



# California

The price is wrong, bitch

NICK KHATTAR  
STAFF CONTRIBUTOR

It is a place that has existed to me only on TV, in magazines and in dreams – California. But not anymore.

For 10 days in January, five of which I should have been in class, a friend and I went on a kamikaze tour around California. I've concluded it is a vastly beautiful and equally bizarre place.

In those 10 days we covered roughly 2,500 kilometres (don't ask me what it is in miles; 10 days of dealing with that confounding system did nothing to help me comprehend it). I could fill this entire column with tales of debauchery, run-ins with the law and near-death experiences, but *The Gazette* can only afford so much ink, so I've decided instead to bring you the most bizarre of it.

Our adventure began in Los Angeles, the City of Angels, where dreams are made and exploited. On our last day in L.A. before going up the country (Canned Heat lyric reference here) we wanted to do something memorable, something very Los Angeles. Something Hollywood. So naturally, we got tickets to *The Price Is Right*.

Every child of the mid- to late-80s has warm memories of afternoons spent watching Bob Barker reward enthusiastic contestants for their consumer-based knowledge, or disappoint them in a game of Plinko. I always wanted to be that smiling contestant, flaunting my superior shopping wisdom.

We arrived at CBS Studios, necks sore from craning them outside the car window during the drive down Sunset Boulevard. After a slight detour through the ritziest 'farmers' market' I have ever seen (equipped with a Versace boutique), we picked up our tickets and were directed to the waiting area.

My friend, being a *Price Is Right* vet (he was in the audience for Bob Barker's last episode), gave us a bit of an idea of what we could expect. What I saw as I turned the corner into the 'waiting area' (more like a holding pen for society's forgotten souls), was nowhere near what I had been prepared for. Upwards of 400 people, 300 of which were sporting some variation of a fanny pack, were sitting, standing, pacing or otherwise trying to contain themselves. I have only really seen videos of scenes like this on TV and it was in the holy journey to Mecca.

Most of these people had been there since 7 a.m. It was 3 p.m. when we got there.

Words can't describe the effect that being in this scene has on a person. I would compare it to the worst symptoms of Lyme Disease. It's as if the dredges of society have all gathered in this one place to partake in some holy event. Twice a day, four times a week, the trailer parks in southern California become ghost towns.

People flock from all over to come experience this thing. In fact, I was talking to a couple that had come all the way from Labrador to be a part of the madness! I mean my god, what is wrong with these people? I would later end up meeting a guy who had been to 19 tapings. It's absolute insanity.

I tried to find out where the lady who kept talking to invisible 'Ernie' was from, but alas, she and 'Ernie' were engaged in a heated debate about how much a dream vacation to Montreal would cost. The strange thing was, one of the showcase prizes turned out to be a trip to Montreal.

After waiting in line for three of the



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You might not want to be the next contestant.

longest, most mind numbing hours of my life, we were finally moving.

Before you get into the studio, the producer interviews everyone in order to pick who gets to be a contestant. Essentially, you have 30 seconds to make an impression. So I threw on my *Price Is Right* T-shirt, puffed up my hair and spun a tale of how I was a retired mechanical bull rider, now operating an alpaca farm, and was there in honour of my late bull riding mentor, whose only wish was to one day compete on *The Price Is Right*.

I think I saw a lady shed a tear.

Name tags brightly adorning our chests, we were finally going into the studio. I closed my eyes. Having already had my mind completely blown by the circus of half-evolved TV zombies I had witnessed outside, I was prepared for just about anything.

What I was not prepared for was the full-out disco dance party that was going on inside. What a ridiculous spectacle it was. Literally all 300 people were dancing to *Sounds of the 70s*.

It was absolutely bananas. They had a disco ball going while Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive" screamed out of the speakers. The couple from Labrador was dancing hand in hand on the stage while a break dance circled formed. It was so surreal. I kept blinking my eyes and shaking my head, certain I would wake up in a hospital any moment from an overdose.

I searched for officials who should certainly be putting a halt to this madness, but alas, the CBS crew was part of it. It was the closest thing you could come to a serious acid trip while being sober as a stoplight. Although I kept scrutinizing my friends, urging them to admit they had slipped drugs into my morning taquito, they assured me that what I was seeing was actually happening.

Eventually things calmed down and Drew Carey, the show's new host, took the stage to applause similar, I'm sure, to what Bob Hope used to be greeted by when he visited American soldiers overseas. A giant man got up, took off his shirt and, I shit you not, displayed an "I love Drew Carey" tattoo across his stomach. It turned out this horrid specimen was studying to be a minister in a church. May God have mercy on his soul.

The contestants were called up and games were played. These new games were elementary and boring, not like the challenging games I remembered, like "Price Puzzle" or "Gamble Your Goods." Instead it was "Pick the Right Key" and the "Moving-Price-o-Meter." It was like the games were made to accommodate a blind chimp. Then I looked around me, and it all made sense.

Drew Carey's previous TV ventures have not done him justice. He is staggeringly funny without even trying.

He has managed to make the simple act of existing hilarious. In his chitchat between commercial breaks, he expressed not only subtle humour, based around the satires of life, but also conveyed stunning intelligence I've never seen before in Hollywood. He would make quirky references to the exploitation of Third World countries, while burning the audience on their idiocy for not knowing what European football and the World Cup is.

And holy hamburgers! The questions that man had to endure are enough to spawn a vein of hatred the size of the San Andreas Fault Line for the American public. Someone asked him what he likes better: KFC or McDonald's.

"I prefer to eat chicken that grows itself," Carey replied. "And beef that is 100 per cent not made by the 100 Per Cent Beef company."

The only people who got the joke were the small percentage of people there strictly as a novelty, as opposed to the vast majority who were there for the religious experience.

What should have taken an hour to film actually took three hours, due to a mechanical problem.

While they fixed the problem again and again, I got my shirt signed by Drew and also got to know Rich Fields, the announcer, pretty well. Turns out he has a broadcasting degree and was inspired to announce for the show by Johnny Olson, the original *Price Is Right* announcer. I also found out he's an avid poet and debater.

The last competitors were called and the Showcase Showdown was about to be decided. I hadn't been chosen as a contestant. Instead, the minister-in-training with the tattoo on his stomach was standing up there, competing for the trip to Montreal. I guess he had Jesus on his side.

In the end, Dezy from Alabama beat Stomach Tattoo and won the pot of gold with his bid of \$1.

It was six hours since we had first arrived at CBS Studios, but it felt like much longer. It was kind of like I had been in detention, but instead of writing lines, I had to listen to the school yard bully and his family shout at each other over how much a box of baking soda costs. It was going to take a lot of malt liquor and Lucky Strikes to cleanse my soul.

When we got out of the building, I felt lightheaded and my knees were weak. I could barely hold my cellphone – my hands were swollen and sore from the endless amount of forced applause.

Out of all the ridiculous things I have ever done in my life (which is a lot), this was by far the most bizarre. I felt infinitely dumber for having experienced it, but I learned something. I didn't get to fulfill my dream of playing Plinko, but I did learn that some dreams just aren't worth chasing.