

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. Amid all the change, 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. 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 San Diego-Coronado Bay Bridge:** The first 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. 99)—or, as the locals say, the Hotel Del—in the distance 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 in a delicate and beautiful coastal environment. See p. 164.
- **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 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. 145.
- **Taking in the City's Best Panorama:** Head 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, Mexico and San Diego's mountainous backcountry. See p. 176.
- **Renting Bikes, Skates, or Kayaks in Mission Bay:** Landscaped shores, calm waters, and paved paths, make Mission Bay an aquatic playground like no other. Explore on land or water, depending on your energy level. See p. 144.
- **Strolling Through the Gaslamp Quarter:** You'll be convinced you've stepped back in time when you walk through this 16½-block area lined with Victorian commercial buildings. The beautifully restored structures, 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. 188.

- **Spending a Day in Balboa Park:** This is San Diego’s crown jewel and the largest urban cultural park in the nation. The buildings that grew out of Balboa Park’s two world’s fairs (1915–16, 1935–36) create a Spanish Golden Age fantasia and provide a home for 15 of the city’s best museums. The park also features mature gardens, the acclaimed Old Globe Theatre, and is the location of the San Diego Zoo. See p. 147.
- **Listening to Live Music Outdoors at Humphrey’s:** An intimate, palm-fringed venue alongside the bay 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:** 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 12.
- **Wildflowers and Serenity at Anza-Borrego Desert State Park:** California’s largest state park attracts most visitors during the spring wildflower

season, when a kaleidoscopic carpet of blooms blankets the desert. Others come year-round to hike more than 100 miles of trails. See p. 273.

- **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.
- **Playing a Round of Golf at Torrey Pines Golf Course:** These two 18-hole championship courses in La Jolla overlook the ocean and provide players with plenty of challenge. In January, the Buick Invitational Tournament is held here. The rest of the year, these popular municipal courses are open to everybody. See p. 181.
- **Spending a Day at the San Diego Zoo, Wild Animal Park, or SeaWorld:** At the zoo, animals live in naturalistic habitats; at the Wild Animal Park, most of the 3,500 animals roam freely over an 1,800-acre spread. SeaWorld is an aquatic wonderland of pirouetting dolphins and 4-ton killer whales with a fetish for drenching visitors. See p. 138.

2 The Best Splurge Hotels

- The **Hard Rock Hotel**, 207 Fifth Ave. (☎ 866/751-7625 or 619/702-3000), has a location at the very entrance to the Gaslamp Quarter, and includes features like concert spaces, high-end nightspots, and a celebrity-chef restaurant. Big-time “wow” factor. See p. 77.
- **Ivy Hotel**, 600 F St. (☎ 877/489-4489 or 619/814-1000), exudes warmth, modern style, and class, and features such amenities as a personal butler and luxury cars to tool guests around downtown at no charge. The Ivy knows how to party, too—not only is there a jamming nightclub on

site, one of the suites includes a stripper pole. See p. 72.

- **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. 245.

- 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). Painstakingly designed in the Craftsman style, the Lodge features an elegant restaurant and a blissful spa, and elbows up against renowned Torrey Pines Golf Course in La Jolla. See p. 95.

3 The Best Moderately Priced Hotels

- You won't find a better location than the **Horton Grand**, 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 hanging around since then, too. See p. 79.
- 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. 79.

- Like some other recent hotel projects around town, the **Hotel Occidental**, 410 Elm St. (☎ 800/205-9897 or 619/232-1336), is a refurbished old beauty, built around 1923, and has a great location (near Balboa Park). Unlike those other properties, though, the Occidental is incredibly affordable. See p. 79.

4 The Most Unforgettable Dining Experiences

- Supper clubs have proliferated in San Diego but none have matched the panache and sophistication of **Anthology**, 1337 India St. (☎ 619/595-0300). It's hard to say what takes center stage here—culinary pooh-bah Bradley Ogden's excellent new American fare or the live music performed by an eclectic lineup of international artists. See p. 110.
- **Blanca**, 437 S. Hwy. 101 (☎ 858/792-0072), may be located in a strip mall blocks away from an ocean view, but this Solana Beach restaurant flies its foodie flag high. It may arguably be the best upscale establishment in the county. See p. 247.
- If you want to know what San Diego tastes like, you can find out at **Market**,

3702 Via de la Valle (☎ 858/523-0007). Native son Carl Schroeder finds the best local ingredients, creates his menu daily, and serves it all in a casually elegant space in Del Mar. See p. 240.

- At the **Marine Room**, 2000 Spindrift Dr. (☎ 858/459-7222), executive chef Bernard Guilla's creative, modern French cuisine provides ample evidence of how far the city's invigorated dining scene has come. See p. 128.
- **Jack's La Jolla**, 7863 Girard Ave. (☎ 858/456-8111), is a three-story epicurean funhouse. It features a casual sidewalk cafe, a sushi bar, and 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; there's a lively bar scene too. See p. 130.

- **Georges California Modern/Ocean Terrace Bistro**, 1250 Prospect St. (☎ 858/454-4244): These two long-time favorites in La Jolla share an *aah*-inspiring ocean view. Georges

underwent a \$2.5-million renovation and re-imagining (and a slight name change), but powerhouse chef Trey Foshee is thankfully still working his magic here. See p. 128.

- You can't visit San Diego without trying a **fish taco**. If the city has an official food, this is it. See p. 124 for suggestions on where to get one.

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. 154.
- **Organ Pavilion Concerts:** Organ recitals have been staged at the **Spreckels Organ Pavilion** (☎ 619/702-8138) in Balboa Park almost without interruption since 1915. With 4,530 pipes, this is one of the world's largest outdoor organs. Free concerts are presented every Sunday at 2pm. See p. 154.
- **Chicano Park Murals:** More than 70 works of art grace the support columns 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. 166.
- **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.