

The Best of San Diego

Once dismissed as a slow-growth, conservative Navy town graced with 70 miles of fabulous sandy coastline, San Diego has been evolving steadily during the past 2 decades. The military link is still a presence today, with a handful of large bases throughout the county. Yet 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. Despite that city'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 burners. 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 the change, San Diego is still first and foremost a big outdoor playground. You can still swim, snorkel, windsurf, kayak, bicycle, in-line skate, and partake of other diversions in or near the water, as you like. And top-notch civic attractions still include three world-famous animal parks and Balboa Park, one of the finest urban parks in the country.

So pack a laid-back attitude along with your sandals and swimsuit. 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. 96)—or as the locals say, the **Hotel Del**—in the distance long before you reach the "island." See "Orientation" in chapter 5 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, the sand is mostly off-limits to humans, who congregate along the seawall railing or onshore to admire the protected pinnipeds that sun themselves on the beach or on semisubmerged rocks.

You can get surprisingly close, and it's a truly mesmerizing sight. See p. 144.

- **Taking in the City's Best Panorama:** Drive out to the tip of Point Loma on a clear day and you'll be rewarded with a 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. 159.

- **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, then grab a bite at the Mission (p. 59). See p. 125.

- **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. 186.

- **Spending a Day in Balboa Park:** Many visitors head straight 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-Moorish fantasia, plus there are mature gardens, the acclaimed Old Globe Theatres, and 13 of San Diego's best museums. See p. 145 and 199.

- **Exploring Model Railroad Museum:** I have long held a fascination with trains, ever since my brother received a model train for Christmas. This is the largest operating exhibit of its kind in America. A delight for all ages. See p. 151.

- **Listening to Live Music Outdoors at Humphrey's:** An intimate, palm-fringed venue located 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 11.

- **Floating Up, Up, and Away Over North County:** Hot-air balloons carry passengers over the golf courses and luxury homes north of the city. These rides are especially enjoyable at sunset. For details, see "North County Beach Towns: Spots to Surf & Sun," in chapter 12.

- **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. 268.

- **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, while 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. 160.

- **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. 184.

- **Spending a day at San Diego Zoo, Wild Animal Park, or SeaWorld:** San Diego boasts three of the world's

best animal attractions. At the zoo, animals live in naturalistic habitats such as Monkey Trails and Forest Tails (the most elaborate enclosure it has ever created), and it's one of only four zoos in the U.S. where you can see giant pandas. At the Wild Animal Park, most of the 3,500 animals roam

freely over a 1,800-acre spread. And SeaWorld, 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. 135.

2 The Best Splurge Hotels

- The **Hotel del Coronado**, 1500 Orange Ave. (☎ 800/HOTEL-DEL or 619/435-6611), San Diego's oceanfront landmark is elegantly posh meets beach, housed in a cluster of red Victorian Turrets. See p. 96.
- If you are looking for swanky, trendy, oooh-la-la, lighten your load of cash

at the Gaslamp Quarter's **W San Diego**, 421 West B St. (☎ 888/625-5144 or 619/231-8220). Relax on your beach-ball pillow watching your flat-screen TV or spend even more on a pricey cocktail at the hotel's alfresco, heated sand floor lounge.

3 The Best Moderately Priced Hotels

- The **Gaslamp Plaza Suites**, 520 E St. (☎ 800/874-8770 or 619/232-9500), is an elegant landmark full of creature comforts that belie its super-friendly rates. You'll also be smack-dab in the heart of the trendy Gaslamp Quarter. See p. 78.
- In San Diego's Little Italy, **La Pen-sione 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. See p. 78.

- 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. 79.

4 The Most Unforgettable Dining Experiences

- **Bertrand at Mister A's** (San Diego; ☎ 619/239-1377): Offering the city's most delectable views, this long-time San Diego favorite was reborn in 2000 with a reported \$1 million makeover. A very old-school, vaguely campy space was molded into an elegant, bright, sophisticated dining destination with excellent American-Mediterranean fare. See p. 112.
- **George's at the Cove/George's Ocean Terrace** (La Jolla; ☎ 858/454-4244):

Tasty smoked chicken-broccoli-black-bean soup is an enduring dish; it's on the menu at the fancy downstairs dining room *and* the breezy upstairs cafe. The two share an *aah*-inspiring ocean view. The downstairs kitchen turns up the finesse factor for inventive and formal California cuisine, while the cafe offers crowd-pleasing versions. See p. 125.

- **Discover Fish Tacos:** You can't visit San Diego without trying a fish taco.

I'm talking about a soft taco filled with lightly fried fish, lime, cilantro, hot sauce, shredded Napa cabbage, and a mysterious white sauce. Try it at the ubiquitous **Rubio's** (various

locations; the original stand is at 4504 E. Mission Bay Dr., ☎ **858/272-2801**) or **Point Loma Seafoods** (2805 Emerson St., ☎ **619/223-1109**). See p. 122 and 134.

5 The Best Things to Do for Free (or Almost)

- **Riding on the San Diego Trolley to Mexico:** The trip from downtown to *la frontera* costs a mere \$2.50, takes only 40 minutes, and the clean, quick, bright red trolleys are fun in their own right. See p. 274.
- **Taking the Ferry to Coronado:** The 15-minute ride gets you out into San

Diego Harbor and provides some of the best views of the city. The ferry runs every hour from the Broadway Pier, so you can tour Coronado on foot, by bike, or by trolley, and return whenever you please. See p. 194.

The Best of San Diego Online

You can find lots of information on San Diego on the Internet; here are a few of my favorite helpful planning and general information sites.

- **www.sandiego.org** is maintained by the San Diego Convention & Visitors Bureau and includes up-to-date weather data, a calendar of events, and a hotel booking engine.
- **www.sandiegoartandsol.com** is the link for cultural tourism. You'll find a list of art shows and music events, plus intriguing touring itineraries that delve into the city's culture.
- **www.sandiego-online.com**, the *San Diego* magazine website, offers abbreviated stories and dining and events listings.
- **www.sdreader.com**, the site of the free weekly *San Diego Reader*, is a great source for club and show listings, plus edgy topical journalism. It has printable dining and other coupons you can really use, plus opinionated arts, eats, and entertainment critiques.
- **www.signonsandiego.com** is where CitySearch teams up with the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, catering as much to locals as to visitors. It offers plenty of helpful links, plus reviews of restaurants, music, movies, performing arts, museums, outdoor recreation, beaches, and sports.
- **www.digitalcity.com/sandiego** is a lifestyle guide targeted at locals, and therefore yields occasional off-the-beaten-tourist-path recommendations. You'll find everything from personal ads to constantly changing restaurant spotlights and daily "Top Clicks."
- **www.sandiegoinsider.com** is a well-rounded online guide containing bar, club, and movie reviews. The dining guide includes lengthy descriptions but few assertive critiques. Suggestions abound for beach-going, hiking, and other outdoor excursions. Searching this site can be tedious, but the articles are generally rewarding.