

Discovering "America's Finest City": San Diego

by Sarah Mudd, PassPorter Message Board Guide (Moderator)

When a lot of folks hear the word California the first thing that pops into their mind is Los Angeles, movie stars . . . maybe even Disneyland. But how many think of the beautiful jewel of a city just 90 miles away from Hollywood? San Diego is nicknamed "America's Finest City," and for good reason.

Bordered in the south by Mexico, the west by the Pacific Ocean and the east by the Anza-Borrego Desert and Laguna Mountains, San Diego has something for everyone.

San Diego is California's second largest city and the seventh largest in the United States with a population of over 1.3 million. Originally inhabited by the Kumeyaay people, the area was "discovered" by explorer Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo in 1542, then named "San Diego" by Sebastian Vizcaino in 1602, when the California coastline was first mapped. The first colonists settled in the city in late 1774.

Mission San Diego de Alcalá, the first of 21 missions to be established on the California coast, was founded in 1769 on Presidio Hill, which overlooks Old Town. In 1774, it was relocated to its current location and is one of the most beautiful buildings in the city. It is also an active Catholic parish in the Diocese of San Diego.

Old Town San Diego State Historic Park recreates Mexican and American life from 1821 to 1872. There are many shops, restaurants, museums, historic buildings (including San Diego's first newspaper office) and the Whaley House, which is the most haunted house in America! Some of the tastiest authentic Mexican food can be found in Old Town at the Old Town Mexican Cafe!

Balboa Park is a museum lover's dream. In total, there are 15 museums in Balboa Park, including the Reuben H. Fleet Science Center, San Diego Aerospace Museum and San Diego Art Museum. In addition, there are over 85 performing arts and international culture organizations, hiking and biking trails, restaurants and the World-Famous San Diego Zoo. There are so many things to do in Balboa Park alone; it could take you days to see everything!

In the Downtown area you will find the Gaslamp Quarter, which is one of southern California's premier dining, shopping and entertainment districts. Horton Plaza is an open-air mall, which looks similar to a

European marketplace with elements of an amusement park and touches of historical San Diego. Seaport Village is an intimate waterfront shopping village with some great shops and restaurants. Some favorites at Seaport Village are the carousel and the shop that makes homemade fudge while you watch. The San Diego Bay has 34 total miles of shoreline with hotels, parks, shopping and museums, including the San Diego Maritime Museum (aboard the Star of India) and the San Diego Aircraft Carrier Museum (aboard the USS Midway). There are quite a few ways to tour the bay area - PediCab, the Old Town Trolley Tours and horse-drawn carriages will take you around the area on shore and there are a handful of options for harbor cruises.

San Diego beaches can often be found packed with surfers. Some of the best beaches for surfing are Pacific Beach, La Jolla, Mission Beach and Ocean Beach. At Ocean Beach, there is even a section of beach just for dogs called, what else but Dog Beach. "OB" is a laid-back beach town and it is likely you will find mostly locally owned and operated shops and restaurants. At Mission Beach, you will find Belmont Park, a historic amusement park with the Giant Dipper, a wooden roller coaster built in 1925.

Whenever someone mentions they are heading on a trip to San Diego, and I am asked for tips, one of the first things I mention is where they should eat. My recommendations are that, at least once, you need to experience authentic Mexican food. My favorite place is Old Town Mexican Cafe in Old Town. I also recommend a trip to In-N-Out Burger, as well as a trip to Rubio's Fresh Mexican Grill. Rubio's is the home of the fish taco, as well as other tasty creations. It is a favorite food stop in our family.

If sports are your thing, you are in luck! There's a sports team for everyone! Like baseball? Catch the Major League Baseball San Diego Padres at PETCO Park between April and October. Is football more your thing? The NFL's San Diego Chargers play in the fall and winter! There are teams representing nearly everything from Major League Baseball to the National Premier Soccer League to the Women's Professional Football League!

Cross the Coronado Bay Bridge from downtown San Diego and you'll find one of the jewels of the San Diego area . . . the Hotel del Coronado. "The Del" was built in 1888 on Coronado Island and was the inspiration for the Grand Floridian resort at Walt Disney World! Further to the north of the city, in Escondido, is the San Diego Wild Animal Park. There, most animals are kept in their "natural" habitat and guests are brought through the "Serengeti" on safari trains. There are also walk-through exhibits and shows to check out. Also north of San Diego,

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in Carlsbad is Legoland California, with rides, attractions and shows for people of all ages all themed to Lego building bricks!

Head up Point Loma and you will find Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery and, further up the Point, Cabrillo National Monument. Cabrillo National Monument celebrates the 1542 landing of Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo on the land that became San Diego. The monument was dedicated in 1913 and includes the Old Point Loma Lighthouse and a visitor's center with historical displays and a gift shop/bookstore. The monument offers gorgeous views of the city of San Diego as well as the San Diego Bay, Coronado and Naval Air Station North Island. On the sea-side of the Point, gray whales can be seen migrating off the coast during the winter time and there is also a small stretch of rocky coastline and tide pools that can be seen during low tide. The entrance fee for the park is \$5 per car (or \$3 if you are on a bicycle, motorcycle or come up on foot or bus) and that is good for 7 days of access to the park! An excellent bargain for some fantastic views and peace and quiet!

Other attractions in the Point Loma area include Sea World San Diego and the iPayOne Center, where you'll often find shows, concerts and, on weekends, the Kobey's Swap Meet. The Swap Meet is my favorite place to find odds and ends as well as San Diego souvenir tee shirts! Most vendors sell their souvenir tees for 3 adult tees for \$10 and kids' tees for 3 for \$9. Some a bit more, some a bit less, but all great deals for great shirts!

San Diego truly is a melting pot of people and cultures with something for everyone. Beaches, mountains, museums, great food and fantastic weather year-round make this a wonderful vacation destination where you will never be without something to do. I am proud to call it my hometown and enjoy exploring the city whenever I am able to get back there. I know you will enjoy exploring as well!

Tip: You'll find more information and tips on San Diego in our new guidebook, "PassPorter's Disneyland Resort and Southern California Attractions."

About The Author: Sarah Mudd is the Guide for the Disneyland: Getting There (and Back!) forum on the PassPorter Message Boards. She is a stay-at-home mom, Navy wife, and displaced San Diego native who looks forward to the day when she can move back to her beautiful hometown!

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