

San Diego® Happiness is calling



2024
VISITOR'S GUIDE

Overview and History

For an overview of San Diego's beginning, start at Old Town State Park. Known as the birthplace of California, Old Town features 17 museums and historical sites where visitors can learn about the first settlements in California and explore original structures built in the 1800s. Among Old Town's key historical sites is the new lipay ~ Tipai Kumeyaay Mut Niihepok (Land of the First People) Area, which honors the legacy and traditions of the area's pre-European inhabitants, the indigenous Kumeyaay peoples.

For a comprehensive look at San Diego's history, head over to Balboa Park and the San Diego History Center located along the Prado. From this vantage point you'll also enjoy sweeping views of the Pacific Ocean and San Diego's dramatic skyline.



Pacific Ocean Shoreline, San Diego



No trip to San Diego would be complete without a walk through the historic Gaslamp Quarter. Begin your journey back in time at the Gaslamp Museum at the Davis-Horton House and discover how San Diego's colorful past mixes with the hustle and bustle of today's modern city. The Museum also offers self-guided and guided walking tours designed for both adults and children, and even a ghost tour!

If you like your history with a dose of celebrity, Coronado and the Hotel del Coronado should be on your radar. Built in 1888, and sporting its signature red turret roofs and wedding cake trim, this San Diego landmark has a colorful history filled with luminary guests including movie stars, national heroes, presidents, royalty and a resident ghost.



Balboa Park is another area in San Diego steeped in history. Balboa Park began as 1400 acres of land set aside in 1868 by San Diego civic leaders. Known then as "City Park", the scrub-filled mesa that overlooked present-day Downtown San Diego sat without formal landscaping or development for more than 20 years. (Today the Park's total land parcel has been reduced to 1,200 acres.)



Spanish Village Art Center, Balboa Park

Today, Balboa Park offers 15 museums, various gardens, arts and international culture associations, as well as the San Diego Zoo. All this makes it a place that offers something historical, horticultural, educational and recreational for everyone.

Balboa Park is also renowned for its brilliant displays of seasonal flowers, shady groves of trees and meandering paths through rolling lawns.

Animals and Nature



In 1972 the Zoological Society opened the San Diego Wild Animal Park. Established in 1969 as a breeding facility for the zoo, the park began drawing its own visitors and subsequently was opened to the public as a complement to the San Diego Zoo.

Its more than 3,200 animals represent some 400 species and roam in groups through huge habitats similar to their native Africa and Asia. Staff members conduct research on natural animal behaviours and operate successful breeding programs for many species, including cheetahs, California condors, rhinoceroses, and sambars.

The Zoo occupies a 100-acre (40-hectare) site in the city's Balboa Park amid a setting of hills and canyons. A noteworthy feature of the zoo is its landscaping. More than 6,500 species of exotic plants are maintained on the grounds, adding atmosphere and frequently providing an element of the natural diet for various animal species.



"STOMACH GROWLS ARE WELCOME IN ELEPHANT SOCIETY"

Have you ever had your stomach growl at an unfortunate moment? Well, stomach growls are a welcome sound in elephant society; a stomach that makes loud rumbling and growling noises seems to signal to others that everything is "okay."

Marine Life



Seals are a major attraction in San Diego. Seals in their natural habitat, seals within the care of trainers, seal transportation vehicles that navigate water and land are all set along the shores of San Diego.

In the early 1990s, the local harbor-seal population was increasing, and more and more seals and sea lions were spotted in the San Diego area. A Marine Mammal Reserve was created to protect them, and the colonies flourished.

You'll have the best odds of seeing seals out on the beaches between late April and early June, but their birthing season is mid-December to mid-May—and that's arguably the best time to visit. Though the birthing beaches may be closed off or have restricted access during this time, you can watch from a distance and maybe even see a live birth! (For newborn sea lion pups, on the other hand, aim for mid-May to mid-July.)

Children's Pool in La Jolla is a must see attraction if you'd like to seal watch. The iconic wall, constructed in 1931, was to protect the small beach from the incoming surf. The internal waters and beach were going to be a safe spot for children to swim. Over the years, the calm waters have also proved to be an excellent haulout for sea lions and seals in San Diego.



Children's Pool, La Jolla

"IT'S A GREAT PLACE TO WANDER AROUND AND LOOK FOR SHELLS"

Next stop walking north is Shell Beach. Located at the south end of Ellen Browning Scripps Park, this beach is easily accessible via a staircase from the street; though it's rarely crowded. This unusual beach is made up of only a small area of sandy shore, but it's a great place to wander around and look for shells and during low tide, a small tide pool area and plenty of sea life in addition to seals and sea lions.

Entertainment

With so many ways to spend your time in San Diego, where should you wrap up your visit? The answer is the one place in the city that combines the best of it all: the Gateway to San Diego, Belmont Park. Belmont Park is San Diego's "everything destination," the perfect mix of excitement and leisure with shopping, top-notch restaurants and thrilling rides, right on the beach.

For nearly a century, Belmont Park has echoed with the sounds of laughter, thrill-chasing, and the timeless rhythm of Mission Beach. Generations have ridden our waves, tasted the fun, and made stories under the SoCal sun. And while our rides have seen seasons change, the exhilarating heartbeat of Belmont—where good times roll and memories shine—has never skipped a beat.



The Giant Dipper Rollercoaster at Belmont Park in Mission Beach is a true icon of American amusement parks. Built in 1925, this wooden coaster has a rich history filled with ups and downs. Over the years, it has survived several earthquakes and even a fire. Today, it remains one of the few traditional wooden coasters in the country, offering riders a thrilling experience that dates back to the golden age of amusement parks. If you're looking for a truly classic coaster experience, the Giant Dipper is not to be missed!



Giant Dipper, Belmont Park

Today, both the Giant Dipper and its famous sibling the Plunge Pool remain as not only pieces of history, but are still the two main attractions to experience at Belmont Park.

