CREDIT: DOTAN SAGUY

"The snake scene ended up carrying a lot of symbolism that is dear to me. They immediately reminded me of a Garden of Eden scene, which contrasts with two other images of the same mother and son later on in the book after they get an eviction notice."

"I am not condemning gentrification in general. It is a natural economic phenomenon in a free market society like the US and can have a positive impact on some neighbourhoods.

"I am just arguing that in the case of Venice Beach gentrification is slowly killing the cherished bohemian identity of the place that has made it world famous for so long."





An improvised performance by Elizabeth, a local artist dressed as a white bird, and Freedom, a homeless musician, turns into a group dance as a handful of spectators joins in. CREDIT: DOTAN SAGUY

Snapchat has become the ultimate symbol of the gentrification that hit the neighbourhood where Jim Morrison used to sleep on a rooftop, on which he wrote the lyrics to some of The Doors' biggest hits, and Arnold Schwarzenegger pumped iron in the 1960s.

The messaging app, originally housed in a tiny blue bungalow on the Venice boardwalk, has grown to 1,900 employees in the beachside neighbourhood, crowding out local staples such as the Venice Beach Freakshow and earning the area the nickname "Silicon Beach".

Saguy thinks that the change is not just down to tech companies. "Venice has been gentrifying since the 1980s so it's definitely been gradual," he said.



The closing of the Venice Beach Freakshow on April 30th 2017 may have been one of the most emblematic moments in the gentrification of Venice Beach. After a decade of good old-fashioned circus-like performances featuring two-headed turtles, five-legged dogs, bearded ladies, sword swallows and other cast members who glorified the weird and the outcast the Venice Beach Freakshow was forced out of its iconic location on the boardwalk. CREDIT: DOTAN SAGUY

"However gentrification has clearly accelerated in recent years. There's no doubt Snapchat and a few other tech companies setting up shop by the Venice boardwalk had a lot to do with it but there are many other factors. It's a very complex topic," he said.

In late February the company put a large part of its office space up for lease with plans to have more than half of its employees in the Santa Monica area by the middle of the year.

Locals have celebrated the move, but commercial real estate brokers predict Snapchat's influence on the neighbourhood will remain - and Saugy agrees with them.

"It is encouraging news for sure but to be honest I think the damage is already done to a large extent, many small businesses that were part of the fabric of the boardwalk like the Venice Freakshow have been pushed out many months ago. The rent prices went way up and I doubt these small mom-and-pop businesses will be able to afford subleasing the space vacated by Snapchat.





A group of young hippies sing on a bench across from the Muscle Beach Gym. The boardwalk is deserted by tourists on this rainy spring day. CREDIT: DOTAN SAGUY

"These properties also remain owned by Snapchat so the company will retain a lot of power in deciding who can lease them and at what price.

"There's no doubt that having smaller well funded tech startups or high end galleries leasing up the space will be an improvement over having a large monolithic company like Snapchat invading this small seaside neighbourhood, but unfortunately I don't think it will reverse the damage that has already been done."

"I just hope the city ends-up achieving some sort of a balance that keeps the boardwalk weird or they will kill the proverbial goose that lays the golden eggs."

Dotan Saguy's *Venice Beach* will be presented at Photo London, Somerset House, 17-20 May 2018, [photolondon.org](http://photolondon.org)

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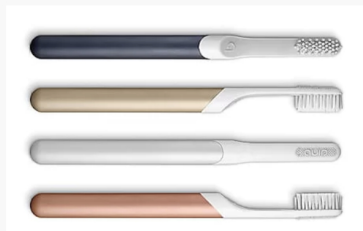
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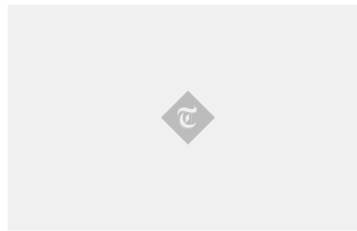
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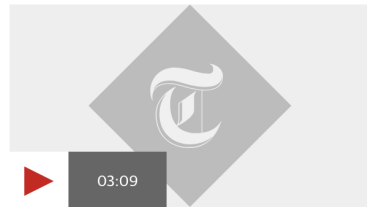
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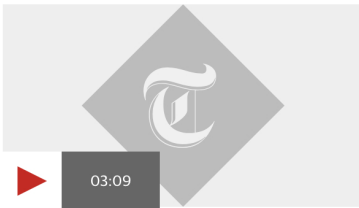
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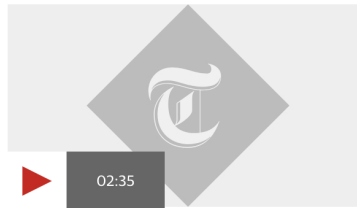
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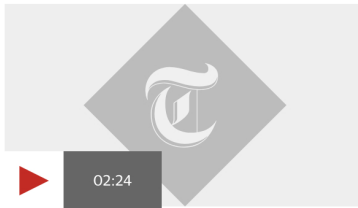
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