

Timeless Treasures: San Diego's Balboa Park (above and top left) and Old Town (left) are evocative backdrops for events with a nostalgic feel.

A Living Legacy

San Diego's historic areas set the stage for creative gatherings

Adapted from an article written by Maria Lenhart for *Meetings West*, September 2007

Photographs were among those featured within the article.

Beneath the surface of its clean and contemporary sun-and-surf persona, San Diego has quite a past. Not only did the city spawn the first European settlement in California, but it also served as a stomping ground for Wyatt Earp and other assorted gamblers, outlaws and speculators back in the not so good old days.

Thanks to a lot of historic preservation efforts, many of them during the past few years, San Diego is celebrating its colorful past in grand style these days. The city is resplendent with restored hotels, districts and venues that not only preserve its past, but inspire innovative events. Just about any era in California history, whether it's the early Spanish Colonial days or the Jazz Age or the classic beach-and-surf culture, can be re-invented here.

"About 50 percent of our customers who haven't been here in the last five years are really surprised at what we have done in the way of restoration," says Steve Schell, vice president of sales for the San Diego CVB. "People think of San Diego as primarily new buildings, but we've gone in and renovated many of our older buildings and turned them into hotels."

Downtown Revival

No part of San Diego has been a greater focus of restoration and redevelopment than its downtown core, a once moribund area that had little to attract either leisure visitors or meeting attendees. Things began to turn around in the 1980's with the unveiling of the waterfront San Diego Convention Center and the first stirrings of restoration activity

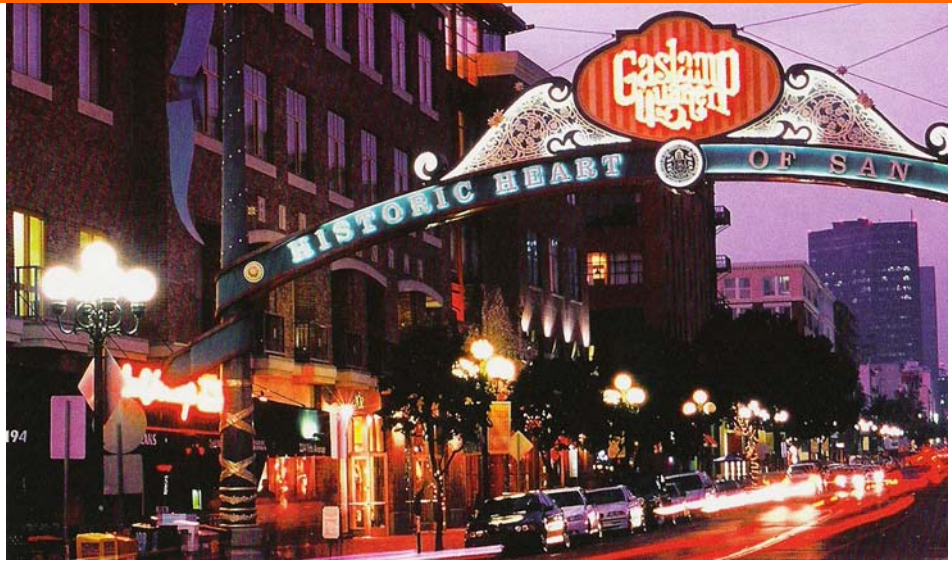
in a run-down area of pawn shops and fleabag hotels known as the Gaslamp Quarter.

What a difference a couple of decades make. Today the Gaslamp Quarter, a hive of commerce and nightlife a century ago, has recaptured its early vibrancy with many of its 19th century buildings made over into hip hotels, restaurants, boutiques, bars, and clubs.

Not surprisingly, the Gaslamp Quarter, within walking distance of the convention center, figures prominently into meetings agendas these days. “We use it in so many ways,” says Jennifer Miller, general manager of *ACCESS* Destination Services, a San Diego-based DMC. “You can reserve a couple of blocks for a block party that gives you the exclusive use of several restaurants. You can bring in entertainment. The historic buildings are the only backdrop you need.” [Jennifer Miller of local DMC, *ACCESS* Destination Services]

Schell adds that the district is ideal for dine-arounds and free nights.

“A lot of planners love the Gaslamp because you can just turn people loose there,” he says. “People can dine at the restaurants or go to the high-energy bars.”



Downtown Vibe:

The revitalized Gaslamp Quarter is ideal for block parties, dine-arounds and free nights.

Visitors who want to delve beneath the surface can enjoy guided walking tours offered by the Gaslamp Quarter Historical Foundation. The guides trace the Gaslamp’s checkered past as it grew into San Diego’s new commercial hub in the late 19th century and then quickly declined into a red-light district known as the Stingree, where Wyatt Earp ran three gambling halls.

Among the Gaslamp’s restored structures is the William Heath Davis Historic House Museum, a saltbox-style house shipped around Cape Horn and assembled in San Diego in 1850, where various rooms represent different eras. Another is the Horton Grand Hotel, which was once a notorious brothel and is now a charming Victorian-era property with 132 guest rooms and 8,500 square feet of meeting space.

The Horton Grand is only one of many hotels that are the result of makeovers to historic buildings in or adjacent to the Gaslamp Quarter. Two such properties that made their debut earlier this year are the 212-room Sofia Hotel, a makeover of the 1926 Pickwick Hotel, and the Ivy Hotel, a 159-room luxury property that was originally built in 1914 to host dignitaries during the Panama-California Exposition.

Located at the foot of the Gaslamp Quarter, the US Grant Hotel, built in 1910 by Ulysses S. Grant Jr. to honor his Civil War hero father, emerged last October from a \$52 million restoration that closed the property for nearly two years. A major focus of the project was the hotel’s 33,000 square feet of meeting space, which includes the 1920’s-era Crystal Ballroom and the circa-1910 Celestial Ballroom.

Despite an illustrious past that included the hosting of no less than 13 U.S. presidents, the US Grant, which is now part of Starwood’s Luxury Collection, does not have a museum-like atmosphere, says Mark DiBella, director of sales and marketing at the property.

“The restoration allowed us to update our technology, so we’re among the most technologically advanced hotels around” he says. “At the same time, we worked with five design teams to give the hotel a timeless quality. We’re not insulting the history of the hotel by trying to be a W.”

A signature event at the US Grant is the Presidential Timeline, a live musical production paired with a video presentation that draws on the hotel’s nine decades of history and the 13 presidents who stayed there.

Hispanic Heritage

San Diego’s original “downtown” and the site of the first Spanish settlement on the West Coast lives on in the form of Old Town State Historic Park. The six-block park is a living illustration of life in San Diego as a Spanish colony and then as a northern Mexican mission town during the first half of the 19th century. The collection of wooden and adobe buildings includes a school-house, a blacksmith shop, the city’s first newspaper office, historic homes, museums, and other structures.

Among the most intriguing of the historic buildings is the Whaley House, which is one of only two designated haunted houses in California. Built in 1856 on the site of a former gallows, the Greek Revival house was the home of a prominent merchant family and also served as the site of San Diego’s first theater and the county courthouse. The house is open for tours and offers an adjacent outdoor area for receptions.

Just above the park on Presidio Hill, the Junipero Serra Museum is filled with household items and tools left behind by the early Native American, Spanish and Mexican inhabitants of Old Town. The museum interior accommodates up to 100 people for a reception, while an exterior loggia accommodates up to 200 for a reception and up to 150 for a dinner.

In and around Old Town are dozens of galleries, most selling Mexican and Southwest handicrafts, and Mexican restaurants, many fronted by outdoor cooking areas where visitors can watch tortillas being made. According to Miller, many of the restaurants are available for group buy-outs and make evocative settings for evening theme events.

“It’s a really great option, especially for a group on a budget, as it’s very affordable in comparison to many of the restaurants downtown,” she says. [Jennifer Miller, *ACCESS* Destination Services] “You can bring in a mariachi band and have someone making paper flowers.”

Balboa Park

San Diego’s cultural crown jewel is Balboa Park, which offers so many museums and cultural attractions that it is sometimes referred to as the Smithsonian of the West. Many of the museum buildings which feature ornate Spanish Colonial-style architecture, were originally constructed for the 1915 California-Panama Exposition and are sightseeing attractions in themselves.

The park offers free tours for visitors of its historical treasures, which include the imposing Spreckles Organ Pavilion, home to the world’s largest outdoor pipe organ, and the Botanical Building, a huge Victorian lath structure filled with tropical plants and seasonal flowers. Special events at the 2,400 seat organ pavilion can be arranged.

Located in the beautiful Casa de Balboa building, the San Diego Museum of History, which has a huge collection of photographs, textiles, costumes, artifacts, and furniture, is a place where visitors can trace the development of San Diego from mission village to modern city. The museum’s atrium makes an elegant setting for receptions for up to 250 people or seated dinners for up to 150 guests, while the Thornton Theater seats up to 60 people for a conference or lecture.

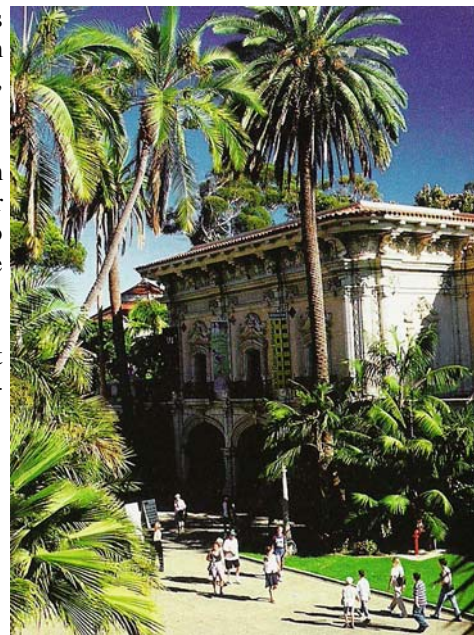
Many of Balboa Park’s other museums are also available for special events, including the Museum of Man, devoted to archaeological discoveries; the Mingei International Museum, a showcase for world folk art; the San Diego Air & Space Museum; the San Diego Museum of Art; the San Diego Natural History Museum; and the Museum of Photographic Art, which includes a private movie theater.

Another historic venue in the park is the Marston House, a 21-room mansion built for a department store magnate in 1905 that is considered a foremost example of the Arts and Crafts style that flourished in California at the time. The mansion’s exquisite formal gardens can be used for receptions.

Military and Maritime

San Diego, an important commercial port and military center since the early 1900’s, is home to nearly a dozen Navy, Marine and Coast Guard installations. So it’s little wonder that a number of popular event sites are tied into the city’s military and maritime heritage.

Culture Hub:
The Prado, Balboa Park’s central walkway, is lined with intriguing museums.

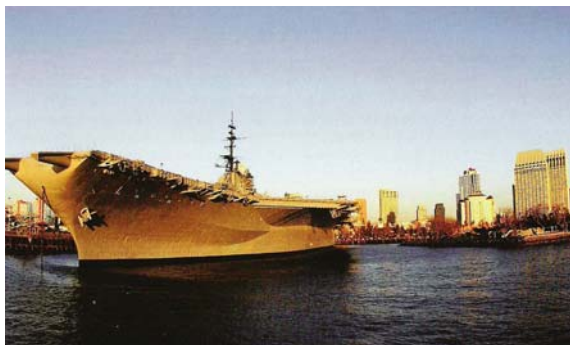


Chief among them is the *USS Midway*/San Diego Aircraft Carrier Museum, the longest-serving aircraft carrier in U.S. Navy history. Docents, many of them Midway veterans, lead tours of the mess deck, berthing spaces, flight deck, and other areas. The massive flight deck, with its restored aircraft and 360-degree views of San Diego’s harbor and skyline, can accommodate gala events for up to 3,000 people.

Another military venue equipped for large-scale events is the Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Miramar, which offers more than 70,000 square feet of banquet space that includes settings such as the Miramar Officers Club, where scenes from the movie *Top Gun* were filmed, and the Flying Leathernecks Aviation Museum, which features vintage aircraft and exhibits on Marine History.

“It’s a very exciting venue, especially for parties with a *Top Gun* theme,” Miller [of *ACCESS* Destination Services] says.

Featuring a collection of historic vessels docked along the downtown San Diego Bay waterfront, the San Diego Maritime Museum offers four floating venues, each with a distinct personality and spectacular city and harbor views. They include the *Berkeley*, a massive 1898 ferryboat with stained glass windows, carved wood detailing, a dance floor, and two large open-air decks.



Anchors Aweigh:
The *USS Midway*/San Diego Aircraft Carrier Museum is a huge hit with groups.

The collection also includes the 1863 *Star of India*, a majestic tall ship that has circled the globe 21 times, and the *HMS Surprise*, a replica of a tall ship that was built specifically for the filming of the movie *Master & Commander: The Far Side of the World*, starring Russell Crowe as a 19th century British naval captain.

The museum’s other tall ship, the *Californian*, can be used either for dockside receptions or for sailing charters. The *Californian* is also available for team-building sailing events that can last for a few hours or several days.

Just north of downtown in Mission Bay, the Bahia Resort Hotel, which was established as Mission Bay’s first beach resort in the early 1950’s, operates two replicas of 19th century riverboats that provide the feel of an earlier era with rich woods, stained-glass skylights and polished brass fixtures. The two sternwheelers, which accommodate up to 1,200 people and offer audiovisual capabilities, can be chartered for cruise excursions.

Classic Coronado and La Jolla

For events with a nostalgic feel, the island community of Coronado, linked by a bridge to downtown San Diego, is the perfect choice. Established in the 1880s as a seaside playground, Coronado, with its quaint streets and cottages, seems to have lost little of its original Victorian-era charm.

“Once you go across the bridge to Coronado, you’ve stepped way back in time,” Schell says. “There’s a nostalgic, small-town feel that’s almost like being in Mayberry.”

Coronado’s most famous landmark is the Hotel del Coronado, which has graced a prime stretch of beachfront in turreted splendor since 1888. A testament to the Victorian age, the hotel maintains a museum gallery of historical displays and photographs as well as its original cage elevator that is hand-operated by an attendant.

Schell notes that the hotel is not content to rest on its laurels, but continually refines its appeal, most recently by opening a new spa and adding luxury villa accommodations.

“The Del recently spent \$35 million on improvements that are making it more group friendly than ever, including more outdoor event space,” he says. “Yet it maintains its historic atmosphere.”

According to Miller, [of *ACCESS* Destination Services] the Del is a favorite staging ground for theme parties based on bygone eras, particularly the 1920s. They include beach parties themed after the movie *Some Like It Hot*, which was filmed at the hotel, and Gatsby parties held on the hotel’s lawn area.

“With the *Some Like It Hot* theme, you can bring actors depicting Marilyn Monroe and other characters from the movie,” she says. [Jennifer Miller, *ACCESS* Destination Services] “We also love to use the hotel’s Crown Room, which has magnificent chandeliers and a wood ceiling without a single nail in it.”

Coronado’s unique past is showcased at the Coronado Museum of History and Art, which offers displays that include early photographs of Tent City, a popular vacation resort for families that was located next to the Hotel Del Coronado from 1900 to 1939. The museum, which accommodates up to 125 people for evening receptions, is operated by the Coronado History Association, which can provide historic walking tours of the island.

La Jolla, just north of San Diego, is another upscale seaside community that recalls a more gracious era. Among its most historic hotels is the La Jolla Beach & Tennis Club, which opened in 1927 as the La Jolla Beach & Yacht Club. Set on 14 acres, the waterfront property offers 98 guest rooms and meeting facilities that include the richly paneled Walnut Lounge, which offers a large fireplace, ocean views, and seating for up to 70 people. A poolside patio and private beach can accommodate large events.

MeetingsMedia

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