

surreality bites

Forget the lost tribes of the Amazon... Sally Feldman camouflages herself behind large portions of food to study some of America's native species

It's midday in LA, and I'm slumped in a green and white-striped corner booth at the Beverly Hills Hotel's Cabana Café, nursing a splitting jetlag headache and a metre-high tumbler of orange juice. It's the noisiest drink I've ever had. (What is it with how much ice Americans cram in their drinks – is it to offset the insane amount of alcohol they free-pour?) Without the protection of my sunglasses, I'd have been pronounced legally blind by now, such is the dazzling intensity of the whiteness everywhere I turn. And that's just my hostess's teeth.

Next to me, talking animatedly on his cell phone (I'm already becoming acclimatised to the local vernacular), is a man of uncertain vintage – his silver coif says 70, but his eyelids beg to differ, stretched as smoothly as they can be considering the tanning they've obviously copped over the years. He's talking real estate, of course. And he's a regular, because there's a crowd of white-clad attendants squawking and flapping like sulphur-crested

cockatoos around him, cocking their heads to one side as he speaks to them each by name, asking them about their kids, singing auditions and university exam results. Nice people, Americans – they really take an interest, even when they're on call waiting.

Beyond this snowdrift of freshly pressed white cotton is the glittering pool, surrounded by vast white umbrellas shading green and white striped lounges. Spindly palm trees punctuate an aching blue sky and, underneath them, clustered in important groups around the pool, are the equally spare silhouettes of caramel-coloured, bikini-clad women and their much, much older male consorts. These people certainly know how to tan; yet no one is lying supine soaking up the sun – they're too busy talking at each other from behind giant

of it). While the world's fast-food trends may have converged over the years (sushi now being LA's official cuisine, from what I can gather), America's intrinsic difference still stands in sharp relief. How does a culture that insinuates itself so deeply into our lives through the media, politics and bacon strip earrings still remain so fabulously exotic? Though with that last example, I've probably answered my own question.

I'm still pondering this a week later, tucked into a cosy booth in Manhattan, as I peer out behind a towering plate of waffles at the Neue Galerie. (I'm sensing a theme developing here – along with my waistline.) Housed in this gorgeous 1914 mansion, just over the road from Central Park, is Café Sabarsky, a wood-panelled wonderland of gilded mirrors and

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sunglasses or watching the Food Network in their private cabanas.

I sink my Australian winter body lower into the cushions as the parade of perfectly sculpted forms shimmy past in a mirage of gauzy animal-print sarongs and chinking gold bangles. I'm beginning to feel faint, and it can't be from hunger, as I've just conquered the summit of my club sandwich – so mountainous that there's a flag on top. I think what I'm feeling is envy.

God bless America. It's been nearly 40 years since I came here for the first time, and all I remember of that visit is corn dogs and fatter people than I could have ever invented (two things not entirely unrelated, now I come to think

blowsy floral banquettes. It's fin de siècle Vienna via the Upper East Side. Yet, despite the strains of Mozart floating through the room, I just can't get Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* out of my head. God bless Woody Allen.

Through the window, I watch a herd of sharp-edged men in shiny shoes marching in formation, punching at their iPhones as they narrowly miss ninety-something, helmet-haired ladies in navy and white walking tiny dogs. At the next table, two terrifyingly clever thirty-something men power-chat over coffee that more closely resembles espresso than any other hot brown drink I've so far experienced in the USA. One has a forehead worthy of Einstein and is dressed in tomato-red polo shirt and camel chinos. The other is a redhead, wearing pink seersucker trousers and a pale blue shirt with white collar. For a moment, I begin to believe that truth really is stranger than fiction – it certainly dresses more strangely than Diane Keaton – before I return to reliving last night's expedition into the foothills of a Katz's Deli corned beef on rye, seated below a sign that proclaimed 'Where Harry met Sally. Hope you have what she had! Enjoy!'. **VE+T**

