

## L.A.'s Eye on Cosmos Returns

**Griffith Observatory will reopen Nov. 3 after a \$93-million renovation. The price of the shuttle ride is also astronomical.**

By Christopher Reynolds, Times Staff Writer  
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Standing before the copper-domed landmark that has perched on the Hollywood Hills since 1935, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa on Tuesday unveiled a restored and expanded Griffith Observatory and said it would reopen to the public Nov. 3.

The announcement follows nearly five years of closure and a \$93-million restoration that more than doubled the size of a facility that observatory director Edwin Krupp likes to call "the hood ornament of Los Angeles." Yet the changes remain nearly invisible from a distance.

Indeed, the first big changes facing visitors are the logistics of arrival. The city has temporarily closed the 199-space lot at the observatory and will instead require that visitors make time-certain advance reservations and, in most cases, use shuttle buses based at the Hollywood & Highland Center and Los Angeles Zoo parking lots.

"If we didn't have a system of reservations early on, we'd have gridlock here on the hill," Villaraigosa said.

The shuttles will cost \$8 per adult and \$4 per child ages 5 to 12. Unless city officials can negotiate a last-minute price break, those parking at Hollywood & Highland also will face a parking fee of \$2 to \$10 per vehicle.

This might surprise donor Griffith J. Griffith, who stipulated in his will nine decades ago that the observatory be free. But City Recreation and Parks officials said they were covering that base by keeping admission free for those who walk or bicycle to the site — up to 1,200 a day. Though they'll pay nothing, those visitors still will need to make reservations.

Built in 1935, the observatory building was prominently featured in the 1955 James Dean film "Rebel Without a Cause," and turns up again in 1984's "Terminator" as the spot where California's governor-to-be, portraying a killer cyborg, first materializes on Earth. Until it closed for upgrades in January 2002, the site was drawing nearly 2 million visitors a year.

In renewing it, the landmark's keepers added bulk below ground and cut seating in half in the top-level planetarium that is the building's central venue.

"We didn't need more visitors," explained Krupp, an author, astronomer (he has a doctorate from UCLA) and showman who has run the observatory since 1974. "What we needed to do is make it more satisfying for visitors."

When the building closed, leaders of the upgrade forecast three years of work and a \$66-million bill.

The cost crept up as builders confronted the job of jacking up the old building while digging a new level beneath — the gambit that preserved its traditional appearance while boosting interior space from 27,000 square feet to 67,000.

Architect Stephen Johnson of Pfeiffer Partners, who collaborated on the project with preservation specialist Brenda A. Levin of Levin & Associates, said the underground work was the key challenge.



**At the unveiling**



**Reborn Icon**



**Griffith Park Observatory set to Reopen soon**

Money for the project came from a broad mix of public and private sources, beginning with \$28.5 million approved by local voters through the county's 1992 Proposition A and the city's 1996 Proposition K.

An additional \$26.4 million came from the city, along with \$7.5 million from the state. Private donors, led by the Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Oschin Family Foundation and courted by the Friends of the Observatory, kicked in more than \$30 million.

City officials have predicted that most visitors will spend at least two hours at the reopened site — twice the time spent by most visitors before the upgrade.

Through the reservation system (reachable at <http://www.griffithobservatory.org> or (888) 695-0888), city officials say they're setting a ceiling of 1,800 visitors at a time.

By Oct. 30, officials aim to take reservations in person as well, at the observatory's satellite building near the zoo at 4800 Western Heritage Way. The reservation system is expected to remain in place for about a year.

The observatory's new features include 60 exhibits addressing tides, seasons, phases of the moon and other astronomical subjects, most of them in the new Gunther Depths of Space exhibit hall. That area, carved from the hillside, includes "the big picture," a 20-by-152-foot photomural (2.46 gigapixels) that depicts a million galaxies — none visible to the naked eye — and a series of displays on the planets.

Next to the planets, in a circular sheath suggestive of the sun, stands the 200-seat Leonard Nimoy Event Horizon Theater, which got its name after a million-dollar donation by Nimoy and his wife, Susan Bay Nimoy, in 2001.

As for the Samuel Oschin Planetarium, whose dome is the building's dominant element, Krupp said, a reduction from 600-plus seats to 300 well-padded, deeply reclining, more widely spaced chairs is part of the push to upgrade the quality of the experience.

Other improvements include the arrival of a new Zeiss projector from Germany; the raising of a steel interior dome to serve as a projection surface; and a new main show: the 22-minute "Centered in the Universe," whose admission fee is expected to be \$7.

Krupp has spoken proudly of resisting the trend toward canned presentations and sticking with live, but the new version has raised a ruckus among longtime speakers such as John Sepikas, a Pasadena City College astronomy professor who complained that the observatory "has gone Hollywood" and is recruiting actors, paying less and "dumbing down" the program.

Krupp acknowledged making changes, saying he is trying to "elevate spirits and minds," not dumb down anything.

The observatory's longtime Laserium light-and-sound shows, meanwhile, have left the building. Laserium founder Ivan Dryer said those presentations — which began in 1973, the year Pink Floyd released its "Dark Side of the Moon" album, and endured until the 2002 closure — would move next year to the former Spruce Goose dome in Long Beach.

Among the building's other new features: a Wolfgang Puck eatery dubbed the Cafe at the End of the Universe, five new doors, added restrooms, an enlarged gift shop, and an elevator that for the first time gives wheelchair users rooftop access.

The observatory will be open noon to 10 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays, 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays, and closed Mondays.