

The Best of San Diego

Over the past 2 decades, San Diego has evolved past its old reputation as a slow-growth, conservative Navy town graced with 70 miles of fabulous sandy coastline. Of course, the military link is still present today, with a handful of large bases throughout the county. But the city—California's first and the nation's seventh largest—now hosts a diversity of neighborhoods and residents to rival Los Angeles. San Diego reflects its Spanish-Mexican heritage in every corner; you won't forget that bustling Tijuana is just across the border, less than 30 minutes away. Yet, in stark contrast to Tijuana's infamous poverty, San Diego boasts one of the nation's priciest housing markets and a biotech/tourism/telecom economy that's firing on all cylinders. A full-fledged building boom is transforming formerly seedy downtown neighborhoods and architecturally rich suburbs into upscale wonders. And the stylish young residents and shop owners they attract are, in turn, updating and enriching San Diego's dining, shopping, and entertainment options.

Amid all these changes, San Diego is still first and foremost a big outdoor playground. You can swim, snorkel, windsurf, kayak, bicycle, in-line skate, and partake of other diversions in or near the water, as well as in the mountains and desert. Top-notch civic attractions include three world-famous animal parks and Balboa Park, one of the finest urban parks in the world. Just pack a laid-back attitude along with your sandals and swimsuit, and prepare for a warm welcome to California's grown-up beach town.

1 The Most Unforgettable Travel Experiences

- **Driving over the Bridge to Coronado:** The 1st time or the 50th, there's always an adrenaline rush as you follow this engineering marvel's dramatic curves and catch a glimpse of the panoramic view to either side. Driving west, you can easily pick out the distinctive **Hotel del Coronado** (p. 93)—or as the locals say, the **Hotel Del**—in the distance before you reach the "island." See "Orientation" in chapter 4 for more about the city's neighborhoods.
- **Escaping to Torrey Pines State Reserve:** Poised on a majestic cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean, this state park is set aside for the rarest pine tree in North America. The reserve has short trails that immerse hikers into a delicate and beautiful coastal environment. See p. 163.
- **Watching the Seals at the Children's Pool:** This tiny La Jolla cove was originally named for the toddlers who could safely frolic behind a man-made seawall. These days, seals and sea lions sunning themselves on the sand are the main attraction. The beach had been off limits to humans since 1997, but following much public debate, it was reopened to swimmers in 2005. Keep a safe distance—these are wild animals—and you'll be rewarded with a unique wildlife experience. See p. 144.

- **Taking in the City's Best Panorama:** Drive out to the tip of Point Loma on a clear day for an unsurpassed 360-degree view that takes in downtown, the harbor, military bases, Coronado, and, in the distance, Tijuana and San Diego's mountainous backcountry. See p. 153.
- **Renting Bikes, Skates, or Kayaks in Mission Bay:** Landscaped shores, calm waters, paved paths, and friendly neighbors make Mission Bay an aquatic playground like no other. Explore on land or water, depending on your energy level, and then grab a bite at the Mission. See p. 159.
- **Strolling Through the Gaslamp Quarter:** Victorian commercial buildings that fill a 16½-block area will make you think you've stepped back in time. The beautifully restored buildings, in the heart of downtown, house some of the city's most popular shops, restaurants, and nightspots. See "Walking Tour 1: The Gaslamp Quarter," on p. 187.
- **Spending a Day in Balboa Park:** Head to the San Diego Zoo and overlook the superb city park that surrounds it. The buildings that grew out of Balboa Park's 1915–16 exposition create a Spanish Golden Age fantasia, plus there are mature gardens, the acclaimed Old Globe Theatre, and 13 of San Diego's best museums. See p. 145 and 200.
- **Listening to Live Music Outdoors at Humphrey's:** An intimate, palm-fringed venue on the water at Shelter Island, Humphrey's has name acts from mid-May to October and puts those impersonal summer concert "sheds" found in other cities to shame. See "Live Entertainment," in chapter 10.
- **Floating Up, Up, and Away over North County:** Sunset hot-air balloon rides carry passengers over the golf courses and luxury homes north of the city. Do it while you can—open space for landings is fast disappearing, making ballooning an endangered species here. For details, see "North County Beach Towns: Spots to Surf & Sun," in chapter 11.
- **Wildflowers and Serenity at Anza-Borrego Desert State Park:** The largest state park in the lower 48 attracts the most visitors during the spring wildflower season, when a kaleidoscopic carpet blankets the desert. Others come year-round to hike more than 100 miles of trails. See p. 274.
- **Frolicking at La Jolla's Beaches:** It may be misspelled Spanish for "the jewel," but there is no mistaking the beauty of La Jolla's bluff-lined beaches. Each has a distinct personality: Surfers love Windansea's waves; harbor seals have adopted the Children's Pool; La Jolla Shores is popular for swimming, sunbathing, and kayaking; and the Cove is a top snorkeling and scuba diving spot, and the best place to spot the electric-orange California state fish, the garibaldi. See p. 143–144.
- **Playing a Round of Golf at Torrey Pines Golf Course (La Jolla):** Two 18-hole championship courses overlook the ocean and provide players with plenty of challenge. In February, the Buick Invitational Tournament is held here. The rest of the year, these popular municipal courses are open to everybody. See p. 180.
- **Spending a Day at San Diego Zoo, Wild Animal Park, or SeaWorld:** At the zoo, animals live in naturalistic habitats such as Monkey Trails and Forest Trails (the most elaborate enclosure it has ever created), and it's

one of only four zoos in the United States where you can see giant pandas. At the Wild Animal Park, most of the 3,500 animals roam freely over an 1,800-acre spread. And Sea-World, with its water-themed rides, flashy animal shows, and detailed exhibits, is an aquatic wonderland of pirouetting dolphins and 4-ton killer whales with a fetish for drenching visitors. See p. 136.

• **Crossing the Border:** What a difference a line makes. Tijuana waits on the other side of the world's busiest border crossing. There's a raucous tourist zone, but also plentiful shopping, cultural, and culinary delights. Beyond Tijuana, check out beachside Rosarito and Ensenada. See p. 279.

2 The Best Splurge Hotels

- **Four Seasons Resort Aviara**, 7100 Four Seasons Point (☎ **800/332-3442** or 760/603-6800), is a AAA 5-diamond resort in Carlsbad that pulls off the hat trick of encompassing one of the best restaurants, spas, and golf courses in the county. See p. 244.
- San Diego's other AAA 5-diamond property is **The Lodge at Torrey Pines**, 11480 N. Torrey Pines Rd. (☎ **800/566-0087** or 858/453-4420). Not surprisingly, the Lodge also features one of the area's top

restaurants and spas, and elbows up against renowned Torrey Pines Golf Course in La Jolla. See p. 89.

- If you're looking for swanky and trendy, lighten your load of cash at downtown's **W San Diego**, 421 West B St. (☎ **888/625-5144** or 619/231-8220). Relax on your beach-ball pillow while watching your flat-screen TV, or spend even more on a pricey cocktail at the hotel's alfresco lounge with its heated-sand floor. See p. 72.

3 The Best Moderately Priced Hotels

- You won't find a better location than the **Horton Grand Hotel**, 311 Island Ave. (☎ **800/542-1886** or 619/544-1886). This historic Victorian beauty has called the Gaslamp Quarter home since 1886, and some otherworldly guests have reputedly been harmlessly hanging around since then, too. See p. 73.
- In San Diego's Little Italy, **La Pensione Hotel**, 606 W. Date St. (☎ **800/232-4683** or 619/236-8000), feels like a small European hotel and offers tidy lodgings at

bargain prices. There's an abundance of great dining in the surrounding blocks, and you'll be perfectly situated to explore the rest of town by car or trolley. See p. 74.

- Tucked away in San Diego's Mission Hills neighborhood (but only a half-mile from trendy Hillcrest), **Crone's Cobblestone Cottage B&B**, 1302 Washington Place (☎ **619/295-4765**), is a tiny Craftsman bungalow-away-from-home. Only two rooms are available; book early. See p. 75.

4 The Most Unforgettable Dining Experiences

- When you combine a world-class chef with a romantic, seaside location in La Jolla, you're guaranteed a

memorable meal. At the **Marine Room**, 2000 Spindrift Dr. (☎ **858/459-7222**), Executive Chef Bernard

Guillas' creative, modern French cuisine provides ample evidence of how far the city's invigorated dining scene has come. Guillas uses plates like a painter uses a canvas, and his palette includes the finest local products. See p. 126.

- **Jack's La Jolla**, 7863 Girard Ave. (☎ 858/456-8111), is a 3-story epicurean funhouse. It features a casual sidewalk cafe and an ocean-view, rooftop raw bar, with a swank fine-dining component sandwiched in between. Chef/owner Tony DiSalvo, a veteran of Jean-Georges in New York City, offers a cutting-edge modern American cuisine that's the toast of the town. The several bar and lounge areas stay open late, and offer live entertainment as well. See p. 126.
- **George's at the Cove/George's Ocean Terrace**, 1250 Prospect St. (☎ 858/454-4244): These two longtime favorites in La Jolla share an *aah*-inspiring ocean view. The downstairs kitchen turns up the finesse

factor for inventive and formal California cuisine (like Pacific swordfish in a ragout of pink grapefruit and chestnuts); the cafe offers crowd-(and wallet-) pleasing dishes (such as George's enduringly popular smoked chicken-broccoli-black-bean soup). See p. 124.

- You can't visit San Diego without **trying a fish taco**. If the city has an official food, this is probably it. Fish tacos are available everywhere, but the best places to try one are **The Fishery**, 5040 Cass St. (Pacific Beach; ☎ 858/272-9985), **Bay Park Fish Co.**, 4121 Ashton St. (Bay Park; ☎ 619/276-3474), and **Point Loma Seafoods**, 2805 Emerson St. (☎ 619/223-1109). **Rubio's**, 4504 E. Mission Bay Dr. (and additional locations; ☎ 858/272-2801) is also worth a visit. Although it's now a chain, Rubio's original stand is where the fish taco was first popularized in the early 1980s. See p. 120.

5 The Best Things to Do for Free

- **Timken Museum of Art**: It's a small collection, and the museum's modern architecture is completely out of place in Balboa Park, but the always-free Timken (☎ 619/239-5548) houses 600 years of art history. Masterpieces by Rembrandt and Rubens, as well as works by such seminal American painters as Eastman Johnson and John Singleton Copley, are among the holdings. See p. 152.
- **Organ Pavilion Concerts**: The world's largest outdoor organ is not atrophying. Its 4,518 pipes have been in nearly continuous use since 1915 at the Spreckels Organ Pavilion (☎ 619/702-8138) in Balboa Park. Free concerts are presented every Sunday at 2pm. See p. 152.
- **Chicano Park Murals**: More than 40 works of art grace the support pylons of the Coronado Bridge in Barrio Logan's Chicano Park, National Avenue at Crosby Street (☎ 619/563-4661). The images celebrate and honor Latino heroes and culture, and are considered the largest and most important collection of outdoor murals in the country. See p. 165.
- **Self-Realization Fellowship Temple**: This retreat in Encinitas, 215 W. K St. (☎ 760/753-2888), with its distinctive lotus-shaped towers, was built by a yogi in 1937. Its cliffside meditation gardens overlook the Pacific and offer incredible vistas. Visitors are welcome free of charge. See p. 243.