

By Dudi Appleton 18 November 2003 • 12:01am

I am sure I have done things in my life for which I deserve to go to prison, but crossing the road is not one of them. Still, that is what happened on a recent visit to Los Angeles. I knew walking, as opposed to driving, in the city was pretty unusual; I didn't realise it was illegal.

It was 1am on a Monday morning and I had just been thrown a "welcome to laid-back California" dinner by friends. Later (and, yes, sober) I walked 300 yards to buy a phonecard: 1am in LA is 9am in London, and the perfect time to make vital calls home.

Emerging from the 7-11 store with two phonecards and a bottle of Vanilla Coke, I dandered across a virtually deserted Santa Monica Boulevard and strolled down La Cienega.

Minutes later, a sheriff's car screeched onto the pavement behind me. Hunting down some notorious LA criminal, I thought. No doubt they wanted to know whether I had seen anyone suspicious.

"Come here," said one of the car's occupants. Keen to help, I walked towards them, only to find myself pushed face down onto the car bonnet.

"Do you always do that?" the woman officer (she did all the talking, pushing and prodding) barked as she yanked my arms back bending my thumbs sharply

upwards. What was my crime, I wondered: whistling Irish folk tunes in a built-up area?

"Do what?" I ventured.

"Walk across the road."

Fearing a trick question I said nothing.

"ID?"

"In my pocket."

"Which pocket?"

I gestured with my chin. "That one, I think."

"Get it."

Now I was really confused. My arms were pinioned behind me while my face was being lightly seared on the metal of the cop car. The next thing I knew, I was being cuffed and thrown into the back of the car. Having decided that my ID was insufficient they told me they were "taking me in". In the Cagney and Lacey, rather than the Orphan Annie sense.

"Listen," I said, "my passport is only a block away."

"We're not taking you there - it's too dangerous."

Now, in my admittedly limited experience, LA's danger spots are far to the east of affluent Melrose, but my captors were adamant. I explained I was in town as

a writer for an British newspaper and accredited by the mayor's office, so my identity could be easily confirmed. This was ignored. A car pulled up and its occupants called over to me. "Can we help you sir? Would you like us to call you an attorney?" But at this, I was driven away. Not to check my passport 200 yards distant, but to a cell a mile away.

Those who know me well will attest to a certain lack of patience with authority, particularly authority wielded with stupidity. I admit that at this point I got angry. "You're only making it worse for yourself."

"How much worse can it be? What are you going to do? Give me a lethal injection?" I replied.

"We're just doing our job."

"Arresting tourists?"

They explained that jaywalking tourists had to be put away. This was the first mention of my crime. To be honest I had no idea what it meant.

"You must love your job," I said.

"We do."

"Can I give you a word of advice?" I was feeling bullish now.

"Yes sir."

"Get another job."