

Amid 'renaissance,' Marina del Rey celebrates 50th birthday with three days of events



Crewmen aboard the Amazing Grace tall ship ready one of the square sails to be unfurled. Many tall ships will be docked at Burton Chase Park in Marina Del Rey for the 50th anniversary festivities. April 9, 2015. (Brad Graverson / Staff Photographer)

By [Carley Dryden](#)

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Sixty years ago, Marina del Rey was a county supervisor's pipe dream.

The land now housing the world's largest manmade harbor was a swamp. The county spent \$50,000 a year just on mosquito abatement. Crime in the area was rampant.

Now, what was once 800 acres of water and swamp is Los Angeles County's largest revenue-producing asset — a collection of glistening channels and basins, dotted with boats, kayakers and paddlers, surrounded by luxury hotels, apartment complexes and an array of restaurants.

This weekend, the county will celebrate Marina del Rey's 50th birthday with a three-day weekend of events, ranging from tall ship tours and cannon battles to a rock concert and fireworks, all free to the public at Burton Chace Park.



1964 aerial photo of Marina Del Rey. Courtesy Marina Del Rey Historical Society.

The “Birthday Bash” coincides with the annual Marinafest Boat Show on Saturday and Sunday. The public can enjoy harbor tours on water taxis, food trucks, historic presentations, car shows and the cutting of the 50th birthday cake. Many area hotels and restaurants will offer special discounts and promotions this weekend and through the rest of the month, such as a \$19.65 prix fixe menu at El Torito and Whiskey Red’s or a \$196.50 per night room rate at Foghorn Harbor Inn. The newly renovated Marina del Rey Hotel and The Ritz-Carlton will offer \$50.00 dining and hotel credits.

The typical birthday events — the cake cutting and a commemorative ceremony — along with the concert and fireworks will take place Friday, on the marina’s actual birthday. The birthday events begin at 5 p.m., with a Three Dog Night concert at 7 and the fireworks at 8:30.

Fisherman’s Village will offer family-friendly events like a magic show, face painting, balloon art and more along with live music and water taxi service to Burton Chace Park on Saturday and Sunday.

“It’s going to be a fun weekend, it’s a celebration,” said Los Angeles County Supervisor Don Knabe, the master of ceremonies for Friday’s events.

While it’s hard to believe the collection of high-rise condominiums and office buildings stand on a former marsh, in many ways, Marina del Rey hasn’t really changed, locals said.

“The main people in the marina (in the 1960s) were young people that we’re starting to see back here today, people working in Silicon Beach,” said Jerry Epstein, 92, one of the last remaining original lessees of the marina, the managing partner of Shores apartment complex and the co-partner of Marina Harbor Apartments and Anchorage.

“When we opened the marina, it was mostly young, unmarried people who really wanted to be on the water.”

At the time, the area had a reputation as Los Angeles’ waterfront playground, said David Levine, president of the Marina del Rey Lessees Association and manager of the Shores apartment complex.

“The more things change, the more they stay the same,” he said. “Marina del Rey has tremendous appeal for young people with active lifestyles who enjoy the water, fresh air and the beach.”

On Thursday afternoon, young families pedaled around the area, tourists strolled along Fisherman’s Village and schoolchildren played tag and gawked at the tall ships as they arrived in the harbor. Others made their way across the channel on stand-up paddleboards or headed out to the open sea in fishing boats. A boisterous group of adults, many with cameras slung around their neck, putted toward land on a large, whale-watching boat.

However, one doesn’t need a boat to enjoy the marina, locals said.

Although the massive harbor houses more than 5,000 boats, less than 2 percent of Marina del Rey residents actually own boats, Epstein said.

“So many people think of Marina del Rey as a place where everyone parks their boats. They don’t realize how much activity there is in the marina,” said Chandra Knee of the Marina del Rey Convention and Visitors Bureau.

“It continues to be a very trend-setting destination. There are a lot of people who have loved Marina del Rey for years and made it home. But when you go up to Mendocino Farms, you see a lot of the movers and shakers in the tech field — people working for Snapchat or Electronic Arts who want to be close to the water.”

The area is unique in that it offers some of the best ocean views along the coast since the development was built up surrounding several basins, Knee said.

“I think everyone moves to L.A. and wants a water view, but Santa Monica only has one direction you can face. Marina del Rey has many, and a lot more opportunities to get you out on the water,” she said.

When former county Supervisor Burton Chace first detailed his plan for creating a place in Los Angeles for residents to enjoy the water and water sports, with a harbor right in the heart of the city, less than 5 miles from Los Angeles International Airport, many scoffed at the idea.

“His idea for the marina was quite visionary. He had to overcome a lot of opposition to it,” Epstein said.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers spent three years dredging the marina, starting in 1959. But when it opened without a breakwater, the continuous surge of waves tossed around boats and damaged much of the harbor.

“Our loans were all canceled because the harbor was untenable,” Epstein said. “Everyone jumped on Chace. They called it Chace’s Folly.”

But by 1965, the breakwater was built, lessees stuck with their developments and the marina flourished.

Now, ground rent alone brings the county more than \$50 million in revenue annually, Levine said. The area boasts some of the highest rents in Los Angeles.

Knabe said the next 50 years are critical for the marina.

“At the end of the day, Marina del Rey is the crown jewel of L.A. County, and like any crown jewel, when it’s 50 years old, it needs to be polished and brought up to date,” he said, nodding to the recent abundance of renovations and new development.

Knabe said the county has approved a vision for fixing up the marina as a whole, not one leasehold at a time.

“I know change is difficult,” he said. “Many people think it’s their own backyard. But it is a county-owned visitor-serving amenity.”

The county has numerous infrastructure improvements in process or planned, including upgrades to Oxford Basin, the seawall, Fiji Way and Admiralty Way, Pier 44 and the Boathouse. Redevelopment is also planned for Fisherman’s Village and various apartment buildings. A \$25 million renovation was just completed at Marina del Rey Hotel.

“We have probably the smallest footprint and largest opportunity to grow,” Knee said. “We’ve been under the radar. But now we’re undergoing a big renaissance. People have finally found us and everything is booming.”

For a schedule of events for Marina del Rey’s Birthday Bash weekend and more information on special hotel and dining promotions, visit www.MdR50.com/. The visitors bureau is holding an Instagram contest throughout the weekend. Attendees who use #mdr50 or tag @marinadelrey_ca have a chance to win gift cards to local restaurants.