



# San Diego

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## Why Go?

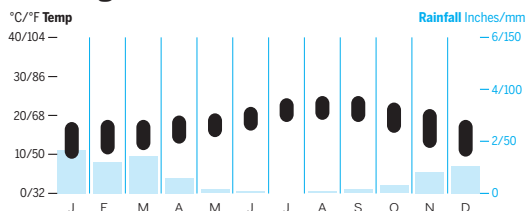
New York has its cabbie, Chicago its bluesman and Seattle its coffee-drinking boho. San Diego, meanwhile, has the valet guy in a polo shirt, khaki shorts and crisp new sneakers. With his perfectly tousled hair, great tan and gentle enthusiasm, he looks like he's on a perennial spring break, and when he wishes you welcome, he really means it.

This may sound pejorative, but our intention is the opposite. San Diego calls itself 'America's Finest City' and its breezy confidence and sunny countenance filter down even to folks you encounter every day on the street. It's the nation's eighth-largest city, yet we're hard-pressed to think of a place of any size that's more laid-back.

What's not to love? San Diego bursts with world-famous attractions for visitors, including the zoo, SeaWorld, Legoland and the museums of Balboa Park, plus a bubbling downtown and beaches ranging from ritzy to raucous, and America's most perfect weather.

## When to Go

### San Diego



#### June–August

High season. Temperatures and hotel rates are highest.

#### September–October, March–May

Shoulder seasons; moderate rates.

#### November–February

Low season while most of America escapes the cold.

## History

Evidence of human habitation in the region goes back to at least 18,000 BC, in the form of middens (ancient refuse heaps). When Spanish explorer Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo became the first European to sail into San Diego Bay in 1542, the region was divided peaceably between the native Kumeyaay and Luiseño/Juaneño peoples. Their way of life continued undisturbed until Catholic missionary Father Junípero Serra and Gaspar de Portolá arrived in 1769. These newcomers founded the first permanent European settlement in California – a mission and fort on the hill now known as the Presidio.

When the United States took California from Mexico following the Mexican-American War of the 1840s, San Diego was little more than a ramshackle village. But San Francisco property speculator William Heath Davis saw a fortune to be made. In the 1850s he bought 160 acres of bay-front property and erected homes, a wharf and warehouses. ‘Davis’ Folly’ eventually went bust, but just a decade later, another San Francisco speculator, Alonzo E Horton, acquired 960 acres of waterfront land and promoted it as ‘New Town.’ This time the idea stuck.

Gold was discovered in the hills east of San Diego in 1869, and the ensuing rush resulted in the construction of the railroad in 1884. It also led to a classic Wild West culture, with saloons, gambling houses and brothels behind the respectable Victorian facades of the present-day Gaslamp Quarter. But when gold played out, the economy took a nosedive and the city’s population plummeted by as much as 50%.

Spurred by San Francisco’s international exhibition of 1914, San Diego’s staged the Panama-California Exposition (1915–16), aiming to attract investment to the city with its deepwater port, railroad hub and perfect climate. Boosters built exhibition halls in the romantic Spanish Colonial style that still defines much of the city today.

However it was the 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor that permanently made San Diego. Top brass quickly chose San Diego, with its excellent, protected port, as home of the US Pacific Fleet. The military literally reshaped the city, dredging the harbor, building landfill islands and constructing vast tracts of instant housing (see also p418).

The opening of a University of California campus in the 1960s heralded a new era as students and faculty slowly drove a liberal wedge into the city’s homogenous, flag-and-family culture. The university, especially strong in the sciences, has also become a biotech incubator. The 2010 census is showing for the first time that the non-white population has grown to parity with the county’s white population.

Coastal communities, including Coronado, Ocean, Mission and Pacific Beaches, La Jolla and North County are covered in separate sections later in this chapter. San Diego is a fantastic destination for families – see p52 for ideas.

## **Sights**

### **SAN DIEGO ZOO & BALBOA PARK**

San Diego’s Zoo is a highlight of any trip to California and should be a high priority for first-time visitors. The Zoo occupies some prime real estate in Balboa Park, which itself is packed with museums and gardens. To visit all the sights would take days, but you can refine your plans at the **Balboa Park Visitors Center** (Map p274; www.balboapark.org; 1549 El Prado; ☎9:30am-4:30pm), in the House of Hospitality. Pick up a park map (suggested donation \$1) and the latest opening schedule (the ones printed here are guidelines). If you plan to visit a lot of museums, you’ll save money with admission passes including the **Passport to Balboa Park** (good for one-time entry to 13 museums within one week, adult/child \$45/24), a **Stay for the Day** pass (five museums for \$35) and the **Combo Pass** (Passport plus zoo admission adult/child \$75/39). Free tours depart the Visitors Center to uncover the park’s architectural heritage (9:30am on the first Wednesday of the month) and nature and history, led by rangers (1pm Tuesday and Sunday).

Balboa Park is easily reached from Downtown on bus 7, 7A or 7B along Park Blvd. By car, Park Blvd provides easy access to free parking. El Prado is an extension of Laurel St, which crosses Cabrillo Bridge with the Cabrillo Fwy (CA163) 120ft below. Make a point of driving this stretch of freeway: the steep roadsides, lush with hanging greenery, look like a rain-forest gorge.

The free Balboa Park Tram bus makes a continuous loop; however, it’s easiest and most enjoyable to walk.