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Love, Lies, and Transportation in L.A.

In the past six months Angelenos have been shaken by earthquakes and scorched by brush fires. Sort of like lumps of tofu in a stir-fry wok. But, what the hell, we're tough out here. We can take it.

What does scare us, though, is suffocation. We're about to go down for the third time in the sea of media cliches that followed the quake. One more mention of "California's love affair with the car" and we're goners. That's not us. If we wanted to fondle cars, we'd be somewhere in Alabama.

But aren't Californians slaves to their cars? Compared to whom? Thirty-six states have more vehicles per capita than California.

But don't we drive a lot? Well, the folks in 36 states drive more miles per capita than we do. But don't Californians get a driver's license at birth? Not exactly, 37 states have more drivers per capita than we do. And for those of you with Greenish inclinations, 42 states use more gasoline and diesel per capita than we do. Ah, but what about public transit? Yes, we have it and we use it. Forty-two states use transit less than we do. The numbers are all right there in Highway Statistics and the Statistical Abstract published by the Feds. That's primary data, not secondary hearsay from newspaper clippings.

So how did this love-affair stuff get started? I have the inside story from a highly placed source. Once upon a time, a New York reporter came out here to learn about the horrors of auto-eroticism. Seek and ye shall find. Especially if you start with the conclusion and then search until you find a fact that supports it. Ignoring the ordinary, this guy finally found someone with a 90-minute commute. He could now go home and write his story: People in Los Angeles travel 90 minutes to get to work.

Not exactly a scientific sample. Suppose I were to visit New York, searched for a long time and found a smiling New Yorker. Would it be fair if I wrote a story accusing New Yorkers of being happy?

But seriously, the pesky government statistics even have something to say about that 90-minute commuter fish-story. Turns out the average commute in L.A. is 26 minutes and the average commute in New York is 5 minutes longer, 31 minutes. That's 10 minutes a day we save on a round trip—extra time to fight brush fires, clear quake rubble, or hum a mantra.

So much for our fabled auto dependence. What phrase might take its place to fill the cliché gap? Well, we do have a lot of hot tubs. Why not write about California's love affair with hot water?

— Charles Lave