

Help!

I'm Thin in New York, Fat in L.A.

How is it that a perfectly normal-size woman can leave New York feeling chic and sleek yet land in L.A. 10 pounds heavier? One writer unravels the mysterious tale of two cities. By Merle Ginsberg



Ginsberg on the streets of New York



Ginsberg toe-to-toe with starlet Paris Hilton in L.A.

In Los Angeles, when the topic turns, as it typically does, to the most weighty matter of a woman's body image, my advice to my Angeleno friends is this: Get on a plane to New York. In five and a half hours you'll lose at least 10 pounds. And you still get to eat carbs.

Exactly how does this happen? It's a phenomenon that's been puzzling me and other female frequent fliers for years. The fact that the Almighty Thin is such a consuming topic in L.A.—as opposed to what can preoccupy New Yorkers (depression, money, real estate, sometimes even culture)—says a lot about the mind-set of the city.

I can't help comparing New York and L.A. life; it comes with a regular seat on JetBlue. I've lived bicoastally throughout most of my career in publishing—one opaque-stockinged foot in New York, one bare and perfectly pedicured one in Hollywood. Now even in the glossiest of glossy-magazine offices in New York, there are wildly divergent body types. For every stick you're thrown a curve. Not so on L.A.'s red carpets. It's a ritualistic parade of borrowed size-2 gowns. Which makes a (fluctuating) size 8 like me feel like Queen Kong dropped into Munchkin Land.

I'm not the only one fighting what I like to call "weight perception disorder." ➤

"Do I feel thinner in New York City?" laughs Debra Messing, a Manhattan transplant. "Absolutely. In New York I'm a hottie! Skinny and gorgeous. Since I had my baby, I'm what they euphemistically call 'healthy' in L.A. I'm no longer a size 0, so I've fallen out of favor. It's really tragic how body perceptions can change like that." Messing blames a number of factors, but mostly the weather. "Anywhere you can wear a bikini 24/7—L.A., Miami—there's a relentless focus on not slipping. In Los Angeles the dieting-and-exercising machine never stops."

And in a city where the actress-per-capita rate is so much higher than anywhere else, the classic "camera adds 10 pounds" rule prevails. Nobody knows this better than Michael Kors: With a boutique on each coast, he caters to both New York socialites and L.A.'s actress elite. "In New York women are very proud of starving down to a size 4," he says. "In Hollywood nobody breathes what size they are—unless it's a 2. We're cutting a lot more zeros for L.A. Lindsay Lohan, Jessica Simpson, Nicole Richie—they're so thin that the men around them are shrinking too."

But trying to emulate the Incredible Shrinking Starlet does not make you a sex symbol in Manhattan; a so-this-season wardrobe does. If I happen to show up to any Manhattan store opening in my same au courant red-carpet dress, I'm suddenly in a different percentile of, well, hotness. And if you're wearing *any* dress while crossing Sixth Avenue on a windy day, men will inevitably cut you a glance.

"In New York the more clothes you put on, the more attention you get," the skinnier-than-ever Jessica Simpson has said. "In L.A. the more you take off, the more attention you get." Heidi Klum agrees: "At eight and a half months pregnant, people were congratulating me [on

how I looked] in New York. But people in L.A. would not even look at me. It's like you're invisible if you're not wearing tight jeans."

In Manhattan well-designed layered clothes can hide a multitude of sins. "The clothes have more fabric in New York," Ashley Olsen recently told *Harper's Bazaar*. (And, for a small girl, she sure does don a lot of fabric.) "Fashion in Los Angeles means which bag and shoes you are wearing with your jeans. A girl in a volume dress in L.A. is pretty much invisible—or hasn't been to the gym in a while."

"There is not one girlfriend of mine who does not feel more beautiful or more at home with herself in New York," says the bicoastal Julianna Margulies. "It always takes me, like, three days to adjust to Los Angeles—everyone looks the same. Same trainers, same surgeons, same food. I always feel like a fish out of water."

Body dysmorphic disorder based on

London—and realize everyone in these cities has been reading and thinking and that that is the healthy pressure. There are other issues going on in the world—AIDS, the economy, world peace—but you might not be aware of it in Los Angeles. The only way to stay realistic, optimistic, is to travel. A lot."

Since the gossip weeklies came up with cover lines like PIN THIN (could the typeface be any fatter?), they've actually been making disappearing divas bigger. Teri Hatcher, who's had her share of eating-disorder accusations, has admitted, "Cooking, baking, and eating stories do not sell magazines." But perhaps Lara Flynn Boyle, a veteran of such things, puts it best: "I used to be too thin in L.A.; now I'm too old. I don't know which one's worse."

But there's a compelling argument for maturity. Goldie Hawn, who is still

"In New York the more clothes you put on, the more attention you get," the skinnier-than-ever Jessica Simpson has said. "In L.A. the more you take off, the more attention you get"

locale is not limited just to the U.S. coasts. College girls pack on the cafeteria-carb pounds, then go slinking home to their Pilates-toned moms in the burbs. London fashionistas tend to have larger shapes than their Milan counterparts (despite the latter's access to better pasta). And women commuting from town to country—whether it's New York to Greenwich or Atlanta to its outskirts—can find bigger grocery carts (and pants sizes) while they're cruising down the supermarket aisles. Dichotomy of lifestyle breeds dichotomy of self-perception.

"You work out like mad in L.A. and feel like, as an actress, you're keeping up with the pressure," says Sharon Stone. "Then you get to New York—or

famous for her youthful bod, has told me: "It's all pretty ridiculous. But maybe it takes getting older to know that. It's all about mindfulness, isn't it? If you put on a few pounds, you buy slightly bigger clothes. If you spend all your time obsessed with being thin, your brain will also get very thin." (And let's not forget that Goldie, with Kurt Russell in tow, now spends a lot of time in Vancouver.)

So try that JetBlue Diet—but whatever you do, don't buy a ticket to Miami. "I thought the girls in L.A. had killer bods," jokes the buff Gwen Stefani. "But if you think it's bad there, check out Miami. They don't even wear long jeans—just cutoffs and bikini tops. It makes me long for L.A.!" ■