



405 Closure Can Mean Great Deals

By Dakota Smith, Staff Writer

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Carmageddon might deliver a weekend of traffic hell, but there'll be plenty of pit stops for weary motorists to take the sting out of all the fire and brimstone.

Plucky businesses are quickly realizing the potential of serving crazed commuters as well as locals who'll be eager to walk or bike to shops and restaurants to avoid clogged streets and highways when the 405 Freeway is closed.

Adam Milstein, owner of South Restaurant in Santa Monica, has a drink for the most rattled of drivers: the Road Rager, a \$3 watermelon liquor-based shot created especially for the weekend.

If watermelon isn't your thing, try a Gridlock shot or the Bud STOP Light at the Wilshire Boulevard restaurant. "We'll be a haven for those wanting to escape Carmageddon," Milstein explains.

The 53-hour closure between the San Fernando Valley and the Westside, from late Friday through early Monday morning, is scheduled so crews can demolish the Mulholland Bridge in preparation for a freeway widening project.

Since plans were first announced to close that stretch of the 405, there's been a steady drumbeat of ominous warnings from city officials.

Their message: Stay home, or at least off the roads over the weekend.

Already, nearly 30 businesses have signed up to announce discounts and deals on Carmageddon, a website launched two weeks ago.

"Everyone was so doom and gloom, even the mayor was telling people to get out of town," said Anastasia Roark, 33, one of the site's backers. "We decided to put an

entrepreneurial spin on it." Businesses pay \$50 to appear on www.car-mageddon.com, with a percentage of the proceeds going to charity.

"Why spend your time in traffic? Get a TATOO!" reads an announcement from Studio City's T-Tattoo. "15% off tattoos or piercing during closure if you mention car-mageddon.com."

Some businesses are playing on the 405 theme. The Four Seasons Hotel Westlake Village is offering a two-night deal for \$405, and extending Sunday checkout time to 4:05 p.m.

Others are luring locals by offering free services and goods. A Santa Monica exercise class is offering free yoga classes to first-time customers.

It's all part of a grass-roots effort by neighborhood and business groups, who see a silver lining amid all the fear-mongering by city officials.

"We see an opportunity," says Milstein, who anticipates a rise in customers during the weekend. "Usually, we lose a lot of Saturday and Sunday customers to the beach."

John Walker, president of the Studio City Neighborhood Council, has been sending emails to encourage his neighbors to seek discounts at the stores and restaurants along Ventura Boulevard.

"It's a bit of a forced family situation," says Walker. "But you may as well take advantage of it."

Deals for any budget are available. For those who can afford to be really mobile, fliers get a \$50 discount on helicopter rides at Van Nuys-based Orbic Air, which charges \$700 an hour.

According to Heather Child, director of sales at Orbic Air, the company already has bookings from travelers going from Van Nuys Airport to LAX during the weekend.

Additionally, Child has been calling neighborhood groups in Bel Air to inquire about landing on residents' lawns to pick up landlocked locals.

"They're reviewing it with their members," said Child.

The Reseda Neighborhood Council is looking to lure newcomers to spend money with ShopReseda. According to Noelle Guzman, chairwoman of the Economic Development Committee at the Reseda Neighborhood Council, discounts will be available at businesses ranging from the Vanowen Car Wash on Vanowen Street to Admiral Carpet Cleaning on Darby Avenue.

To draw anxious motorists over the hill, Santa Monica's Pacific Park amusement park will offer free unlimited-ride passes to guests with a San Fernando Valley ZIP code

during the freeway closure. A driver's license or utility bill must be shown to obtain the giveaway.

Numerous hotels near the 405 route are offering discounts for those who have to stay in the area. The Luxe Hotel, which sits on the edge of the 405 Freeway, not far from the Mulholland Bridge, is offering a neighborhood rate of \$195, down from \$265, its usual cost for a standard room.

Additionally, the SLS Hotel near the Beverly Center is offering a \$405 per room night special. There's also a special in the spa called the Driver's Reprieve: a 15-minute massage for \$40.50.

For harried drivers looking for dinner specials, one of the best food discounts can be found at San Gennaro Cafe on Barrington Place in Brentwood, which is offering 40 percent off the entire bill, including alcohol. The sale will last all weekend, and "potentially Monday, too," according to restaurant owner Jay Handel.

"Because they won't re-open it...it will be delayed," Handel predicted.

Even musicians are getting in on the act: Venice singer Ken Elkinson is offering a free download from his album "Music for Commuting," described as 60 new original instrumental tracks "ranging from the dark and droning...to upbeat '80s inspired synth-pop.. to the futuristic and downright spacey."

"It's to help fellow Angelenos cope with Carmageddon," Elkinson wrote in a promotional email.