

PART ONE

SAN DIEGO COUNTY

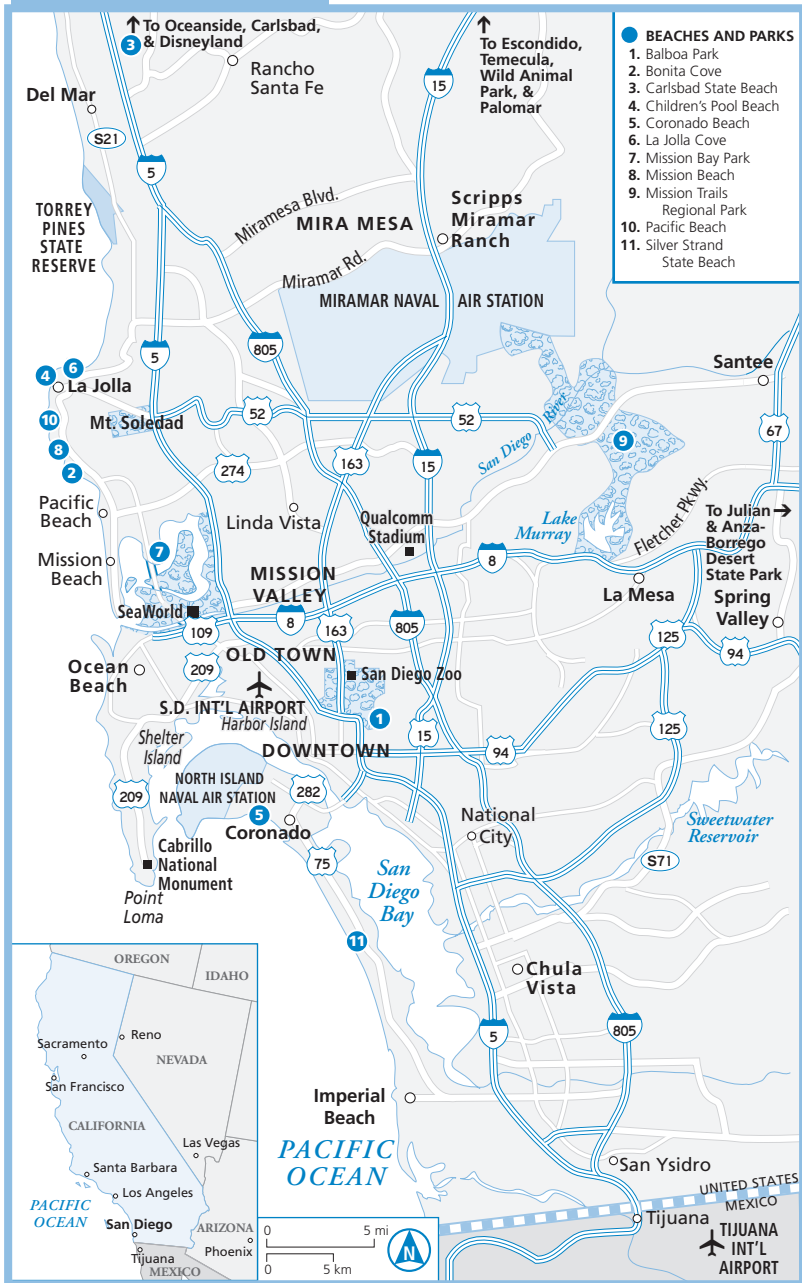
WHAT AN INTERESTING TOEHOLD SAN DIEGO COUNTY has on the continent—right at the edge, where travelers must choose between the ocean and a foreign country if they keep going. The eastern part of the county is home to the enormous **Anza-Borrego Desert State Park**. The coastal area is the population center, with the city of **San Diego** (the second-largest municipality in the state) dominating. The northern part of the county (before the huge military base at **Camp Pendleton** takes over the map) is dotted with golf courses. To the south, of course, is Mexico.

We've taken our kids to San Diego County in all seasons and for lots of different kinds of vacations. We've ridden the train from **LA** and stayed in downtown San Diego, riding the trolley to the **San Diego Zoo** and shopping in **Horton Plaza**. We based ourselves in **Carlsbad** to visit the **Wild Animal Park** and **Legoland** and enjoyed a bonus of gorgeous beach time. We've lolled in a fancy **Coronado Island** resort's outdoor spa after biking all over the island and taking the ferry back and forth just for fun. And we've sat in the gentle tidal waters of **Mission Bay** while a happy toddler splashed next to us. You see where this is headed, of course. It'll take more than a single vacation to even begin to sample San Diego's charms.

If it's your first visit to the San Diego area and you're arriving in summer, a four-day itinerary with a base at one of the Mission Bay resorts is ideal. **SeaWorld** is right in Mission Bay, so that's one day's outing. Pick among the zoo, the Wild Animal Park, a **Balboa Park** museum or two, **Old Town**, and **Legoland California** for another two days of fun. Finish with a day dedicated to water sports and beach fun. If the attractions that most interest you are Legoland and the

unofficial TIP
Families will find San Diego County easy to like. It has everything California is supposed to have—palm trees, beaches, a multicultural population, unlimited outdoor recreation, sophisticated cultural offerings, and good Mexican food.

san diego county



Wild Animal Park and you like a small-town setting, consider staying up the coast in **Carlsbad**. Families traveling with convention-goers won't be disappointed with the ever-improving downtown area and can try out the car-free itineraries described below. Visitors with another day should add a **Borrego Springs** visit, a **Tijuana** excursion (*note*: passports are required to enter Mexico), or (in early spring) a whale-watching boat trip.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE **San Diego International Airport**, also known as **Lindbergh Field**, is served by most major airlines; ☎ 619-231-2100; www.san.org and is just northwest of downtown.

BY TRAIN **Amtrak** makes its final southbound stop in San Diego, delivering travelers from as far north as Seattle. From LA, the trip is less than three hours on the popular, well-patronized **Pacific Surfliner** commuter line (frequent departures morning and afternoon). Excellent public transportation from the train station makes a trip without a car possible. Call ☎ 800-USA-RAIL, or visit www.amtrak.com or www.amtrakcalifornia.com.

BY CAR **Interstate 5**, which runs from Canada to Mexico, is the main freeway heading into San Diego. It's also reached from the north by **Interstate 15**, which passes through the Riverside area and connects to **Interstate 10**, and by **Interstate 8**, which heads east to Arizona. A car is not necessary to enjoy central San Diego, but it's great to have if you want to explore the farther reaches.

Car-free Sightseeing

Although San Diego and its suburbs are spread generously over many acres, and motorists will find their way along good roads and modern freeways, the city has also created a network of public transportation that permits easy access to major attractions, many of which are in a comparatively concentrated geographic area. The weather's almost always sunny and mild, so the journey from place to place is a pleasant jaunt; and because the city does a brisk convention business, the various trams, trolleys, and ferries have enough patronage to justify frequent, convenient runs.

If you think you'd like to do San Diego without a car (arriving by train, for example), you'll need to stay downtown, in Coronado, or near Old Town in order to easily combine the attractions mentioned here into a network. You can also simply take a taxi or municipal bus to the first boarding point of the day.

Here's a sample no-car itinerary: Board the **Old Town Trolley Tours** bus at your hotel in Coronado and ride it (enjoying the guide's descriptions of passing sights) to **Balboa Park**. Spend a morning at the zoo, then take the free Balboa shuttle to the **Space Museum**, then reboard the Old Town Trolley and continue to Old Town. Save the

historic buildings for another day, but enjoy a Mexican meal and some shopping, then take the **San Diego Trolley** to downtown, changing to another trolley to **Seaport Village**. At Seaport Village, let the kids play some games and get an ice-cream cone, then get on the ferry to cross the water to Coronado and your hotel.

You might think the Old Town Trolley Tours bus (with narration and music) is corny, but it sure is convenient. It goes to most of the major attractions, and you can get on and off at ten stops, including Old Town, the **Embarcadero**, **Seaport Village**, Horton Plaza, Coronado, and Balboa Park. For locations of stops and a timetable, call ☎ 800-868-7482 or 619-298-8687, or visit www.historictours.com. Fare is \$32 adults, \$16 ages 4 to 12; age 3 and under free. **Metropolitan Transit Service's Transit Store** (102 Broadway, downtown San Diego; ☎ 619-234-1060 or 511; transit.511sd.com) is a center of information about buses, Coaster (coastal light rail), and the San Diego Trolley. The center is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays; closed weekends. The new 511 system, sponsored by a coalition of transit entities, operates a free phone (just dial 511) and Web service (see above) with one-stop information about transportation options throughout the county. The Day Tripper Transit Pass, available as a one- (\$5), two- (\$9), three- (\$12), or four-day (\$15) pass, is sold here. There is no charge for children age 6 and under. One-day passes can also be purchased at trolley stations and the ferry landing.

The **San Diego Trolley** (☎ 619-233-3004; automated info line, ☎ 619-685-4900) operates daily from 5 a.m. to midnight, with service every 15 minutes most of the time. Tickets are dispensed from automated machines at each station. The **Blue Line** extends from Old Town through downtown to the Mexican border. The **Orange Line** covers the Harbor Drive area and goes to Seaport Village, to the convention center, and through downtown and the **Gaslamp Quarter**, including **Petco Park**, home of the San Diego Padres baseball team. The **Green Line** links to the Blue Line and heads for **Qualcomm Stadium**, home of the San Diego Chargers football team, via Mission Valley. Fares are \$1.25 to \$6. There is free daily tram-shuttle service around Balboa Park.



The **San Diego–Coronado Ferry** (☎ 800-442-7847 or 619-234-4111; www.sdhe.com/san-diego-bay-ferry.html) runs between downtown San Diego's Broadway Pier (1050 North Harbor Drive, at Broadway) and the Ferry Landing Marketplace on Coronado at First Street and B Avenue. The crossing is 15 minutes, and the ferry leaves San Diego every hour on the hour from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., returning from Coronado every hour on the half hour. One-way fares are \$3.50 per person, and reservations are not needed.

The **San Diego Water Taxi** (Fish Harbor Pier, Seaport Village, 891 West Harbor Drive; ☎ 619-235-8294; www.sdhe.com/san-diego-water-taxi.html) offers on-call service daily from 3 p.m. to 10 p.m., and transports people to various spots around the bay, including Shelter Island,

Harbor Island, Coronado, and Chula Vista; fares start at \$7 but can vary by destination.

HOW TO GET INFORMATION BEFORE YOU GO


- **Anza-Borrego Desert State Park Visitors Center** 200 Palm Canyon Drive, Borrego Springs 92004; ☎ 760-767-5311; parks.ca.gov
- **Balboa Park Visitors Center** 1549 El Prado, San Diego 92101; ☎ 619-239-0512; www.balboapark.org
- **Border Station Parking and Tourist Information** A commercial park-and-shuttle service at the Mexican border; 4570 Camino De La Plaza, San Ysidro 92173; ☎ 619-428-1422; www.borderparking.com
- **Carlsbad Convention & Visitors Bureau** 400 Carlsbad Village Drive, Carlsbad 92008; ☎ 800-CARLSBAD or 760-434-6093; www.carlsbadca.org
- **Coronado Visitor Center** 1100 Orange Avenue, Coronado 92118; ☎ 619-437-8788; www.coronadovisitorcenter.com
- **San Diego Convention & Visitors Bureau** 2215 India Street, San Diego 92101; ☎ 619-232-3101; www.sandiego.org
- **Tijuana Tourism Board** ☎ 800-025-0888; www.seetijuana.com

CHILD CARE AND BABYSITTING

Marion's Childcare (10491 Pine Grove Street, Spring Valley; ☎ 619-303-4379 or 888-891-5029; www.hotelchildcare.com), a long-established agency providing in-room child care, works with concierges all over town.

The BEST BEACHES *and* PARKS

ANZA-BORREGO DESERT STATE PARK This 600,000-acre park is home to bighorn sheep, roadrunners, and, in the spring, amazing wildflower displays; it's rich with riding and hiking trails for families with desert and wilderness experience. For a stop on a driving tour of San Diego County, the visitors center offers a fine slide presentation and lots of great children's books on desert flora and fauna. Open daily October through May, on weekends and holidays only June through September. Visitors center: 200 Palm Canyon Drive, Borrego Springs; ☎ 760-767-5311; parks.ca.gov.

 **BALBOA PARK** San Diego has taken the urban park to new heights, going beyond outdoor recreation to create a compact cultural hub that no other American city can rival (except, of course, Washington, DC). In the heart of the city, not far from downtown, Balboa is home to 14 museums (many are reviewed later), the world-famous San Diego Zoo, and five theaters (including the Old Globe). You'll also find outdoor pleasures,

unofficial TIP

Before you visit any of Balboa Park's destinations, hop on the free tram that cruises the park, both to get oriented and to give your kids a cheap thrill.

including picnic areas, three playgrounds, and botanical gardens, along with amusements such as a miniature-train ride, a carousel, and a butterfly-theme ride for kids age 5 and under. Open daily 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., 5 p.m. in summer; free parking. The Web site offers packages such as the Passport to Balboa Park for \$65 adults, \$36 children ages 3 through 12, which gets you into 13 attractions plus the zoo (\$39 and \$21 without the zoo). Visitors Center: House of Hospitality building, 1549 El Prado; ☎ 619-239-0512; www.balboapark.org.

BONITA COVE Within Mission Bay Park, near **Belmont Park** and **Mission Beach**, you'll find this outdoor paradise for young children. The calm, shallow water is friendly even to toddlers, and there's a playground, a grassy picnic area, and sand to dig. For information, call ☎ 858-694-3049 or visit www.sandiego.gov/park-and-recreation.

CARLSBAD STATE BEACH A broad sand beach with a wide, concrete bike and skating path, this is a great summertime beach for families—there's typically enough surf to have fun in, but it's rarely rough. Just south of the beach is Agua Hedionda Lagoon, a calm, wave-free spot for swimming, fishing, and boating. Lifeguards, restrooms, showers. For information, call ☎ 760-438-3143; carlsbad.ca.us/beaches.

CHILDREN'S POOL BEACH Still known by the name given it by locals who brought kids to play in the quiet surf, this beach is now home to herds of sea lions. Families stop by to look down on the hundreds of huge, protected creatures from a high vantage point. End of Jenner Street, 850 Coast Boulevard, La Jolla; ☎ 619-221-8901; www.sandiego.gov/lifeguards/beaches.

CORONADO BEACH San Diego's widest beach, Coronado is so big that it absorbs even the largest crowds comfortably. Good for swimming, bodyboarding, people-watching, and basic beach fun, it is guarded by the looming Hotel del Coronado. There are volleyball courts, fire pits on the north end, changing rooms, lifeguards in summer, showers, and pay parking at the hotel or free parking on the streets. For beach information, call ☎ 619-437-8788 or 866-599-7242; www.coronadovisitorcenter.com.

LA JOLLA COVE A drop-dead gorgeous jewel of a beach, in a cove protected by cliffs, La Jolla Cove seems smaller than ever in peak season, when crowds get intense. But don't let that keep you from enjoying the tide pools, the calm, clean water, the excellent snorkeling, and the grassy picnic areas. Next door is Boomer Beach, an expert-bodysurfing spot that's dangerous for most but great for pros, or for watching the locals put on a show. Changing rooms, lifeguard. Coast Boulevard to Scripps Park, La Jolla. For information, call ☎ 619-221-8901; www.sandiego.gov/lifeguards/beaches.




MISSION BAY PARK Although major resorts and hotels line Mission Bay, a calm-water tidal area that curls and curves for many acres, the bay's park is a huge public playground, with grassy

meadows and picnic areas sloping down to sandy beaches (many areas with no waves!), as well as several marinas servicing the 4,235-acre aquatic sports area. There are designated areas for each sport (swimming, sailing, windsurfing, kayaking, waterskiing, and fishing). And paved bike paths dot the grassy areas and run along the shore. Free parking lots adjacent; no overnight parking or camping. Fires allowed in designated fire containers on beaches. The playground at Tecolote Shores was especially designed for disabled children. For more information, call ☎ 619-276-8200 or 858-694-3049, or log on to www.sandiego.gov/park-and-recreation/parks/missionbay.

MISSION BEACH If you have older kids who want to be where the action is, head to this two-mile-long shoreline on the ocean side of Mission Bay. Teenagers are plentiful here, playing volleyball, skating on the boardwalk, bodyboarding in the sometimes-rough surf (riptides are common), and flaunting the latest surf wear. On the boardwalk right in the center of the beach is Belmont Park amusement park (see profile, page 43). Changing rooms, showers, lifeguards. Mission Boulevard, Mission Bay; for information, call ☎ 619-221-8900; www.sandiego.gov/lifeguards/beaches.

MISSION TRAILS REGIONAL PARK See “Hiking” under “Family Outdoor Adventures.”

PACIFIC BEACH Locals call it the Strand, and locals are plentiful on hot summer days, of which San Diego has many. (Consequently, parking is a challenge.) It has everything a big public beach should have, from a fishing pier to a biking and skating path to bodyboard rentals to lifeguards; surfers are limited to one area, so swimmers don't have to battle them for wave space. The many restaurants and shops of the neighborhood of Pacific Beach are a short walk away. Changing rooms, showers, restrooms (but no public restrooms between Pacific Beach Drive and Mission Beach). Mission Boulevard, San Diego; for information, call ☎ 619-221-8900; www.pacificbeach.org.

 **SILVER STRAND STATE BEACH** Three things make this state park a good beach for families: the surf and riptides are fairly calm; parking is plentiful here, unlike at the city beaches; and the shoreline sparkles with millions of tiny silver shells, which enchant many children. This two-mile-long beach connects the isthmus of Coronado (no, it's not really an island) to the mainland's Imperial Beach, and it's quieter than the beach in front of the Hotel Del Coronado. The broad, shallow shoreline allows for lots of safe scampering in gentle waves (or in no waves on the bay side), as well as good clamming and surf fishing. If you visit in winter, know that the location invites wind and chill, so dress warmly. Dogs are not allowed on the beach, in the tunnels, or on the bay side. Parking is free, and RV camping (reservations required) is available for \$25 to \$30; no tent camping. Restrooms, showers, lifeguards. Follow signs off CA 75; for information, call ☎ 619-435-5184; parks.ca.gov.

FAMILY OUTDOOR ADVENTURES

BICYCLING AND SKATING On some bright summer days, it seems that every San Diegan is on skates, bikes, or skateboards, making good use of the endless paved paths that wind around Mission Bay and along the beaches. Mission and Pacific Beaches are particularly fun to cruise, but in season they can get intimidatingly crowded and speedy for the training-wheel set. For a quieter, beautiful, long ride, follow the path along the Coronado shoreline through Silver Strand State Park. The Mission Bay paths are also good for younger children. On Coronado Island, you can rent bikes and skates from **Bikes and Beyond**, Ferry Landing Marketplace; ☎ 619-435-7180; www.hollandsbicycles.com. In the Mission Bay area, get gear from **Mission Bay Sportcenter**, Hyatt Regency Mission Bay Spa & Marina, 1441 Quivira Road; ☎ 619-221-9264; www.missionbaysportcenter.com.

BOATING Even novices can learn to sail in the calm waters of Mission Bay, and every weekend, they're out there doing it. Boats and lessons are offered at **Mission Bay Sportcenter**, 1010 Santa Clara Place; ☎ 858-488-1004; www.missionbaysportcenter.com. At the Dana Hotel on Mission Bay (1710 West Mission Bay Drive), there's **Adventure Water Sports**; ☎ 619-226-8611; www.adventurewatersports.com), offering motorboats, kayaks, and aqua cycles.

FISHING Oceangoing fishing charters are plentiful in San Diego, but with kids we prefer a cheaper, lower-key outing—we head for one of the several fetching piers, where licenses are unnecessary and fish are often caught. The piers at Pacific Beach and the Coronado Ferry Landing are good ones, and both have bait-and-tackle shops.

HIKING Serious hiking opportunities abound in the region, but with kids in tow, our favorite destination is **Mission Trails Regional Park** (1 Father Junipero Serra Trail, San Diego; ☎ 619-668-3275; www.mtrp.org). This inland, 5,800-acre urban park has 35 miles of trails for hiking, mountain biking, and horseback riding, and some of the trails are paved to accommodate strollers and wheelchairs. Pick up a map at the visitors center. If your kids are sturdy, tackle the trail to San Diego's highest peak, a 1,600-foot climb that pays off with a 360-degree view of the city.

SNORKELING California's clearest waters are found in **La Jolla Cove**, a protected part of the San Diego–La Jolla Underwater Park. For swimming children old enough to manage a mask and snorkel (typically age 7 and up), a snorkeling adventure is mind-blowing, as interactive a nature experience as they'll ever have. See La Jolla Cove listing in “The Best Beaches and Parks” for location details; if you don't have snorkel gear, you can rent it from **La Jolla Kayak** 2199 Avenida de la Playa, La Jolla; ☎ 858-459-1114; www.lajollakayak.com).



SURFING Surfing's popularity has exploded in the last few years, and so the choices for surf lessons and camps are numerous. One of our favorites is the **San Diego Surfing Academy** (☎ 800-447-SURF or 760-230-1474; www.surfsdsa.com), which makes fine use of the gentle waves at South Carlsbad State Beach in its private lessons for kids (age 8 and up) and adults; also note that its summertime surf camps can be attended for just a day or two. On Mission Beach, Pacific Surf School (☎ 858-488-2685; www.pacificsurf.org) offers frequent group lessons for a reasonable \$55 to \$65. Also highly recommended is **La Jolla's Surf Diva** (☎ 858-454-8273; www.surfdiva.com), known for its classes for girls and their moms, but boys are welcome, too. If you want to try it on your own, rent a soft-foam longboard from the rental concessions at Pacific Beach and go for it.

WATERSKIING AND WINDSURFING On the ocean side of Mission Bay is some of the best windsurfing in California; on the bay side is superb waterskiing. For instruction and equipment for both sports, you can contact the **Mission Bay Sportcenter** (1010 Santa Clara Place; ☎ 858-488-1004; www.missionbaysportcenter.com); open daily, 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. The staff can also get you started on a surfboard, personal watercraft, or kayak. Another good spot for waterskiing lessons and rentals (as well as whale-watching excursions) is **Seaforth Mission Bay Boat Rentals** (1641 Quivira Road; ☎ 619-223-1681; www.seaforthboatrental.com).



WHALE WATCHING The Pacific gray whale swims past San Diego from December through mid-March, and blowhole and brech sightings are common. In fact, so confident is one outfitter, **H&M Landing** (2803 Emerson Street, San Diego; ☎ 619-222-1144; www.hmlanding.com), that it guarantees a whale sighting or you get a voucher for another outing. Family trips are typically three hours long. If you'd rather scout whales from dry land, head to the Cabrillo National Monument on Point Loma (see profile, page 44).

A CALENDAR of FESTIVALS and EVENTS

January

WHALEFEST *Birch Aquarium at Scripps, La Jolla.* January and February. Special exhibits and hands-on activities teach kids about whales; ☎ 858-534-FISH; aquarium.ucsd.edu.

February

HERITAGE DAY PARADE *San Diego.* Late February. Celebrates the city's rich ethnic diversity; ☎ 619-262-0334; www.heritagedayparade.org.

WILDFLOWER BLOOMS *Anza-Borrego Desert State Park.* The blooms hit sometime between early February and late April, and they last only for a few weeks; ☎ 760-767-5311; parks.ca.gov.

March

OCEAN BEACH KITE FESTIVAL *Ocean Beach.* Sponsored by the Kiwanis for more than 50 years. Kite decorating (9 a.m. to noon) and flying, as well as a parade (plus free hot dogs). Bring your own kite; ☎ 619-531-1527.

April

GASLAMP QUARTER EASTER BONNET PARADE & HAT CONTEST *Fifth and L streets, San Diego.* A charity event held the weekend before Easter. Hat-making workshop, Easter egg hunt, parade, and treats; ☎ 619-233-5008; www.gaslamp.org.

OPENING DAY, SAN DIEGO PADRES BASEBALL *Petco Park.* ☎ 619-795-5000; padres.mlb.com.

SAN DIEGO EARTHFAIR *Balboa Park.* Earth Day festival with lots of activities for children; ☎ 858-272-7370; www.earthdayweb.org.

May

FIESTA CINCO DE MAYO *Old Town State Park, San Diego.* A two-day party with music, entertainment, food, booths, and kids' activities; ☎ 619-296-3236; www.fiestacincomemayo.com.

CARLSBAD VILLAGE STREET FAIRE *Carlsbad.* Some 90,000 people fill this small town for its twice-a-year (May and November), one-day blowout, which includes children's rides, a pancake breakfast, farmers' market-style vendors, live music, and international foods; ☎ 760-931-8400; www.carlsbad.org.

INDIAN FAIR *San Diego Museum of Man, Balboa Park.* Native Americans from across the country gather to share tribal ceremonies, stories, music, foods, and crafts, with hands-on projects for children; ☎ 619-239-2001; www.museumofman.org.

June

SAN DIEGO COUNTY FAIR *Del Mar.* Carnival rides, flower shows, animals, arcades, and nationally known musical performers; ☎ 858-755-1161; www.sdfair.com.

July

ANNUAL FESTIVAL OF THE BELLS *Mission Basilica.* Weekend-long festival celebrating the anniversary of the founding of Mission Basilica San Diego de Alcalá. Includes food, music and dance performances, llama rides, and games; ☎ 619-283-7319; www.missionsandiego.com.

FOURTH OF JULY EVENTS *La Jolla:* a free concert at Scripps Park followed by a fireworks show; ☎ 858-454-1600; www.lajollabythesea.com.

Coronado: a parade, free concert in Spreckels Park, and fireworks; ☎ 619-437-8788; www.coronadovisitorcenter.com.

U.S. OPEN SANDCASTLE COMPETITION *Imperial Beach Pier*. Sandcastles like you've never seen 'em, along with a parade and evening fireworks. Children have their own competition; ☎ 619-424-6663; www.usopensandcastle.com.

MOVIES BEFORE THE MAST *Star of India*. Nautically themed, family-friendly movies are screened on board this historic sailing ship in July and August; ☎ 619-234-9153; www.sdmaritime.org.

August

CHULA VISTA ANNUAL DOWNTOWN LEMON FESTIVAL *Chula Vista*. Food and crafts; ☎ 619-422-1982; www.cvdba.com.

WORLD BODYSURFING CHAMPIONSHIPS *Oceanside Pier and Beach*. Bodsurfers from around the world put on a show; ☎ 760-722-1534; www.worldbodysurfing.org.

September

FLEET WEEK *San Diego*. An extended tribute to the military with many events that extend well into October, including ship and submarine tours, a ship parade, and an air show; ☎ 619-858-1546; www.fleetweeksandiego.org.

October

OKTOBERFEST *Holiday Park, Carlsbad*. Since Carlsbad was originally a German settlement named Karlsbad, this is the Oktoberfest event to attend; ☎ 760-434-6093; www.rotaryoktoberfest.org.

November

DEL MAR FAIRGROUNDS HOLIDAY OF LIGHTS *Del Mar*. Drive your car around the racetrack and view more than 400 holiday displays; ☎ 858-755-1161; www.sdfair.com/holidayoflights.

CARLSBAD VILLAGE STREET FAIRE *Carlsbad*. The fall version of this semiannual event (see May listing); ☎ 760-931-8400; www.carlsbad.org.

MOTHER GOOSE PARADE *Main Street, El Cajon*. Hundreds of thousands of spectators jam into El Cajon for this decades-old parade honoring fairy tales, children, and Mother Goose rhymes; ☎ 619-444-8712; www.mothergooseparade.org.

December

LA JOLLA CHRISTMAS PARADE AND HOLIDAY FESTIVAL *Downtown La Jolla*. Floats, marching bands, and Santa, followed by a carnival and street fair; ☎ 858-454-5718; www.lajollabythesea.com.

SAN DIEGO

San Diego IS THE ONE DESTINATION IN CALIFORNIA that combines an ocean-resort feel with big-city culture and activities. You can lie on the beach at **Coronado** and 20 minutes later be downtown at a major rock concert. You can spend the morning in a museum as you might in other cities, but after lunch you'll be skating along Mission Bay. While you watch your little one ride the carousel at **Shoreline Village**, you'll admire the bay on one side and the skyscrapers of the financial district on the other.

More cosmopolitan than Santa Barbara and easier to navigate than LA, San Diego is an ideal introduction to Southern California.

unofficial TIP

If you'll be in San Diego for at least a week, renting a beach house is the way to go.

The big-deal attractions (**San Diego Zoo, Wild Animal Park, SeaWorld**) are indeed world-class; the historic areas (**Old Town, the Maritime Museum** ships) are colorful and inviting; there are wonderfully located concentrations of hotels and motels (**Mission Bay, Coronado**); north of town are some beautiful, laid-back beach towns for day trips or overnight escapes (**La Jolla, Carlsbad**); and the residents are relaxed and casual.

FAMILY LODGING

Best Western Blue Sea Lodge

707 Pacific Beach Drive, San Diego; ☎ 800-BLUE-SEA OR 858-488-4700; www.bestwestern-blueseas.com; \$159–\$279 off-season, \$229–\$319 in summer

THE EXTERNAL ARCHITECTURE may be hideous, but the location can't be beat: the boardwalk and the soft sand of Pacific Beach are right in front, Mission Bay is just around the corner, and the neighborhood is full of cafes, restaurants, and beach shops. Furthermore, a recent remodeling spruced up the interior, adding a colorful surfer theme and 26 new rooms, bringing the room count up to 128. The ocean-view suites are big enough for families, and many rooms have kitchens. Extras include free wireless Internet, a small pool, a spa, a cheerful cafe, and rental bikes. Reserve at least two months in advance for summertime visits.

Catamaran Resort Hotel & Spa

3999 Mission Boulevard, Mission Bay; ☎ 800-422-8386 or 858-488-1081; www.catamaranresort.com; \$159–\$799; packages with SeaWorld or various sporting adventures offered

THIS LARGE MISSION BAY RESORT has live parrots in the tropical-decor lobby, spacious rooms (many with sliding glass doors to patios and bayside), outside pizza-delivery service, and a location convenient to SeaWorld. It's not as glitzy as some other San Diego-area resorts, but it is a beach and water-sports paradise—wear your bathing suits and board shorts and head for the hotel pier for rentals and lessons in kayaking, windsurfing, diving, and more, or go to the bayfront beach for swimming and volleyball; wave lovers can just walk across Mission Boulevard to get to Mission Beach. Among the offerings for adventurous teens is sea-cave kayaking.

Embassy Suites San Diego Bay

601 Pacific Coast Highway, San Diego; ☎ 800-EMBASSY or 619-239-2400; www.essandiegobay.com; \$189–\$717

IF YOU WANT TO BE DOWNTOWN (not a first choice for beach-loving families, but it has its appeal), this is a good place to stay. It has all the family comforts that the chain is known for (two-room suite, two TVs, sleeper sofa, refrigerator, microwave, free breakfast); it's close to the trolley line, the Embarcadero, and Seaport Village; and it's not far from Balboa Park. There is a pool, but, curiously, it is indoors.

Hotel del Coronado

1500 Orange Avenue, Coronado; ☎ 800-HOTEL-DEL or 619-435-6611; www.hoteldel.com; \$335–\$535; suites \$700 and up

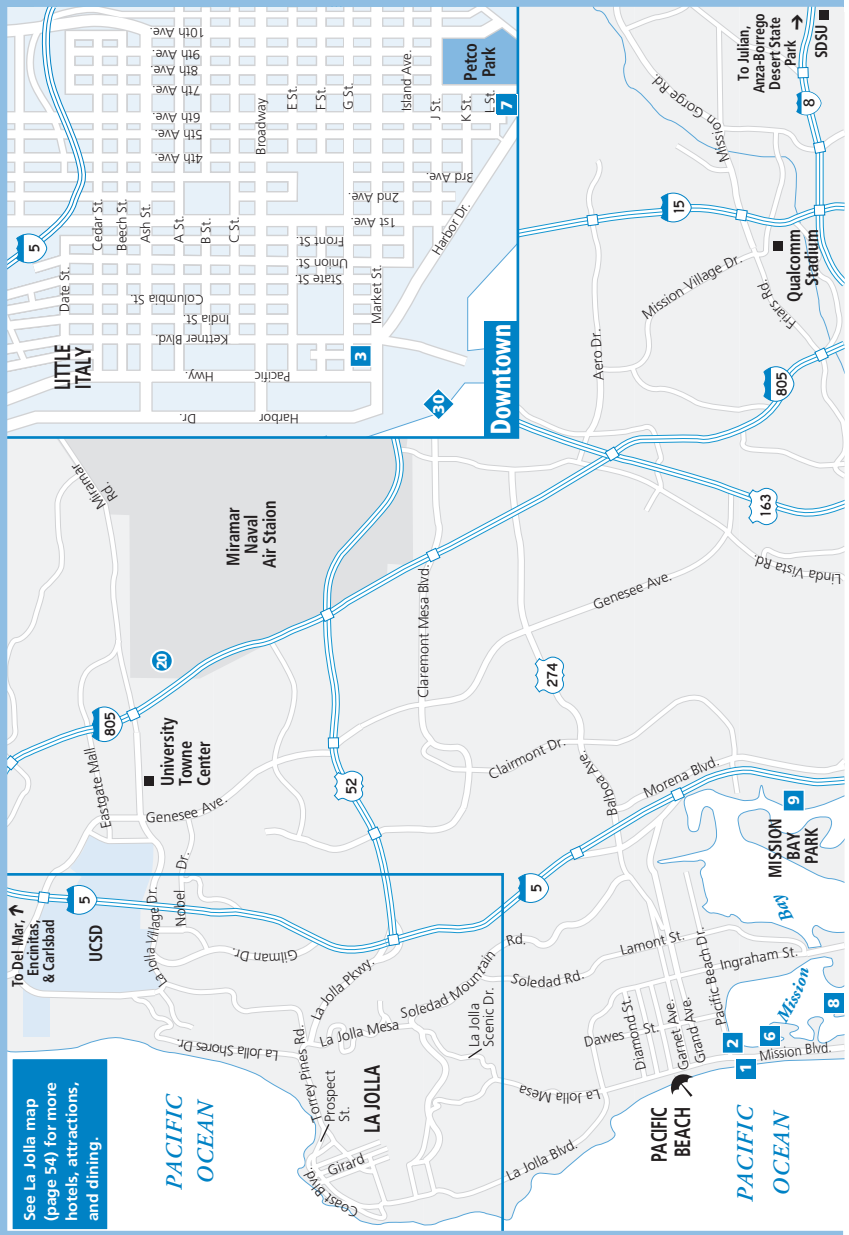
INCREDIBLY POPULAR WITH MANY TRAVELERS, this huge (692 rooms, six restaurants) resort complex on Coronado Island offers lodgings from vintage-historic rooms to modern beachfront suites. Some kids find the main Victorian building kind of creepy, its dark hallways often crowded with busloads of day-trippers. But there's plenty of sunshine out by the (crowded) pool and on the beach, where supervised kids' programs and activities (some free, most costing \$15 to \$65, depending on activity) are held in spring and summer and during the Christmas holidays. Teens have a new lounge, with computers, video games, a pool table, and music, and they get such active options as surf lessons, kayaking, and biking. The full line of sports and water equipment is available to rent, and there are child-care services and children's menus. This is no place for the budget-conscious—you'll pay dearly for everything from parking to food—but for some it's worth it to be in the middle of the history and the beach action.



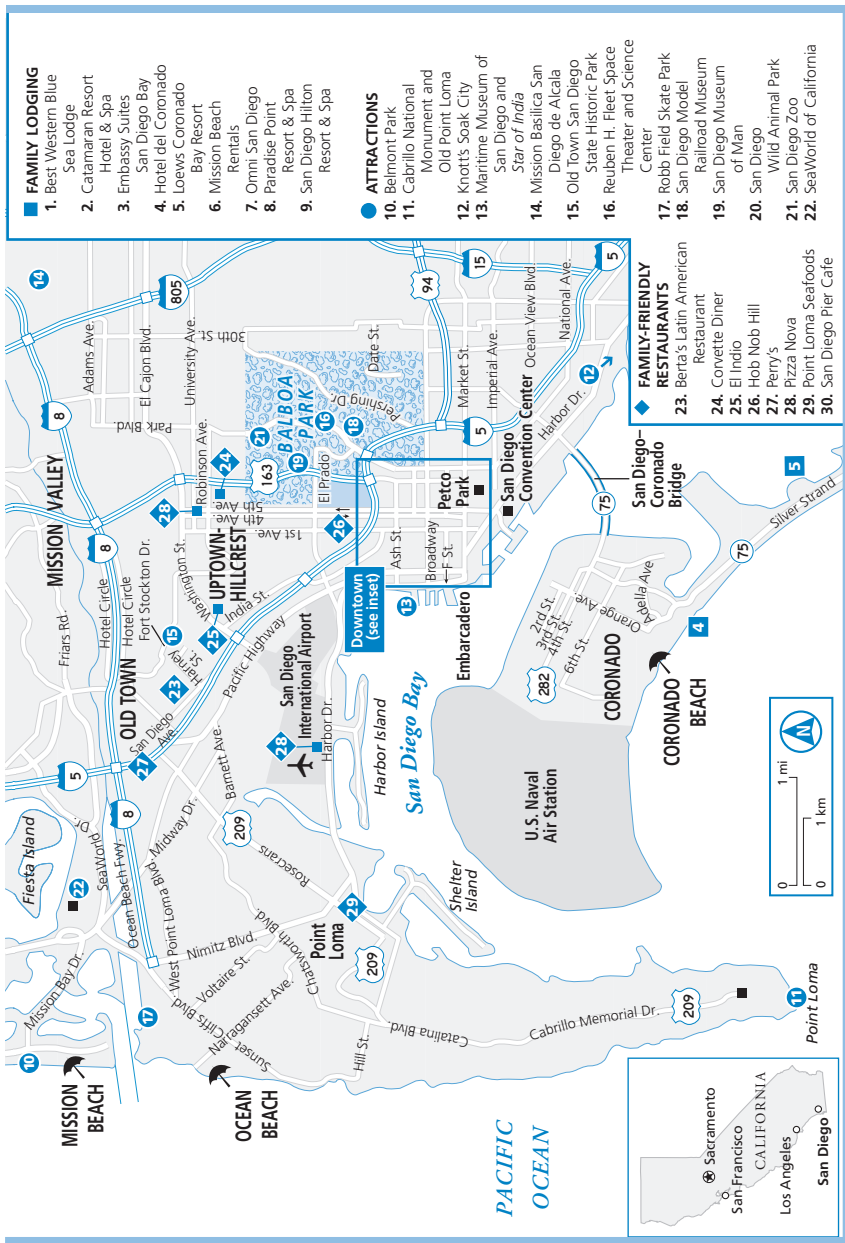
Loews Coronado Bay Resort

4000 Coronado Bay Road, Coronado; ☎ 800-815-6397 or 619-424-4000; www.loewscoronadobay.com; \$339–\$369; suites \$575 and up

san diego



See La Jolla map (page 54) for more hotels, attractions, and dining.



THIS UPSCALE, MODERN, 440-room resort looks at first like a business hotel, but it is actually totally family-friendly. Located on its own little peninsula on Coronado Island, it's far from the taco bars and shops of Coronado Village, but there's plenty to keep families happy right at the resort. There's a nice pool area (three pools, one of which is adults-only) with a great snack bar; on Friday nights, a 9- by 12-foot screen shows family movies while kids float on inner tubes. You'll also find a spa (for grown-ups), a playground, a game room, PBteen lounge-spa, and sailboat and bike rentals; beautiful Silver Strand State Beach is a short walk. The Loews Loves Kids activities program for ages 4 to 12 (summers and holidays) is \$80 for a full day and \$55 for a half day, with sibling discounts, and there is an in-room babysitting service as well as baby-proofing kits. The casual restaurant and room service have kids' menus, but save the fine-dining room for adults.

Mission Beach Rentals

747½ San Fernando Place, Mission Beach; ☎ 858-488-3100;
www.missionbeachmanagement.com;
weekly rentals in summer \$550–\$6,000 per week

A LONG-ESTABLISHED RENTAL AGENCY with a good supply of beach houses, apartments, and condos. All but the smallest studios are ideal for families, with kitchens, living rooms, and homelike comfort; some condos have such amenities as pools and spas. Locations include Mission Bay and Pacific Beach.

Omni San Diego

675 L Street, San Diego; ☎ 888-444-6664 or 619-231-6664;
www.omnisan Diego hotel.com; \$259–\$369; suites \$500 and up

LINKED BY A SKYBRIDGE to Petco Park (home of Padres baseball), this gleaming new tower has a great location for those who need to be near the Convention Center or want to be in the Gaslamp Quarter or at a baseball game (some rooms even look right into the stadium!). Its 511 rooms include 27 family-fitting junior and one-bedroom suites, all decorated with a cool white-on-beige palette and all complete with such modern frills as video games, pay-per-view movies, and wireless Internet. The pool deck is decidedly urban, with modern buildings all around, but it's kid-friendly and has a good cafe with a children's menu. The San Diego Trolley stops right in front, so you can easily get to Old Town, Seaport Village, and the Mexican-border transit center.



Paradise Point Resort & Spa

1404 West Vacation Road, San Diego; ☎ 800-344-2626 or
858-274-4630; www.paradisepoint.com;
\$259–\$509 off-season, \$356–\$631 summer

THIS IS NO PLACE FOR FANS OF INTIMATE LITTLE HOTELS—462 low-slung, recently rehabbed, 1970s-vintage rooms, five pools, tennis courts, a volleyball court, an 18-hole putting course, and much more are spread over

a tropically landscaped, 44-acre island in Mission Bay. But it's a good place on a lovely bayside beach for an active family resort vacation. Summertime brings the daily Kids Camp, where kids ages 3 to 12 experience everything from Hula Hoop lessons to making ice cream; the cost is \$100 for a full day, including lunch (the littlest ones have a morning program only). Teens get nighttime activities and lots to do on their own, from sunbathing at the beach to cruising the video arcade. Many rooms have kitchens; all have patios or terraces. Bike and pedal-boat rentals, children's menus, sauna, fitness center, packages with local attractions.

San Diego Hilton Resort & Spa

1775 East Mission Bay Drive, San Diego; ☎ 800-221-2424 or 619-276-4010; sandiegoresort.hilton.com; \$239 (and up) off-season, \$279 (and up) in season; children stay free in parents' room

PART HIGH-RISE, PART BUNGALOW COMPLEX, this 357-room resort hotel on Mission Bay caters to families, with all sorts of kid-friendly amenities. The Kids Klub program is \$12 per hour. (It's less like day care and more like organized fun, so many kids just join in for an hour or two to take part in the activities that most attract them.) The over-11 set gets its own Teen Time program, which includes mixers. Fun facilities include the huge swimming pool, the little-kid wading pool, pathways for biking and skating (rentals available), the beach, the tennis, and the water-sport rentals. Many of the large rooms have terraces or patios, as well as wet bars and refrigerators. Children's menus are available.

ATTRACTIONS

Belmont Park

APPEAL BY AGE PRESCHOOL ★★ GRADE SCHOOL ★★★★★ TEENS ★★
YOUNG ADULTS ★★★ OVER 30 ★★ SENIORS ★★

**West Mission Bay Drive and West Mission Boulevard, Mission Bay;
☎ 858-488-1549; www.giantdipper.com**

Hours *Summer:* Sunday–Thursday, 11 a.m.–11 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m.–midnight. *Off-season:* Monday–Thursday, 11 a.m.–8 p.m., Friday–Sunday, 11 a.m.–10 p.m. **Admission** Free to the park; ride prices vary. **Touring time** Average 3 hours with swimming; minimum 1 hour. **Rainy-day touring** Yes, for indoor facilities. **Restaurants** Concessions. **Alcoholic beverages** No. **Disabled access** Limited on rides. **Wheelchair rental** No. **Baby-stroller rental** No. **Lockers** No. **Pet kennels** No. **Rain check** No. **Private tours** No.

DESCRIPTION AND COMMENTS Part old-fashioned seaside amusement park, part modern playground, this fun zone is particularly appealing to school-age kids and teens; many of the games and rides are too difficult or scary for young children, though there is a small kiddie area. The showpieces are the 1925 wooden roller coaster and the wooden replica of a Looft carousel; our kids particularly liked steering the little boats

around the miniature harbor. The Plunge, a gigantic indoor saltwater pool, is worth a dip, if only to experience Wyland's impressive underwater whale mural. Arcades, video games, a movie theater, and shops ring the rides.



Cabrillo National Monument and Old Point Loma

APPEAL BY AGE PRESCHOOL ★★ GRADE SCHOOL ★★★★★ TEENS ★★★
 YOUNG ADULTS ★★★★★ OVER 30 ★★★★★ SENIORS ★★★★★

Point Loma, south on Catalina Boulevard, San Diego; ☎ 619-557-5450; www.nps.gov/cabr

Hours Daily, 9 a.m.–5 p.m.; open later in summer. **Admission** \$5 per car or \$3 per person walk-in. **Touring time** Average 2 hours; minimum 1 hour. **Rainy-day touring** Not good. **Restaurants** Vending machines. **Alcoholic beverages** No. **Disabled access** Yes. **Wheelchair rental** Yes, free. **Baby-stroller rental** No. **Lockers** No. **Pet kennels** No. **Rain check** No. **Private tours** No.

DESCRIPTION AND COMMENTS This falls under the scenery category, which typically bores kids, but ours enjoyed this outing as much as we did. Reached after driving past the airport through Shelter Island, a huge Navy base (some of which is operational and some abandoned), and Point Loma, this point of land several hundred feet above the ocean seems like the end of the world. As you stand on the point's bluff, the Pacific stretches eternally to your right, while the whole of San Diego Bay spreads out straight ahead and to the left. The kids loved looking through the coin telescope for close-ups of the many incoming and outgoing military ships and planes, commercial planes, and pleasure boats (in winter and spring, this is also a great vantage to spot gray whales). Then we walked higher up the point to the tiny old 1855 lighthouse; what enthralled our 8-year-old was not the light itself, but the preserved (behind glass) living quarters of the lighthouse captain, his wife, and two sons. A steep trail down to tide pools is a worthy outing with older kids, and the visitors center has displays on the history of Juan Cabrillo's discovery of San Diego.

Knott's Soak City

APPEAL BY AGE PRESCHOOL ★★ GRADE SCHOOL ★★★★★ TEENS ★★★
 YOUNG ADULTS ★★ OVER 30 ★★ SENIORS ½

2052 Entertainment Circle, Chula Vista; ☎ 619-661-7373; www.soakcityusa.com

Hours May and June: daily, 10 a.m.–6 p.m.; July and August: daily, 10 a.m.–7 p.m.; September: daily, 10 a.m.–5 p.m. **Admission** \$30 adults, \$20 children ages 3–11; after 3 p.m., \$20 for adults and kids; parking \$8–\$12. **Touring time** 4–6 hours; minimum 1 hour. **Rainy-day touring** Yes. **Restaurants** Snack bar. **Alcoholic beverages** No. **Disabled access** Yes. **Wheelchair rental** No. **Baby-stroller rental** No. **Lockers** Yes. **Pet kennels** No. **Rain check** No. **Private tours** No.

DESCRIPTION AND COMMENTS This 1950s-themed water park celebrates the surf-loving California fantasy. A highlight is the Coronado Express, a family raft ride that rushes down almost 700 feet of twists and turns into a splashdown pool. Among the 22 other rides are tube slides, body slides, speed slides, a wave pool, and a lazy river for folks who just want to kick back and float.

Mission Basilica San Diego de Alcalá

APPEAL BY AGE	PRESCHOOL ★	GRADE SCHOOL ★★	TEENS ★★
YOUNG ADULTS ★★	OVER 30 ★★★	SENIORS ★★★	

10818 San Diego Mission Road, San Diego; ☎ 619-283-7319;

www.missionsandiego.com

Hours Daily, 9 a.m.–4:45 p.m., except Thanksgiving and Christmas. Tours are Monday–Friday, 9 a.m.–2 p.m.; call ☎ 858-565-9077 between 12:30 p.m. and 2:30 p.m. on Monday and Thursday only for reservations. **Admission** \$3 adults, \$2 seniors, \$1 children ages 6–12. **Touring time** Average 1 hour; minimum 30 minutes. **Rainy-day touring** Yes. **Restaurants** No. **Alcoholic beverages** No. **Disabled access** Yes. **Wheelchair rental**. No. **Baby-stroller rental** No. **Lockers** No. **Pet kennels** No. **Rain check** No. **Private tours** Self-guided audio tour.

DESCRIPTION AND COMMENTS This was the first of the California missions, and it still serves as an active parish church. It's a short stop for most families because the museum area is small, but the grounds are lovely, and the church sanctuary is a fine example of the folkloric quality of mission architecture.

Old Town San Diego State Historic Park

APPEAL BY AGE	PRESCHOOL ★★★	GRADE SCHOOL ★★★★★	TEENS ★★★★★
YOUNG ADULTS ★★★★★½	OVER 30 ★★★★★½	SENIORS ★★★★★½	

Bounded by Wallace, Congress, Twiggs, and Juan streets, San Diego;

☎ 619-220-5422; parks.ca.gov

Hours Daily, beginning at 10 a.m. for historic houses; most shops open until 9 p.m. **Admission** Free; donations appreciated. **Touring time** Average a half day; minimum 3 hours, with a meal and minimal shop browsing. **Rainy-day touring** Not great; outdoor paths, unpaved areas. **Restaurants** Surrounding. **Alcoholic beverages** In some restaurants. **Disabled access** Yes. **Wheelchair rental** No. **Baby-stroller rental** No. **Lockers** No. **Pet kennels** No; leashed pets allowed. **Rain check** No. **Private tours** Yes.

DESCRIPTION AND COMMENTS Shops and restaurants occupy many of the landmark buildings that surround the official state-historic-park section of Old Town, so the kids may never know they're being educated when you come here. The park showcases aspects of San Diego's past from 1821 to 1872, when the area was first under the Mexican and then later the American government. The original town plaza is the focal point of the pedestrian-only zone; it is surrounded by restored homes with furnishings of the period, a smithy and stable, a courthouse, a schoolhouse,

a dental museum, a drugstore museum, and a newspaper museum. Free tours are conducted daily at 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. by costumed docents at the visitors center in the Robinson-Rose House (4002 Wallace Street). The Bazaar del Mundo—shops and cafes surrounding a courtyard—often has mariachis and costumed dancers performing.



Reuben H. Fleet Science Center

APPEAL BY AGE PRESCHOOL ★★★ GRADE SCHOOL ★★★★★ TEENS ★★★★★
YOUNG ADULTS ★★★★★ OVER 30 ★★★★★ SENIORS ★★★★★

1875 El Prado, Balboa Park, San Diego, near San Diego Zoo;
☎ 619-238-1233; www.rhfleet.org

Hours Monday–Thursday, 9:30 a.m.–8 p.m.; Friday, 9:30 a.m.–9 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 9:30 a.m.–8 p.m. Summer hours vary. **Admission** Price varies depending on IMAX movies attended: \$8–\$16.50 adults, \$7–\$14 seniors age 65 and over and children ages 3–12, free for children under age 3; first Monday of each month (holidays excluded) is Senior Monday, with \$5 admission for seniors to exhibits and 1 IMAX film. **Touring time** Average 2 hours; minimum 1 hour. **Rainy-day touring** Yes. **Restaurants** Yes. **Alcoholic beverages** No. **Disabled access** Yes. **Wheelchair rental** No. **Baby-stroller rental** No. **Lockers** No. **Pet kennels** No. **Rain check** No. **Private tours** No.

DESCRIPTION AND COMMENTS Of the many, many fine museums in Balboa Park, this is the hardest to find—despite its tremendous appeal to families, it is not mentioned on any of the directional signs posted in the park. (*Hint: It's across the fountain plaza from the Natural History Museum, en route to the zoo.*) This is an excellent hands-on science museum, where kids can touch, feel, experiment, and explore. The special exhibits are always first-rate, and they sometimes stay for a long time; recent examples included interactive exhibits on high-definition television and the science of seeing, and a “flight” through the human heart. Big-screen IMAX Dome films, usually about nature and/or space, are shown daily in the adjacent theater, and they are invariably worth seeing—but note that the noise and special effects may scare small children. This place can get mobbed, so try to visit on a school day after lunch, when the field trips have all returned to school.

Robb Field Skate Park

APPEAL BY AGE PRESCHOOL ★ GRADE SCHOOL ★★★ TEENS ★★★★★
YOUNG ADULTS ★★★★★ OVER 30 ½ SENIORS –

2525 Bacon Street, San Diego (Ocean Beach); ☎ 619-525-8486;
www.sandiego.gov/park-and-recreation/centers/robbskate.shtml

Hours Monday–Friday, 1 p.m.–dark.; Saturday and Sunday, noon–dark. **Hours** subject to change; call to verify hours. **Admission** \$5 for a day pass; three-month multiuse pass \$30. **Rainy-day touring** No. **Restaurants** No. **Alcoholic beverages** No. **Disabled access** Limited. **Wheelchair rental** No. **Baby-stroller rental** No. **Lockers** No. **Pet kennels** No. **Rain check** No. **Private tours** No.

DESCRIPTION AND COMMENTS Top local skateboarders helped the city of San Diego come up with a winning street-course design for this popular, 40,000-square-foot concrete paradise. It has something for all skill levels, including a combo bowl, a volcano shaped like an octagon, and rails, ledges, and blocks galore. Pay for a day pass at the entrance office and ollie away. Helmets and pads are required; the park office has a limited supply of gear you can check out with an ID. Parents need to fill out an entrance application and sign a liability release that stays on file for return visits. To get there, take the Sunset Cliffs exit from Interstate 8, then turn right on West Point Loma Boulevard and right on Bacon Street, which leads to the park. We often let our teens skate here (it's totally safe and gated, with staff supervising at all times) while one of us takes the preschoolers across the street to the playground, or the doggie to the off-leash beach next to the field.



Maritime Museum of San Diego and *Star of India*

APPEAL BY AGE PRESCHOOL ★★★ GRADE SCHOOL ★★★★★½ TEENS ★★★★★½
 YOUNG ADULTS ★★★ OVER 30 ★★★★★½ SENIORS ★★★★★½

1492 North Harbor Drive, San Diego; ☎ 619-234-9153; www.sdmaritime.com

Hours Daily, 9 a.m.–8 p.m.; Memorial Day through Labor Day, open until 9 p.m.
Admission \$14 adults, \$11 seniors 62 and older, \$11 active military with valid ID, \$8 ages 6–17, free for children age 5 and under. **Touring time** Average 3 hours; minimum 1 hour. **Rainy-day touring** Not good. **Restaurants** No. **Alcoholic beverages** No. **Disabled access** Limited. **Wheelchair rental** No. **Baby-stroller rental** No. **Lockers** No. **Pet kennels** No. **Rain check** No. **Private tours** No.

DESCRIPTION AND COMMENTS The picture in our minds of the cozy passenger cabin of the square-rigged *Star of India*, an 1863 merchant sailing ship, is as fresh as it was the day we stepped into the officers' and passengers' area. As we talked to the children about what it might have been like to sail across an ocean on a ship like this, the wooden floor beneath us gently rose and fell with the waves. *Star of India* is one of five historic ships at the Maritime Museum; the others are an 1898 ferryboat, a 1914 harbor pilot boat, an early-1970s Soviet submarine, and a 1904 steam-powered luxury yacht. Visitors walk or scramble up and down the ships, in and out of decks and holds, seeing ropes and engines and sailors' bunks. In summer, such nautical film classics as *Captain Blood* are projected onto a ship's sail for an evening of unusual entertainment.

San Diego Model Railroad Museum

APPEAL BY AGE PRESCHOOL ★★★ GRADE SCHOOL ★★★★★ TEENS ★★★
 YOUNG ADULTS ★★★ OVER 30 ★★★★★ SENIORS ★★★

1649 El Prado, Balboa Park, San Diego; ☎ 619-696-0199; www.sdmrm.org

Hours Tuesday–Friday, 11 a.m.–4 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 11 a.m.–5 p.m.
Admission \$6 adults, \$5 seniors over 65, \$3 students 15 and over, \$2.50 military

on active duty, free for children under age 15; free first Tuesday of the month for San Diego County residents. **Touring time** Average 2 hours; minimum 1 hour. **Rainy-day touring** Yes. **Restaurants** Sandwich shop. **Alcoholic beverages** No. **Disabled access** Yes. **Wheelchair rental** No. **Baby-stroller rental** No. **Lockers** No. **Pet kennels** No. **Rain check** No. **Private tours** No.

DESCRIPTION AND COMMENTS We've seen many a grown man get far more excited about model trains than any kid does, and this museum caters to both groups. The country's largest collection of model trains winds through elaborate miniature countrysides and towns, some of which represent historical periods in Southern California. This fascinates some kids but makes others insane because they're not allowed to touch—so take them to the Toy Train Gallery, where they can work the controls of Lionel O-Gauge toy trains and push Brio wooden trains on their tracks.

San Diego Museum of Man

APPEAL BY AGE PRESCHOOL ★★ GRADE SCHOOL ★★★★★ TEENS ★★★★★
YOUNG ADULTS ★★★ OVER 30 ★★★ SENIORS ★★★

1350 El Prado, Balboa Park, San Diego; ☎ 619-239-2001;
www.museumofman.org

Hours Daily, 10 a.m.–4:30 p.m.; closed Christmas, Thanksgiving, and New Year's Day. **Admission** \$10 adults, \$7.50 children ages 13–17 and seniors, \$5 children ages 3–12, free for children under age 3. **Touring time** Average 3 hours; minimum 1 hour. **Rainy-day touring** Yes. **Restaurants** No. **Alcoholic beverages** No. **Disabled access** Yes. **Wheelchair rental** No. **Baby-stroller rental** No. **Lockers** No. **Pet kennels** No. **Rain check** No. **Private tours** No.

DESCRIPTION AND COMMENTS If your kids aren't fascinated with the history of man and woman, they will be after a visit to this cool museum, home to mummies, skeletons, and life-size, very realistic (often naked) re-creations of our predecessors going back to early Africa. Weekends bring live demonstrations of crafts and cooking from cultures around the world, and the Children's Discovery Center offers changing hands-on displays keyed to the museum's collection, allowing kids to, for instance, dress up like ancient Egyptians.

San Diego Wild Animal Park

APPEAL BY AGE PRESCHOOL ★★★★★ GRADE SCHOOL ★★★★★½ TEENS ★★★★★
YOUNG ADULTS ★★★★★½ OVER 30 ★★★★★½ SENIORS ★★★★★½

15500 San Pasqual Valley Road, Escondido; ☎ 760-747-8702 or
760-738-5067 (TDD); www.sandiegozoo.org

Hours *Summer:* daily, 9 a.m.–8 p.m. (grounds open until 9 p.m.). *Winter:* daily, 9 a.m.–4 p.m. (grounds open until 5 p.m.). **Admission** \$28.50 adults, \$17.50 children ages 3–11, free for children age 2 and younger; combination tickets for the San Diego Zoo and Wild Animal Park: \$60 adults, \$43 children ages 3–11; parking \$9 and \$14 for RVs. **Touring time** Average two-thirds of a day; minimum a half day. **Rainy-day touring** Some shows and exhibits close. **Restaurants** Yes.

Alcoholic beverages Yes. **Disabled access** Yes. **Wheelchair rental** Yes. **Baby-stroller rental** Yes. **Lockers** Yes. **Pet kennels** Service animals only. **Rain check** No. **Private tours** Photo Caravan, age 8 and older, \$90–\$230 plus admission.

DESCRIPTION AND COMMENTS Although it's actually in Escondido, about 45 minutes northeast of downtown, we're putting this in the San Diego section because San Diego heads up the name and it'd be confusing otherwise. This is a unique animal-viewing experience, designed to replicate what you'd see if you were visiting animal parks in Africa. The animals roam freely in herds over many acres of land similar to an African savannah, and the visitors observe from an open-sided, soft-wheeled tour vehicle that travels 2.5 miles through the park's 21,000 acres. The 30-minute Journey into Africa ride (sometimes too long for toddlers) departs from Simba Station, between the Lion Camp and Heart of Africa exhibits. Unless you are a member or purchase a Best Value ticket, the ride is not included in admission; tickets cost \$10 per adult, \$6 for children ages 3 to 11. A theme park–like Nairobi Village and Mombasa Lagoon area feature more traditional exhibits as well as animal shows presented in an African-village setting, and visitors can relax at cafes—and, of course, shop. A walk-through exhibit, Condor Ridge, showcases endangered North American bird species; more heart-pounding is the new Cheetah Run Safari, where you get to watch cheetahs run at full speed up close (limited hours; call for reservations). There's also a pleasant play area for younger kids, with slides and climbing equipment, also themed. For a more in-depth adventure, consider the Beastly Bedtime and other themed sleepover programs (☎ 619-718-3000 or 800-407-9534), overnight family camping experiences for parents and children age 4 and over; the cost runs \$109–\$179 adults and \$89–\$109 for children.

We like to hike the two-mile Kilimanjaro Safari Walk through some of the park's most scenic areas. We always take a picnic and binoculars, and rest near Kilima Point, with restrooms, a drinking fountain and fantastic views of African herds roaming the fields below. We also advise that you watch little children carefully on some of the viewing platforms; one is a three-story-high, circular platform with wood railings that attract climbing kids like magnets.

If you're planning to visit both the San Diego Zoo and the Wild Animal Park more than once a year, consider a membership for yourself and your children—it's probably cheaper, and you get other benefits as well. For details, call or go to the Web site.



San Diego Zoo

APPEAL BY AGE PRESCHOOL ★★★★★½ **GRADE SCHOOL** ★★★★★½ **TEENS** ★★★★★½
YOUNG ADULTS ★★★★★½ **OVER 30** ★★★★★½ **SENIORS** ★★★★★½

2920 Zoo Drive, Balboa Park, San Diego;

☎ 619-234-3153 or 619-231-1515; www.sandiegozoo.org

Hours Daily, 9 a.m.–4 p.m. (grounds open until 6 p.m.). *Summer:* open until 8 p.m. with grounds closing at 9, but animals generally go to sleep at dusk; call

☎ 888-MY-PANDA for current panda-viewing schedule. **Admission** *Regular admission*: \$24.50 adults, \$16.50 children ages 3–11, free for children age 2 and under. *Deluxe admission* (includes bus tour and sky tram): \$34 adults, \$24 children ages 3–11, free for children age 2 and under. **Touring time** Average 6 hours; minimum 2 hours. **Rainy-day touring** Some shows and exhibits close. **Restaurants** Yes. **Alcoholic beverages** Yes. **Disabled access** Yes. **Wheelchair rental** Yes. **Baby-stroller rental** Yes. **Lockers** Yes. **Pet kennels** Service animals only. **Rain check** No. **Private tours** V.I.P. Tours go behind the scenes: call ☎ 619-718-3000 or 800-407-9534.

DESCRIPTION AND COMMENTS This legendary zoo has been exhibiting rare species since 1915 and now has more than 4,000 animals of 900 species. Unbarred enclosures and sensitive landscaping (Dr. Seuss used to sketch in the cactus gardens here) have been the norm at this 100-acre facility for many years, but trying to see everything means a lot of walking. The narrated bus tour gives a good overview in just 35 minutes; best viewing is from the left side. The giant pandas Bai Yun and the now-deceased Shi Shi became parents in 1999 to Hua Mei (currently in China), the first panda cub born in captivity in the West since 1990, and their home is well worth a look. Bai Yun has since given birth to three other cubs at the San Diego Zoo. Also don't miss the new Monkey Trails and Forest Tales, a naturalistic home for more than 30 rare African and Asian monkeys, reptiles, pygmy hippos, and birds. Between June and September, the zoo opens at 9 a.m. (great if you have your own early birds) and stays open until 9 p.m. for nocturnal animal viewing and special entertainment programs.

 **unofficial TIP**
Trying to see everything at the San Diego Zoo means a lot of walking—we head right for the Children's Zoo, built to a 4-year-old's scale; here, kids can pet creatures and see the newborns.



SeaWorld of California

APPEAL BY AGE PRESCHOOL ★★★★★ GRADE SCHOOL ★★★★★½ TEENS ★★★★★
YOUNG ADULTS ★★★★★½ OVER 30 ★★★★★½ SENIORS ★★★★★½

500 SeaWorld Drive, Mission Bay; ☎ 800-25-SHAMU or 619-226-3901; www.seaworld.com

Hours *Fall–spring*: daily, 10 a.m.–dusk. *Summer*: daily, 9 a.m.–11 p.m. **Admission** \$61 adults, \$51 children ages 3–9; parking \$12. **Touring time** Average 6 hours; minimum 3 hours. **Rainy-day touring** So-so; most attractions are outdoors. **Restaurants** Yes. **Alcoholic beverages** Beer garden. **Disabled access** Yes. **Wheelchair rental** Yes. **Baby-stroller rental** Yes. **Lockers** Yes. **Pet kennels** Yes. **Rain check** No. **Private tours** Yes.

DESCRIPTION AND COMMENTS Part theme park, part zoo, part serious animal rescue and research program, SeaWorld has an appeal that cuts across age groups and interests—just try to find someone jaded and cynical enough to not be thoroughly wowed and charmed by the dolphin show, in which smiling dolphins perform amazing acrobatic feats and

deliberately splash the audience. Over in Shamu's stadium, a huge crowd roars its approval when the killer whales leap far into the sky, ask for the extra-large bucket of fish, and serve as living surfboards for trainers. Popular attractions are *Clyde and Seamore's Risky Rescue*, a sea-lion, walrus, and otter show, and *Sesame Street Presents Lights, Camera, Imagination!*, a 3-D film and live special-effects experience.

Our 5-year-old loved adventuring through the aquarium tunnel under the shark tank, and the sight of our shivering but deliriously happy 8-year-old after a Shamu soaking will stay with us for years. (Her little sister, however, was shocked into shrieking tears by the coldness of the water, so don't forget a change of clothes for less-tough little ones.) Bring a disposable, waterproof camera—even if you don't sit in the Soak Zone at a show, you're bound to get wet riding the Shipwreck Rapids rafts or plunging into the waterway on the thrilling Journey to Atlantis ride. Buy (or bring) a thin vinyl poncho if you don't want to walk around dripping from head to toe. For a break, head to the new two-acre *Sesame Street* Bay of Play, where Elmo, Cookie Monster, and friends preside over a vast complex of pirate ships, three kid-friendly rides, and other play areas.

SeaWorld also gets points for going a little beyond the deep-fried, junk-food theme-park basics—at some of the snack carts, you can get a tasty fresh-fruit smoothie for a cooling, healthy snack that kids love.

In summer, the park stays open later and jazzes things up with live music, a circus show, and special night performances. But we prefer getting dolphin-splashed under a hot San Diego sun.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY RESTAURANTS

Berta's Latin American Restaurant

3928 Twiggs Street, Old Town, San Diego; ☎ 619-295-2343;

www.bertasinoldtown.com

Meals served Lunch and dinner. **Cuisine** Mexican. **Entree range** \$8–\$17. **Kids' menu** No. **Reservations** Recommended for 6 or more. **Payment** All major credit cards.

BERTA GOES WAY BEYOND the tourist-Mexican standards to offer the best from Chile (lamb stew), Guatemala (shrimp in spicy salsa), Spain (paella), and practically every other Spanish-speaking country. Kids will like the cheese empanadas, quesadillas, and flan, and parents will like the Argentinean rib-eye steak and Brazilian seafood with tomatoes, peanuts, ginger, coconut, and chiles. Beer and wine only.

Corvette Diner

3946 Fifth Avenue, San Diego; ☎ 619-542-1476;

www.cohnrestaurants.com

Meals served Lunch and dinner. **Cuisine** American. **Entree range** \$8–\$13. **Kids' menu** Yes. **Reservations** Not accepted. **Payment** All major credit cards.

HUGELY POPULAR WITH LOCAL FAMILIES, this 1950s diner camps it up with a live DJ, a magician, wisecracking waitresses, and blaring oldies rock. The decor is equally over the top: neon, chrome, a soda fountain, and an actual Corvette. The food is retro diner: meat loaf, chicken-fried steak, burgers, corn dogs, PB&Js, and root beer floats. Our kids beg to go back.



El Indio

3695 India Street, Old Town, San Diego; ☎ 619-299-0333;
www.el-indio.com

Meals served Breakfast, lunch, and dinner. **Cuisine** Mexican. **Entree range** \$6–\$11. **Kids' menu** Yes. **Reservations** Not accepted. **Payment** MC, V.

TORTILLA CHIPS ARE THE CLAIM TO FAME of this beloved institution—they're so good that people buy them as souvenirs and ship them home. Originally a tortilla factory in 1940, the Old Town location is notable for its bare-bones outdoor seating, as well as its claim to have invented the word *taquito*. Other than the fabulous chips, the food is workaday (but tasty) Cal-Mex; try the carne asada, the vegetarian tamale, the nachos deluxe, and, of course, the handmade tortillas. Beer and wine only.

Hob Nob Hill

2271 First Avenue, downtown San Diego; ☎ 619-239-8176;
www.hobnobhill.com

Meals served Breakfast, lunch, and dinner. **Cuisine** American. **Entree range** \$8–\$20. **Kids' menu** Yes. **Reservations** Recommended. **Payment** All major credit cards.

SINCE 1944, HOB NOB HILL has been dishing out home cooking, and it still looks as though it's 1944 inside: red Naugahyde booths, chintz curtains, glass pie cases, and waitresses who know their way around a coffeepot. The location is convenient to nowhere, but that doesn't stop this place from being San Diego's favorite breakfast restaurant, home to very good Western omelets, pancake sandwiches, roast-beef hash, and cinnamon rolls. Dinner is of the turkey-croquette variety, and it's popular with the early-bird-special crowd.

Perry's

4610 Pacific Highway, Old Town, San Diego; ☎ 619-291-7121

Meals served Breakfast and lunch. **Cuisine** American/Mexican. **Entree range** \$7–\$9. **Kids' menu** Yes. **Reservations** Not accepted. **Payment** D, MC, V.

THE BEST PLACE IN OLD TOWN for breakfast, Perry's serves an odd but appealing mix of Mexican (huevos rancheros), Italian (frittatas), and American (French toast) cooking; the children's menu is the usual pancake-hot dog roster. The food is cheap, tasty, and generously served, and there's a crowd on weekends.



Pizza Nova

3955 Fifth Avenue, downtown San Diego; ☎ 619-296-6682; 5050 North Harbor Drive, Point Loma, San Diego; ☎ 619-226-0268; 954 Lomas Santa Fe Drive, Solana Beach; ☎ 858-259-0666; www.pizzanova.net

Meals served Lunch and dinner. **Cuisine** Italian/Californian. **Entree range** \$9–\$18. **Kids' menu** Yes. **Reservations** Recommended. **Payment** All major credit cards.

WINNER OF *San Diego* MAGAZINE'S BEST PIZZA award, this small chain makes very good wood-fired pizzas, ranging from classic pepperoni to pizza pies with lox or Thai shrimp. Pastas, salads, and special-occasion desserts are also offered, along with kid-sized pizzas. The original branch at Point Loma has water views and an appealing funkiness.

Point Loma Seafoods

2805 Emerson Street, San Diego (Point Loma); ☎ 619-223-1109; www.pointlomaseafoods.com

Meals served Lunch and dinner. **Cuisine** Seafood. **Entree range** \$8–\$14. **Kids' menu** Yes. **Reservations** Not accepted. **Payment** All major credit cards.

FOR DECADES, PEOPLE HAVE LINED UP in droves at the Point Loma Seafoods counter to pick up what most locals consider the freshest seafood around. The casual, family-owned market and eatery sits right on the water in Shelter Island Harbor and specializes in locally caught fish straight from the boats. Our kids devour the fish-and-chips, and teens hanker for the fish tacos, crab cakes, and shrimp platters with coleslaw and fries. If you're staying at a place with a barbecue or cooking facilities, this is the place to fetch tonight's dinner ingredients. We love to sit at a table on the patio. This place closes by 6:30 p.m., so dine early if you're coming for dinner.

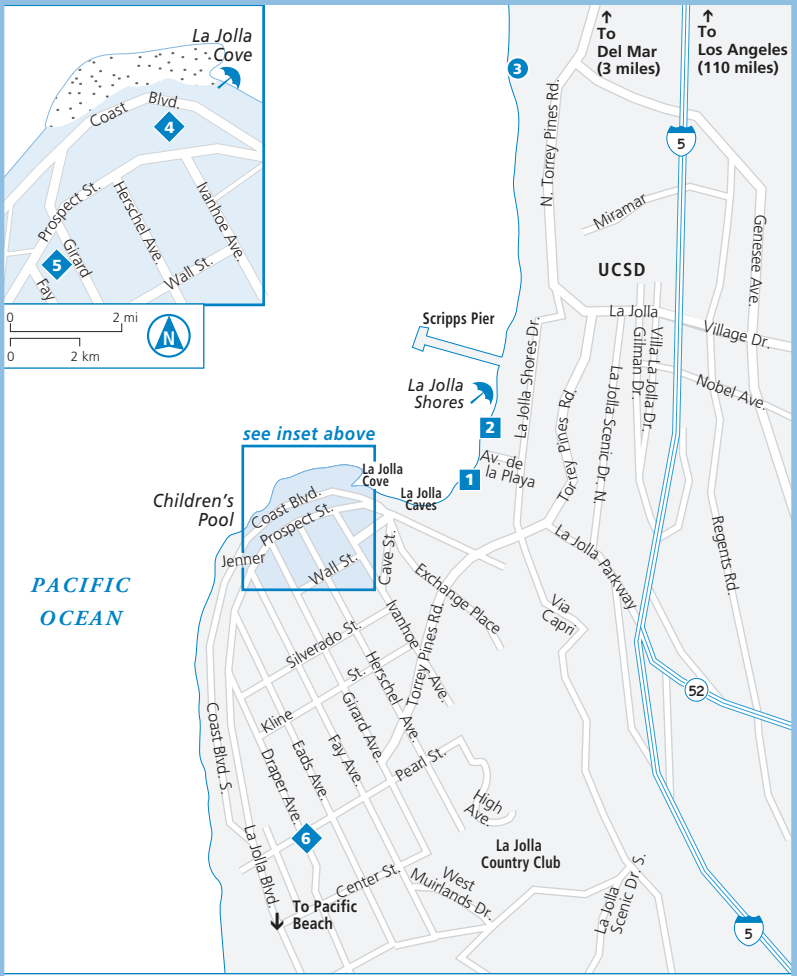
San Diego Pier Cafe

885 West Harbor Drive, downtown San Diego; ☎ 619-239-3968; www.piercafe.com

Meals served Lunch, dinner, and weekend brunch. **Cuisine** Seafood/American. **Entree range** Lunch, \$9–\$18; dinner, \$13–\$28. **Kids' menu** Yes. **Reservations** Only for 6 or more. **Payment** All major credit cards.

IT MAY LOOK LIKE A TOURIST TRAP, given the Seaport Village location, but the food is better than it needs to be at this family favorite. Perched on the end of a small pier next to an old boathouse, it's a wonderful place for watching seagulls fly past, with the Coronado Bridge in the background; try to snag an outdoor table, especially if you have restless kids. The clam chowder, fresh fish, and fish tacos are all tasty, and the all-American breakfasts are particularly good; the children's menu includes fish-and-chips.

la jolla



■ FAMILY LODGING

- 1. La Jolla Beach and Tennis Club
- 2. La Jolla Shores Hotel

● ATTRACTION

- 3. Birch Aquarium at Scripps

◆ FAMILY-FRIENDLY RESTAURANTS

- 4. Brockton Villa
- 5. Hard Rock Cafe
- 6. Sammy's California Wood-Fired Pizza

LA JOLLA

A SOPHISTICATED VILLAGE perched above a dramatic public beach, **La Jolla** isn't the kind of place you might think to take your kids—unless they are precocious, design-conscious shoppers. But look beyond the expensive shops and restaurants to discover La Jolla's spectacular cove (see "The Best Beaches and Parks") and the low-key, family-friendly resorts right on the gorgeous main beach. And the aquarium at **Scripps Institute** is worth a stop if you haven't seen one of the larger aquariums in Monterey or Long Beach. La Jolla is a few miles north of central San Diego, about a ten-minute drive.

FAMILY LODGING

La Jolla Beach and Tennis Club

2000 Spindrift Drive, La Jolla; ☎ 800-640-7702 or 858-454-7126; www.ljbtc.com; \$379–\$809 off-season, \$379–\$1,500 summer

THIS IS THE SORT OF OLD-MONEY BEACH retreat where Pasadena families have been summering for decades. It's decidedly unglamorous, even motel-frumpy, but once you get to know the place, its charms are seductive. The best draw is its own gorgeous beach, close to but just far enough away from the mob scene at La Jolla Shores public beach, and notable for one of the shallowest, most family-friendly shorelines in California. There's also a large pool tucked into a wind-protected courtyard. Supervised activities in summer for kids ages 3 and up include swim meets, treasure hunts, and craft making. The club can set you up so you can have your own beach barbecue. Other on-site fun includes a large collection of quality tennis courts (tennis is taken very seriously here) and a par-three golf course.



La Jolla Shores Hotel

8110 Camino del Oro, La Jolla; ☎ 866-392-8762 or 858-459-8271; www.ljshoreshotel.com; \$219–\$399 off-season, \$389–\$699 in season; children under 12 stay free

LA JOLLA SHORES HOTEL doesn't have supervised children's activities, which is just fine with its many loyal patrons—with a beach this lovely and

kid-friendly, who needs a kids' program? The tile-roofed Spanish-style hotel, a sibling of the La Jolla Beach and Tennis Club, is right on the same wonderful beach (with a boardwalk, good bodyboarding, and a gentle shoreline for little kids) and next door to a public park and playground; families also make good use of the pool, whirlpool, two tennis courts, Ping-Pong, and upscale restaurant, which has a children's menu. Wet, hungry kids can get a grilled cheese sandwich delivered poolside. The 128 rooms have a no-frills, beachy-rattan decor, with refrigerators, coffeemakers, and wooden balconies; 19 of the larger rooms have kitchenettes.

ATTRACTIONS

Birch Aquarium at Scripps

APPEAL BY AGE PRESCHOOL ★★★ GRADE SCHOOL ★★★ TEENS ★★★
YOUNG ADULTS ★★★ OVER 30 ★★★ SENIORS ★★★

2300 Expedition Way, La Jolla; ☎ 858-534-3474; aquarium.ucsd.edu

Hours Daily, 9 a.m.–5 p.m.; closed Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day. **Admission** \$11 adults; \$9 seniors; \$8 college students; \$7.50 University of California, San Diego, staff and children ages 3–17; under age 3 free; 3-hour free parking. **Touring time** Average 1 hour; minimum 30 minutes. **Rainy-day touring** Yes. **Restaurants** Concessions. **Alcoholic beverages** No. **Disabled access** Yes. **Wheelchair rental** Yes. **Baby-stroller rental** No. **Lockers** No. **Pet kennels** No. **Rain check** No. **Private tours** Yes.

DESCRIPTION AND COMMENTS The museum is perched on a bluff high above the blue Pacific, and the outdoor touch tank is on a balcony boasting one of the most extraordinary views ever. Parents will find themselves admiring their offspring as the strong sunlight glints on their heads while gulls circle overhead and the kids concentrate on sea stars. Meanwhile, inside, dramatically dark hallways are lined with glowing aquariums, lit from behind to best showcase the jellyfish, lobsters, and other marine species. There's also a theme-park moment—a simulated submersible ride—but be warned that the ride might be too scary for kids under age 6. If your kids want to prepare for a visit, have them go to the Web site.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY RESTAURANTS



Brockton Villa

1235 Coast Boulevard, La Jolla; ☎ 858-454-7393; www.brocktonvilla.com

Meals served Breakfast, brunch, lunch, and dinner. **Cuisine** American. **Entree range** Lunch, \$11–\$21; dinner, \$16–\$35. **Kids' menu** Yes. **Reservations** Recommended; a day in advance. **Payment** All major credit cards.

THE PERFECT FUNKY BEACH RESTAURANT, the Brockton Villa is pure San Diego. Breakfast or lunch at this 1894-vintage white clapboard beach house perched over La Jolla Cove will evoke beach summers of your childhood, or at least of your fantasy childhood. While you take in the ocean view, you can feast on the city's best French toast, scented with orange; warming oatmeal; a great turkey sandwich; or the popular cioppino.

Hard Rock Cafe

909 Prospect Street, La Jolla; ☎ 858-456-7625; www.hardrock.com

Meals served Lunch and dinner. **Cuisine** American. **Entree range** \$9–\$25. **Kids' menu** Yes. **Reservations** For groups of 8 or more only; expect to wait. **Payment** All major credit cards.

IF YOU'VE BEEN TO ONE HARD ROCK, you've been to them all. But for a 12-year-old, there's no such thing as too many trips to the Hard Rock. Like the others, it's a loud place, perhaps too loud for the very young; the small patio is a bit quieter. The ribs, burgers, and chicken are tasty, but it's the T-shirts that most kids remember.

Sammy's California Wood-Fired Pizza

702 Pearl Street, La Jolla; ☎ 858-456-5222; www.sammypizza.com

Meals served Lunch and dinner. **Cuisine** Californian. **Entree range** \$10–\$17. **Kids' menu** Yes. **Reservations** For 6 or more only. **Payment** All major credit cards.

THIS IS THE PARENT OF A BRIGHT, yuppified San Diego chain dedicated to the California pizza: small pies flavored with such things as goat cheese, grilled zucchini, and barbecued chicken. They are utterly delicious and can be paired with tasty Caesar salads. Kids have their own menu of minipizzas, and they can decorate a paper pizza with crayons. Come early to beat the considerable crowds.

DEL MAR *and* CARLSBAD

THE RACETRACK AT **Del Mar** is the famed adult draw here, but plenty of families frequent Del Mar and never place a bet. Instead, they head for the broad, white-sand beach between 15th and 29th streets, and the quaint little downtown area. We've used it as a base for visiting the **Wild Animal Park**—still a half-hour drive, but along scenic country roads from here. Downtown San Diego is a 15- to 20-minute drive south outside of rush hour, but be warned that increasing traffic on I-5 can greatly lengthen that trip.

A half hour north of San Diego, **Carlsbad** is a quiet community that has typically attracted the upscale-golfing set (think the senior George Bush), but it became more family-friendly when **Legoland** came to town. What with this major theme park; the clean, beautiful state beach; and two swell kid-friendly resorts (the upscale Four Seasons and the charming Carlsbad Inn), Carlsbad is turning into a lovely family destination away from the San Diego crowds. If you're in town in spring

(March through May), don't pass up a quick trip to the 50 acres of colorful blooms at **The Flower Fields** (Carlsbad Ranch); ☎ 760-930-9123; www.theflowerfields.com.

unofficial TIP

Families seeking beautiful beaches with fewer crowds than in urban San Diego are increasingly heading for Carlsbad.

FAMILY LODGING

Carlsbad Inn

3075 Carlsbad Boulevard, Carlsbad; ☎ 800-235-3939 or 760-434-7020; www.carlsbadinn.com; \$169–\$189 off-season, \$240–\$350 summer

A CHARMING IF QUIRKY (what's with the Tudor thing in sunny California?) beach resort, the Carlsbad Inn offers a lot of bang for the buck. Accommodations include family-size junior suites and spacious condos; the pool and spa area is fronted by a broad, green lawn; and terrific Carlsbad Beach is just across the road. On site are a playground, a frozen-yogurt shop, a Mexican restaurant, Ping-Pong, a fitness center, bikes, and beach toys, and Carlsbad's shops and restaurants are an easy walk. The hotel

organizes activities for kids (sand-dollar painting, root-beer-float making) and seniors (financial planning, bus trips to Mexico).

Clarion Del Mar Inn

**720 Camino del Mar, Del Mar; ☎ 800-451-4515 or 858-755-9765;
www.delmarinn.com; \$119–\$159 off-season, \$199–\$299 summer**

THERE'S A SNAPSHOT OF OUR KIDS in the pool area of this motel, and the brightness of their smiles is matched by the bright flowers everywhere around them—real home gardens, not institutional landscaping. A landmark along the Pacific Coast Highway and popular lodging for the horse professionals frequenting the racetrack (just count the trailers in the parking lot), this 80-room faux-Tudor place has some unusual homey touches. Afternoon tea is served in real china cups by a woman with a genuine English accent, and the decor is heavy on horse pictures and red plaid. The beach isn't too far of a walk.



Four Seasons Resort at Aviara

**7100 Four Seasons Point, Carlsbad; ☎ 800-819-5053 or 760-603-6800;
www.fourseasons.com/aviara; \$405–\$595 low season, \$395–\$615
high season, suites \$775 and up; special packages sometimes available;
children stay free in parents' room**

IT MAY NOT HAVE A BEACH—South Carlsbad beach is a couple of miles away—but this expensive resort has just about everything else: a gorgeous golf course, tennis, a swimming pool, a health club, a spa, high-end restaurants, ocean views, walking/jogging trails around the neighboring Batiquitos lagoon and bird sanctuary, and luxuriously outfitted rooms. Like almost all Four Seasons resorts, this one is out to corner the upscale family market. Children are won over from the moment of check-in: waiting for them in the room are cookies and milk, and their names are spelled out with sponges in the bathroom. The free Kids for All Seasons program goes far beyond the video-room basics—warm, well-qualified counselors take kids on nature walks and for swims in the pool; kids also enjoy storytelling in a tepee, make their own postcards, and pet and feed the program's mascot, Avie the frog. Available for kids ages 4 to 12, the program is offered daily in summer, weekends and school vacations in spring, and weekends the rest of the year.

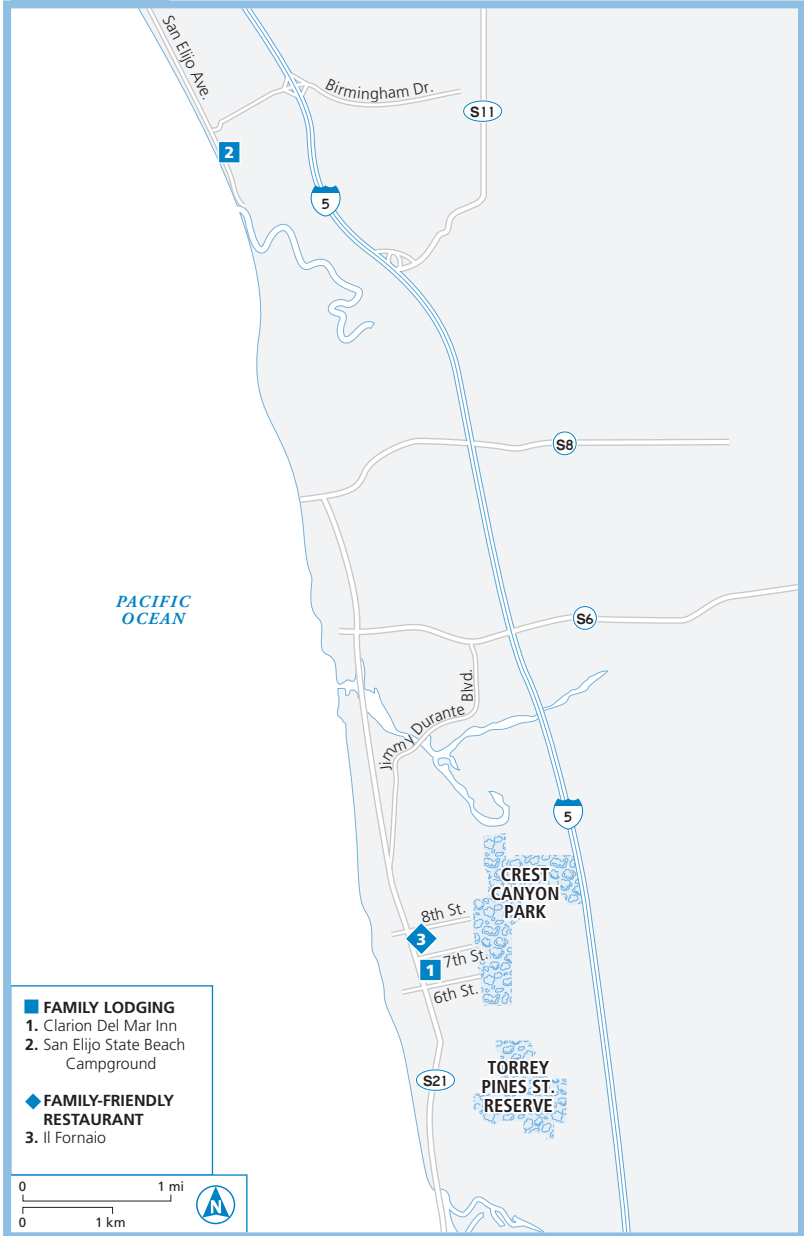


San Elijo State Beach Campground

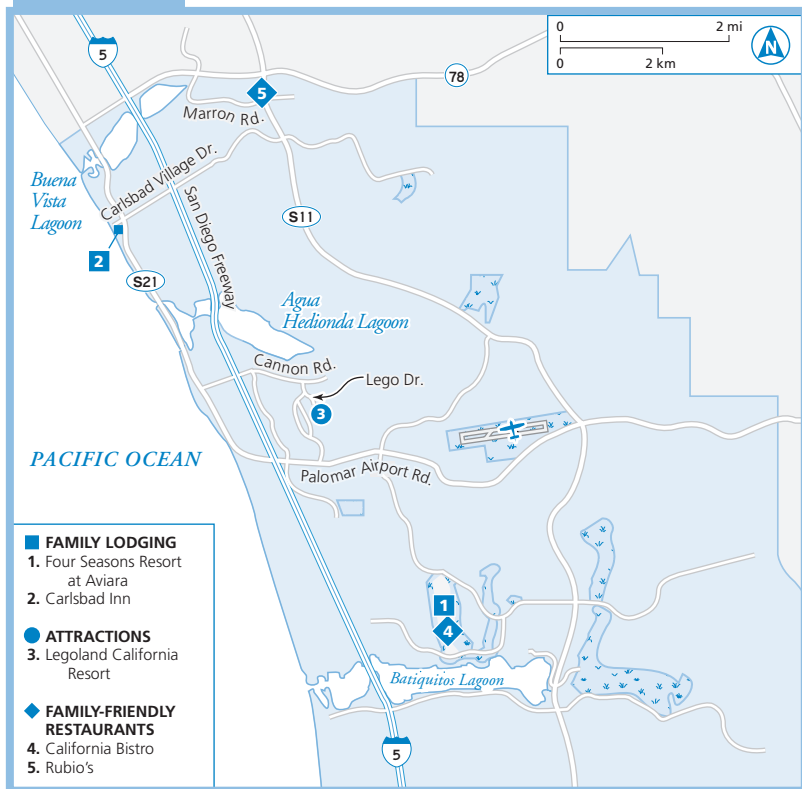
**On US 101, Cardiff-by-the-Sea; ☎ 800-444-7275 or 760-753-5091;
parks.ca.gov; campsites \$25–\$44**

IN SPIFFY CARDIFF-BY-THE-SEA, just south of Carlsbad and about 20 minutes north of San Diego's Mission Bay, this campground is beautifully set on a small bluff above the beach, with most of the tent campsites overlooking the ocean. You won't get any privacy out here in the open (the beachfront road runs right by), but you'll get a lot of beach beauty and

del mar



carlsbad



fun for very little money. Summertime always books up seven months in advance, so reserve early. Hot showers, flush toilets, lifeguards, barbecues, lots of nearby restaurants.

ATTRACTIONS

Legoland California Resort

APPEAL BY AGE PRESCHOOL ★★½ GRADE SCHOOL ★★½ TEENS ½
YOUNG ADULTS ★★ OVER 30 ★★ SENIORS ★★

1 Legoland Drive, Carlsbad; ☎ 760-918-5346; www.legoland.com

Hours Vary daily; call ahead or check Web site for correct hours. **Admission** \$60 adults, \$50 children ages 3–12 and seniors; discounts for parents or Southern California residents are sometimes offered. Parking is \$10 cars, \$11 campers/RVs, \$5 motorcycles, preferred \$20. **Touring time** Average 5 hours; minimum

3 hours. **Rainy-day touring** Limited. **Restaurants** Yes. **Alcoholic beverages** No. **Disabled access** Yes. **Wheelchair rental** Yes. **Baby-stroller rental** Yes. **Lockers** Yes. **Pet kennels** Yes. **Rain check** No. **Private tours** No.

DESCRIPTION AND COMMENTS When it opened in 1999, this theme park held little appeal for older kids, especially older kids who aren't into Legos. There were no thrill rides, and to a 14-year-old, thrill rides are the only reason to go to a theme park. Over the past few years, however, the Legoland folks have added attractions and developed the property to broaden the park's appeal. It's now a full-on resort, with two new hotels and the adjacent Sea Life (separate admission), a two-story, 36,000-square-foot aquarium with interactive exhibits and play areas designed to educate visitors about underwater life in California's rivers, lakes, streams, and oceans. Still, for the most part, this friendly place remains best suited for kids under 12—and, of course, Legomaniacs of all ages.

unofficial TIP

Arrive right at opening time, do the Sky Cruiser, driving school, and rides first, indulge in some quiet-time building activities, have lunch, explore Miniland, burn off lunch in the Hideaways and Pirate Shores, then leave at the hottest part of the day, in the early afternoon, to hit the beach in Carlsbad for a refreshing family swim.

The theme here, of course, is Legos, the little, primary-colored plastic bricks out of which children (and adults) make everything from houses to Star Wars vehicles. The showpiece is Miniland, which is perhaps the most appealing part of the park for adults and older Lego-loving kids, if a bit frustrating for little ones, who aren't allowed to touch. Many regions of the United States have been meticulously re-created with more than 20 million Lego bricks. Lego boats chug in the New England harbor, subway trains run under Rockefeller Center in Manhattan, rockets get ready to launch from Cape Canaveral, and cars drive down the streets of Beverly Hills. It's pretty astounding. In the Florida Miniland, kids can race remote-control minicars around a replica of Daytona International Speedway.

Our kids' hands-down favorite attraction is the driving school, which takes Disneyland's Autopia to the next level. Kids from ages 6 to 13 attend a brief class on driving safety and rules of the road and are then rewarded with a driver's license (these are treasured by 6-year-olds). In a Volvo-sponsored Lego car, they drive scaled-down city streets, stopping at signals and staying in their lanes like real drivers. Kids ages 3 to 6 get their own, smaller-scale driving school as well.

Otherwise, your child's favorite area will depend on age and interests. The littlest ones like the Duplo building area, while the oldest ones like Mindstorms in the Imagination Zone, where they can build robotics vehicles. In this same area, kids are often allowed to help the master builders with whatever they're currently creating. After a session of quiet building, head over to the Hideaways in Castle Hill, a terrific climbing and play structure, or to the new Pirate Shores—and make sure to change into bathing suits! This new water-play area is a huge hit for 8-year-olds and up, offering waterslides, mock pirate battles, water jets, and a water-play place stocked with soaker devices galore. Younger

kids might be happier at Explore Village, which includes the Dino Island, where they can dig for “remains” of prehistoric dinosaurs and ride the moderately thrilling Coastersaurus.

Other rides include the fairly tame Castle Hill Dragon roller coaster (an ideal thrill for 5- to 8-year-olds), the very tame Lake (great for preschoolers), and the fun Aquazone Wave Racer personal watercraft ride, a good one for older kids. The Technic Coaster will amuse the big kids, though it’s still no match for Magic Mountain’s megacoasters. The Sky Cruiser, which putters around high over Fun Town, isn’t worth it if the line is long, which it often is. If your kids really want to ride Sky Cruiser, head over there as soon as you arrive.

Legoland gets huge kudos for making the food far more palatable and healthful than at any other theme park. Pastas, sandwiches, and salads (including a great fruit salad for kids) are made fresh to order, and the various restaurant spaces are inviting, with plenty of shade from the often-hot Carlsbad sun.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY RESTAURANTS

California Bistro

Four Seasons Resort at Aviara, 7100 Four Seasons Point, Carlsbad;

☎ 760-603-3773; www.fourseasons.com/aviara

Meals served Breakfast, lunch, dinner, and Sunday brunch. **Cuisine** Californian/American. **Entree range** Lunch, \$10–\$20; dinner, \$25–\$45. **Kids’ menu** Yes. **Reservations** Recommended. **Payment** All major credit cards.

A RARE “NICE” RESTAURANT that’s as comfortable for children as adults, this casual eatery is a find for families seeking a relaxed dinner out. In a beamed, high-ceilinged, California-chic dining room with an ocean-view terrace, the staff dotes on kids, bringing them coloring supplies and children’s menus; babies and toddlers get a high chair and spill mat. Our kids flipped for the tortilla chip–crusted crab cakes from the grown-up menu, then returned to the safety of the children’s menu for burgers and fries; we loved the roasted asparagus salad and the organic king salmon with a lentil vinaigrette. Good vegan and vegetarian choices, too, even for kids.

Il Fornaio

Del Mar Plaza, 1555 Camino del Mar, Del Mar; ☎ 858-755-8876;

www.ilfornaio.com

Meals served Lunch, dinner, and Sunday brunch. **Cuisine** Italian. **Entree range** Lunch and dinner, \$11–\$32. **Kids’ menu** Yes. **Reservations** Advised. **Payment** All major credit cards.

FOR AN UPSCALE FAMILY MEAL with a sunset ocean view you won’t soon forget, head to this accomplished chain. A different region of Italy is

featured monthly, and those specials are always the best, but the regular menu of risottos, pasta, bruschetta, grilled fish, and salads is delicious, too. Children are welcomed and given their own menu, with such things as Italian-style macaroni and cheese.



Rubio's

2604-A El Camino Real, Carlsbad; ☎ 760-434-6298; www.rubios.com

Meals served Lunch and dinner. **Cuisine** Mexican. **Entree range** \$5–\$12. **Kids' menu** Yes. **Reservations** Not accepted. **Payment** MC, V.

BORN IN SAN DIEGO, this order-at-the-counter chain is now found all over the West, and for good reason: the food is fresh, healthy, cheap, and tasty, appealing to kids and grown-ups alike. Known for its soft fish tacos, it also has a good chopped salad, generous wraps, peppery beans, and burritos and tacos filled with grilled mahimahi, savory carnitas, and grilled shrimp.



SIDE TRIP:

Anza-Borrego Desert State Park

MANY SOUTHERN CALIFORNIANS manage to achieve middle age without even realizing that this 600,000-acre desert park is hiding right in their midst. Inland about two hours from San Diego, Anza-Borrego is a wilderness preserve, desert playground, and wildflower paradise in spring; the only town, Borrego Springs, still doesn't have a traffic signal, though it has a few hotels and amenities. Our favorite excursions are the extremes: either sleeping in relative luxury at La Casa del Zorro or sleeping under the stars at the state campground. Either way, pack a picnic (including lots of drinking water), have the kids wear swimsuits under their clothes, and spend a day hiking up the Palm Canyon Trail. This child-friendly destination was overwhelmed by a flash flood in 2004 that took out many of the palms and swimming holes, but the intrepid scrambler will still find a few palm oases and water. Before your hike, stop by the visitors center in Borrego Springs so your kids will know which sorts of cacti, birds, and wildflowers to hunt for. Avoid the area from June through October, when the heat can be brutal. Visitors center is at 200 Palm Canyon Drive, Borrego Springs, ☎ 760-767-5311; parks.ca.gov. Open daily October through May; on weekends and holidays June through September.

FAMILY LODGING

Borrego Palm Canyon State Campground

2 miles north of Borrego Springs (check Borrego Springs visitors center for directions); reservations: Reserve America, ☎ 800-444-7275, www.reserveamerica.com; campsites \$15 without hookups, \$24 with hookups. **Note: This campground is inside Anza-Borrego Desert State Park.**

QUIET CAMPSITES ARE SCATTERED among the ocotillo, mesquite, and barrel cactus, close to the trailhead to Palm Canyon, an easy hike that kids love. When not on the trail, they can scramble up the hillside, hunt for lizards, and, at night, count the shooting stars. Hot showers, flush toilets, barbecues, fire pits, and drinking water are available.

La Casa del Zorro Desert Resort and Spa

3845 Yaqui Pass Road, Borrego Springs; ☎ 760-767-5323 or 800-824-1884; www.lacasadelzorro.com; \$240–\$1,220 off-season, \$360–\$1,500 high season

MORE LUXURIOUS THAN THE NO-FRILLS town and empty expanse of state park would suggest, this is a fine place to recover from a long, hot hike up Palm Canyon. Swim in the pool, play tennis, rent a bike, or stay cool in one of the large, handsome, family-size villas or casitas, many of which have one or two bedrooms, refrigerators, and microwaves. Children's activities are sometimes scheduled on weekends. Rates plummet in the depths of summer. Good restaurant.

