



A Cultural Guide to San Diego

Arts crawl.

Sun in the sky, sails on the horizon, and palm trees all around—this is what San Diego is known for and what it proudly delivers. As the second-largest city in California, this cheerful destination has no shortage of carefree, sun-kissed distractions. From Point Loma's bustling harbour to La Jolla Cove's posh boutiques and mesmerizing sunsets, San Diego is both historic and hip, stimulating and serene. But while many may flock towards this coastal city for its beach and its theme parks, there is also a strong arts scene that is continuing to take hold here.

No more than 20 minutes away from downtown, these cultural hot spots should be part of every vacationer's next visit to California's southernmost city.

Balboa Park

Boasting ornate Spanish Colonial Revival-style architecture, this 1,200-acre plaza is regarded as America's largest urban cultural park and one of oldest sites dedicated to the San Diego public. Built for the 1915 Panama-California Exposition in honour of the Panama Canal, this colourful public square is loved by locals and visitors alike for its tropical gardens and 17 major museums, including the San Diego Museum of Art. Bearing an ambitious facade reminiscent of the Cathedral of Valladolid in Spain, the city's primary art museum showcases an eclectic mix of fine and modern art from Southeast Asia, Western Europe, and Latin America.

For the day explorer, consider a carefree stroll down El Prado, discovering local musicians and artisans as *California Dreamin'* chimes from the California Tower at noon. Stop and see the orchids at the Botanical Building, an impressive wood lath structure housing a verdant paradise of 2,000 tropical plants opposite a picturesque lily pond. Break for lunch inside fresh American eatery Panama 66, a true San Diego gem featuring indie craft beers from the region. Set inside an open courtyard, the restaurant allows the opportunity to marvel at the dome covering the California Building, an artistic feat combining Spanish influences and bold Mexican colours of blue and gold (Tijuana is just a short drive south, after all). With nearby cultural jewels like The Old Globe (a Tony Award-winning theatre fashioned after the original in London), and the Mingei International Museum (a fascinating collection of textiles and traditional everyday objects from around the world), Balboa Park is a one-stop-shop for culture.

La Jolla Playhouse

Since 1947, La Jolla Playhouse has been a beacon of contemporary American drama. Situated on the campus of the University of San Diego, this nationally-acclaimed theatre has seen over 300 awards, including the Tony for America's outstanding regional theatre. Founded by Gregory Peck, Dorothy McGuire, and Mel Ferrer, the non-profit playhouse has introduced 32 productions to Broadway including *Jersey Boys*, *The Who's Tommy*, and *Come From Away*, an ongoing Canadian hit musical set in Gander, Newfoundland following the events of September 11. Renowned for its Page-to-Stage Program, a grassroots initiative for developing new plays and musicals, the La Jolla Playhouse is a great place to find the next big thing in North American theatre.

Before catching an evening show, make the most of the afternoon at [La Jolla Cove](#). Home of the “Lorax” tree from the vivid imagination of Dr. Seuss, Scripps Park is where some of the most breathtaking sunsets from San Diego can be seen. After minutes of cooing at the abundant seals in repose on the shores of Children’s Pool, indulge in fine seaside fare at [George’s at the Cove](#). Comprised of three levels, each with its own distinct culinary style, George’s is a must-visit when in the area. The restaurant’s second level features a colourful cocktail selection based on the 23 neighbourhoods of San Diego; indulge in the popular La Jolla, a reinvented margarita of Cimarron Blanco, dried mangos, fresh lime juice, and dehydrated seaweed encased in a cube of ice. It’s the ideal pick-me-up before a show.

Liberty Station Arts District

Underneath the terracotta tile roofs and Spanish arcades of Liberty Station, close to two million young men—and eventually women—were trained by the United States Navy before it was transformed into San Diego’s largest civic arts and cultural district. Designed by Bertram G. Goodhue, the same architect behind the 1915 Exposition at Balboa Park, these historic barracks and mess halls now entertain 145 galleries, museums, artist spaces, dance studios, music centres, boutique shops, restaurants, and cafes following \$110 million in renovations. As a testament to the arts, Liberty Station is dedicated to fostering and showcasing creativity in the community.

Start the day early and opt for brunch at Breakfast Republic, a fun spot serving up inventive dishes combined with the Baja California flavours of the region. While navigating the exciting sights and smells of Liberty Public Market—a spot none too different from [Granville Island](#)—find the towering 88-foot Norfolk pine tree, below which young families and dogs frolic across a grass courtyard. Continue towards the New Americans Museum, which features a rotating exhibit highlighting the experience of immigrant families in the United States. From there, it might be nice to visit some of the individual artist studios, including the floral-inspired fine art of Colleen Veltz. If arriving at just the right time, visitors may even get to watch watercolour impressionist painter Peggy Fischbeck at work. Featuring the San Diego Comic Art Gallery and the NTC Command Center—a place dedicated to the legacy of Point Loma and the city’s Navy heritage—there is plenty to come away with here.

So, whether it’s the sunshine or the lifestyle of San Diego that beckons, remember that its Spanish colonnades can be just as beautiful as its palms.