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Photographs by PHILIP RODAK

UNDER THE LIGHTS: Competitors in Race/LA work to solve clues in the Museum of Neon Art. Two-person teams solve brainteasers, discover clues and undertake physical challenges.

The love of the hunt

Race/LA is the local version of 'The Amazing Race.'

By LIANE BONIN
Special to The Times

THINK Los Angeles is your personal playground? Have no fear of weekend traffic, mind games or the thrill of the chase?

Race/LA, a local event inspired by the CBS reality television show "The Amazing Race," leads adventure seekers on a daylong, city-centric scavenger hunt. Armed only with a Thomas Guide if they choose (no cellphones or GPS navigation allowed), two-person teams must solve brainteasers, unearth clues, undertake physical challenges (such as carrying Chinese good luck beads 30 feet using chopsticks) and test their knowledge of city landmarks while racing from one off-the-beaten-path location to another.

For John Hennessy, who created Race/LA in 2004, the event is something of a consolation prize. "This grew out of my sister and I being huge fans of 'The Amazing Race,' but, with her having three kids and me having a graphic design business to run, taking off six to eight weeks to run around the world on a TV show wasn't plausible. And I just thought, 'Why can't we do it in a



IN A HURRY: Yumio Dornberg makes his way through Chinatown.

weekend instead?"

Hennessy adds that so far CBS has not contacted him. "We've had racers who work in the show's editing department, so we know CBS is aware of us," he says.

Before you get any ideas, if you do this race, you're doing it

for the love of competition; there's no million-dollar pot at the end of this road. All entrants get a T-shirt and an undisclosed prize (which can't be revealed because the prize often relates to the clues in the race and races are sometimes repeated).

"For a million dollars, I'd send someone down the wrong path, sure," admits April 2005 winner Tom Monjack, who now wears his first-place medal as a monitor for the race. "But you're doing this for fun, so you go in with the spirit of having a good time."

Most of the time, anyway — and thank goodness for that. As any reality fan will tell you, what's a contest without a little backstabbing? Peter Bagnall — who is racing for a second time with his daughter Shelley on Saturday — has witnessed some "very sneaky stuff. People were friendly, but they would mislead you and hide clues." Hennessy says that, though no one has been disqualified for breaking the rules, "we've come close to it."

Occasional bad behavior isn't the only thing Race/LA shares with the TV show; there's drama aplenty in stranded contestants (one team was stuck in a Metro car for two hours), cultural hurdles (a clue might require a translator) and some truly bi-

zarre moments.

"When I was a monitor for the race, I was stationed right where Christina Ricci's sister was getting married," says Jill Thomsen, who is also a two-time racer. "The freakiest thing was that the maid of honor had the exact same first and last name as I do, and guests kept asking me questions, assuming I was in the wedding."

THERE can be risks as well — with crack-ups physical (a pothole misstep landed Shelley Bagnall in the hospital last October with a broken foot, which isn't stopping her from competing Saturday: "I'm going to need a brace, but I've got to do it," she says) and emotional.

"This race can make or break a relationship," admits Ron Coronado, Monjack's partner. "If you race with a new boyfriend or girlfriend, you'll know by the end of the day if you're a good match or not."

"The secret of the game isn't about who's in the best shape or who's youngest, but who works well together," Monjack says. "We must have said 'Oh my God, this is so much fun' about a half dozen times, but some people weren't even talking to one another by the end of the day."

The emphasis on teamwork and mental, not physical, strength is the appeal to many players. "This is a bonding experience if you play with someone you want to spend time with," Thomsen points out. "You get to use your brain. It's all about problem solving and navigation, and to me that's fun."

But perhaps the greatest lure — and reward — is getting into the nooks and crannies of L.A.

"The race took me to places I never knew existed, and places I didn't think I'd even be allowed into," says Peter Bagnall. "There are things that are right off the freeway that you never really see, and that's why I want to do it again. I'm interested to see what's out there."

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Race/LA

When: Saturday and May 12 races are sold out, but teams can apply for the wait list at racela.com. Races will also be held Oct. 13 and 20, with registration beginning six to eight weeks before each race.

Price: \$75 per person, \$150 per team

Info: (310) 360-6950. Each event is limited to 18 teams, and each team must have its own car and one team member 21 or older.