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Get a Clue

Contestants Swarm Local Landmarks in a Truly Amazing Race

by Kathryn Maese

On a recent Saturday afternoon, about 20 couples, each with a mysterious origami cup in hand, sped through Little Tokyo to Grand Central Market on a mission. After ditching their cars in a nearby parking lot, they hoofed it up Hill Street in search of an exotic ingredient most had never heard of - flor de tilo.

Despite their name, the "Bewildered" team promptly located a stall in the market selling the brownish herb. They filled the origami cup as instructed and were handed a cryptic missive by the vendor.

"It has played host to the Academy Awards, Hollywood stars, kings, queens and presidents. Today, it hosts the happy couple in the enclosed photo. Travel on foot to this 1923 historic landmark overlooking Pershing Square. In the Rendezvous Court (at one time the original lobby), find the couple pictured and give them the Flor de Tilo in your cup."

Dashing back out onto Hill Street, Bewildered broke into a sprint as they were joined by two other teams hot on the trail of the next stop - the Biltmore Hotel. Race/LA was on.

Much like the television reality show, "The Amazing Race," two players make up each team, and must complete a challenge before receiving the next clue. Participants are allowed a single map, but no cell phones. The event, now in its third year, takes racers all over the city.

A pair of races last month started at Hollywood and Highland and brought the teams Downtown in the afternoon. Their first local stop was the James Irvine Garden, followed by the Japanese American National Museum, where they were challenged by origami master Yami Yamauchi to make the origami cup. Once they completed it to Yamauchi's satisfaction, they received a clue.

Running Through the Biltmore

The scene later inside the Biltmore verged on controlled chaos. Several sweaty, frantic couples zipped through the lobby in search of a tea-sipping duo but missed them entirely and instead headed up the grand staircase. The team 2 Cool Cats immediately realized their mistake as they spotted the dapper couple in a small alcove sipping tea and nibbling on cucumber sandwiches.

Clue holder Mary Jo Catlett, who competed in the very first Race/LA, held out a teapot for the contestants to pour in their flor de tilo. As she handed over the clue, Catlett paused dramatically. "Follow the water up the stairs," she instructed. As others approached she added, "Where do they keep the books?"

"This year's race is neck and neck," said Catlett, an actress who played the housekeeper Pearl Gallagher in the television series "Diff'rent Strokes." "It was hard and we finished dead last when we played but John's clues are great."

Contestants tore out the door for a steep climb up the five-story Bunker Hill Steps across from the Central Library in search of the Robert Graham sculpture "Source Figure." From there, the teams



Teams in the recent Race/LA had to find a couple in the Biltmore Hotel. Once they dropped off herbs they had purchased in the Grand Central Market, they received a clue to their next destination. Photo by Gary Leonard

raced to the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, where they searched amid scores of names in the mausoleum for the tomb of actor Gregory Peck.

Some teams took taxis and others hopped on the subway to Olvera Street's Avila Adobe, the oldest existing house in the city. Once there, players had to shop for a variety of traditional items before making a mad dash to the finish line on the upper level of the California Plaza Watercourt.

As the minutes ticked away, the plaza remained quiet. "They are on their way," Race/LA organizer John Hennessy said as he got word from a nearby Race Monitor. "They should be here any minute."

Then, from the plaza below, there were footsteps. Brennan Movius took a wrong turn up a flight of stairs but finally found an escalator leading to the last stop of the race. He called to partner Leila Rouhi, who trailed behind him.

They completed the race in about six hours, and finished 15 minutes ahead of Team Barry Cohen (named after last year's winner).

"Downtown was the most fun," Movius said. "It was more urban and we did a lot of running around. Once we got to Grand Central it was just sort of a free for all."

Throughout the race, contestants were besieged by time penalties and clues that only one member could perform. Runner-up Brian Talbot's team was docked 10 minutes when they couldn't find the James Irvine Garden and had to call for help. "I asked people and freaked out but we couldn't find it. No one knew. That was the hardest."

Strategies varied. Some teams asked a lot of questions while others relied on personal knowledge. Movius said his team did both. It didn't hurt that Rouhi works Downtown at Wilshire and Figueroa. "We gained a lot of ground Downtown," she said. "Also, people were really helpful."

The most challenging part of the race? "Running," laughed Rouhi. "It was way more physical than I thought it would be. There were stairs. Lots of stairs."