

SAN DIEGO TOP EXPERIENCES

Did we mention the beach?

If stretching out on the sand with a sunscreen-stained paperback sounds like a snooze, there's always swimming, snorkeling, surfing, diving, and deep-sea fishing. And that's just in the water. On the sand, serve and spike in a friendly beach volleyball pickup or pal around with your pooch at a leash-free dog beach. The truly adventurous should sign up for Over-the-Line, a massive beach softball tourney that takes place every July—the title refers as much to blood alcohol levels as the rules of the game.

Sail away

So you don't own a historic tall ship. Who says you can't experience the thrill of sailing the seas in high style? Several times a year, the **San Diego Maritime Museum** offers public adventure sails aboard the *Star of India*, the *Californian*, and the *HMS Surprise*. And, on very rare occasions, the ships even stage cannon battle reenactments in the San Diego Bay. *Master and Commander* wannabes, consider it your shot at combat glory.

Culture vulture

San Diego's artistic scene gets short shrift compared to the city's outdoorsy offerings, which is a shame. Truly top-notch theater dominates the dance cards of local culturati, like **La Jolla Playhouse**, which routinely hosts Broadway-bound shows before they head east. The **Old Globe**—the oldest professional theater in the state—stages everything from Shakespeare to the avant-garde at its cluster of spaces, including the new state-of-the-art Conrad Prebys Theatre Center. Both locations (downtown and La Jolla) of the **Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego** showcase thought-provoking exhibitions, from regionally focused to international retrospectives, while niche galleries throughout the county cater to the visually curious. And no matter what the season, visitors will find something fetching from area performing arts staples such as the **San Diego Symphony Orchestra**, **San Diego Opera**, and **San Diego Ballet**.

Bogey bliss

Whether you're timid at the tee or an aspiring golf pro, San Diego's wide-ranging golf options will wow you. Never mind the fact that water restrictions have left some greens a little less, er, green. Golfing in San Diego is an experience par none, no matter what your price range and ability. If you can swing the fees, splurge at Carlsbad's **Park Hyatt Resort Aviara** or at the **Rancho Bernardo Resort & Spa**. La Jolla's **Torrey Pines Golf Course**, home to the 2008 U.S. Open and every Buick Invitational since 1968, is one of the finest 18-hole public courses in the country, and a more affordable outing. Just be sure to book tee times well in advance.

Sky high

Sometimes, soaring above the earth is the best way to get a sense of its mind-blowing scale—to wit, the colorful hot-air balloons that dot the horizon at sunrise and sunset. Tiny and toy-like from the ground, they offer big birds-eye views to those who take flight. The annual **Temecula Balloon & Wine festival**, typically in June, is a favorite among fliers. If standing beneath an open flame makes you a basket case, perhaps tandem paragliding

will put you in your proper airborne place. An instructor handles the hard work. All you have to do is shout in glee as the winged glider climbs and dips above cliff-bordered beaches.

Charge it

When your Visa bill reads like a vacation diary, you know you're a serious shopaholic. Jimmy Choo, Hermès, and Louis Vuitton? That was just an afternoon at **Fashion Valley!** San Diego has options to suit every style of shopper. For unique, edgy scores, scour boutiques in neighborhoods like **Hillcrest**, **Little Italy**, and **North Park**. Sleek storefronts in **La Jolla** and other well-heeled areas carry all variety of luxury goods, while downtown's **Westfield Horton Plaza** stocks standard mall fare. For souvenirs—seashells and such—try **Seaport Village**, or browse festive Mexican arts and crafts at Old Town's **Fiesta de Reyes**.

Hang loose, dude

Only a grom (a newbie) would say hang loose, but “dude” is definitely a prominent part of the local surfer's vocabulary (as in, duuuuude). If you have the courage to wriggle into a wetsuit and waddle into knee-deep white water with a big foam board, you might just catch a wave—or at least stand up for a few seconds. Learning to surf is hard work, so your best bet is to take lessons, either private instruction or group-based. Try La Jolla's **Surf Diva Surf School**, geared primarily toward ladies, or Carlsbad's **San Diego Surfing Academy** in North County.

Sample the fish tacos

The humble fish taco is a local foodie favorite. Beer-battered and fried or lightly grilled, topped with salsa or white sauce and cabbage, tacos around town appeal to every palate. Sample the different styles from simple storefront restaurants and mobile taco trucks, and be prepared for a heated discussion. The only thing most San Diegans agree on is that fish tacos taste even better with a cold beer.

Spa-tacular

Money may not buy happiness, but it can definitely purchase a day of pampering at one of San Diego's many upscale spas. There's no limit to the luxuriating, from youth-restoring facials to aromatherapy massages that unkink months' worth of muscle aches. If cost is no concern, book an afternoon at Carlsbad's idyllic **La Costa Resort and Spa**, or at the historic **Hotel Del Coronado**, a beauty-boosting seaside retreat since the Victorian days.

Skip town

San Diego's allure extends well beyond its famous coastline. To the east, visitors will find forested mountains and an otherworldly desert landscape. The tiny town of **Julian**, in the Cuyamaca Mountains, charms with olden-day bed-and-breakfasts and ample slices of apple pie.

In winter, weather allowing, visitors can even take horse-drawn sleigh rides. One of San Diego's most underrated natural attractions is the vast **Anza-Borrego Desert State Park**,

600,000 jaw-dropping acres of protected land crisscrossed with hiking trails. Rough it at a campground or hole up at a posh hotel. Spring, which blankets the valleys with desert wildflowers, is peak season. Just steer clear of summer, when temperatures skyrocket into the 100s.