

SOME LIKE IT HOT

From seacoast to desert, San Diego has environments for every taste

By MARIA LENHART

While well known for its beaches and bases, San Diego is far more than a stomping ground for sailors, *Top Gun* test pilots and sun-worshippers. In fact, when the whole of San Diego County is considered, it could almost be the state of California in microcosm.

To the east and north of the city, there are acres of vineyards producing award-winning wines, along with fine resorts offering everything from golf to casino gaming. In close proximity to each other, there are desert hot springs, nature preserves where wildflowers burst forth in spring and mountain hamlets set among historic gold mines and apple orchards.

San Diego itself has evolved into a sophisticated urban center filled with vintage buildings wearing new guises as hip hotels, restaurants, pubs, art galleries and boutiques. Not far from downtown are one of California's best-preserved Spanish Colonial settlements, a bucolic island community straight from the Victorian era, a magnificent park dotted with museums and a world-famous zoo, chic coastal enclaves and much more.

"We are actually seven regions, and every one of them has a freshness to it," says Margie Sitton, senior vice president of sales and services for the San Diego CVB. "Within a few minutes, you're up in north county with golf courses and traditional resorts or up the coast in quaint villages like Del Mar. There are so many experiences here."

Beyond its geographic bounty, Sitton believes that San Diego's appeal also stems from a sunny atmosphere that goes beyond the perpetually balmy climate.

"When I moved here over 20 years ago, I was struck by how nice the people are," she says. "This is a place that inspires optimism, which is what everyone needs right now. When you come here for a meeting, it provides a hopeful backdrop that inspires creativity and helps you be positive."

Downtown San Diego

In a little more than two decades, downtown San Diego has gone from flat to fabulous, transforming itself from a moribund place of urban decay to a sought-after address for visitors and locals alike. No small amount of this success comes from the city's development as a meetings and conventions destination, complete with a sail-roofed convention center within walking distance of world-class hotels, dining, shopping, nightlife and unique waterfront attractions and venues.

Celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, the San Diego Convention Center has proven to be a cornerstone of downtown's remarkable renaissance. The stunning waterfront facility, which offers over 1.1 million square feet of meeting, exhibit, prefunction and outdoor event space, recently released preliminary design plans for a proposed expansion that would include 225,000 square feet of new exhibit space as well as a rooftop restaurant and pedestrian bridge to San Diego Bay.

In December, the 1,200-room Hilton San Diego Bayfront Hotel opened adjacent to the convention center and across from PETCO Park, which is home to the Padres baseball team and also serves as a popular group venue. Features of the 30-story hotel include 165,000 square feet of meeting and event space as well as a 4.3-acre waterfront park sporting over \$2 million worth of public art.

"It's a great addition to our other hotel inventory near the convention center," Sitton says. "Having another 1,200 rooms to offer is good news."

Also new on the downtown hotel scene is Se San Diego, a 184-room boutique property with a rooftop pool deck, penthouse suites, a full-service spa and 20,000 square feet of function space that includes a two-story ballroom and a 132-seat screening room.

San Diego's newest property is the Hotel Indigo San Diego Gaslamp Quarter, a LEED-certified hotel that opened in July a block from PETCO Park. Featuring local artwork throughout, the hotel includes 1,328 square feet of meeting space and a rooftop terrace with a reflecting pool, fire pits and panoramic skyline views.

The new hotels join a robust inventory of over 10,000 rooms near the convention center, offered by such properties as the San Diego Marriott Hotel and Marina, which recently completed a \$35 million renovation; the Omni San Diego; the Manchester Grand Hyatt; the Hilton San Diego Gaslamp Quarter; the San Diego Marriott Gaslamp; the Hard Rock Hotel San Diego; and the US Grant Hotel, an early 20th century landmark that underwent a major restoration in 2006.



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Prime off-site venues and attractions abound near the convention center, including the USS Midway, a historic aircraft carrier with a massive flight deck accommodating groups of up to 3,000 for gala events. The nearby San Diego Maritime Museum offers four historic vessels, including an ornate Victorian-era ferry and a majestic tall ship, which serve as versatile venues.

The entertainment star of downtown San Diego is the Gaslamp Quarter, a district where pawn shops and flophouses have given way to some of the city's trendiest restaurants, bars and galleries. Block parties, where groups can literally dance in the street while enjoying exclusive access to restaurants and retail shops in a closed-off area, are a popular option for many conventions.

In the midst of central San Diego is one of the nation's great urban oases, Balboa Park. In addition to the San Diego Zoo, which offers many event spaces for groups, the park is home to a unique collection of museums and attractions that include a historic organ pavilion, a botanical garden and a science center.

Coronado

Linked by a bridge to downtown San Diego, Coronado is a charming island community of gingerbread cottages, some dating to the 1880s when the destination first be-

came popular as a seaside playground. Its major landmark is the Hotel Del Coronado, a wedding cake of a hotel that recently completed a major renovation and expansion. The project included a new spa and beachfront accommodations.

The film location for the movie *Some Like it Hot* with Tony Curtis, Jack Lemmon and Marilyn Monroe, the Hotel Del is a popular site for beach parties and 1920s-themed receptions where impersonators from the 1959 movie can grace the scene.

"One of the great things about San Diego is that we have so many outdoor venues that can be used year-round, and the beach behind the Hotel Del is a great example," says Christopher Lee, CEO of Access Destination Services, a local DMC. "You can have live music, fire pits and low chairs all over the place while the waves are breaking just 200 feet away."

Two other group-friendly properties are the Coronado Island Marriott Resort and the Loews Coronado Bay Resort.

Coronado's unique past is showcased at the Coronado Museum of History and Art, which offers exhibits 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.

Mission Valley/Old Town

Located north of Balboa Park, Mission Valley is a magnet for both shoppers and golfers, offering the Fashion Valley Mall and adjacent 27-hole Riverwalk Golf Club. Major meeting properties in the area include the recently renovated Town and Country Resort & Convention Center, which offers 1,000 guest rooms and 165,000 square feet of meeting space. Other group-friendly hotels in the area include the Handlery Hotel and Resort and the Mission Valley Resort and Conference Center.

Liberty Station, a waterfront urban village in the redeveloped Naval Training Center on Point Loma, features a new Courtyard by Marriott, offering 200 guest rooms and 5,000 square feet of meeting space. Also within Liberty Station are the 130-room Homewood Suites by Hilton; Liberty Station Conference Center, which accommodates groups of up to 1,200 people; and several event spaces located in historic Spanish Revival buildings. Other amenities at Liberty Station include parklands, restaurants, shops and a 9-hole golf course. Mission Valley is also home to the first of California's 21 historic Spanish missions, the Mission Basilica San Diego de Alcalá, which dates to 1769 and was founded by Father Junípero Serra.

Just to the west, 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 schoolhouse, blacksmith shop, the city's first newspaper office, historic homes and museums.

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. Many of the restaurants are available for group buyouts and make atmospheric settings for evening theme events.

La Jolla/Mission Bay

Set on a prime stretch of rocky coastline about 15 minutes north of downtown, the posh enclave of La Jolla, with its smart shops and palatial cliff-top homes, is what the California good life is all about. Known for its deep coves abundant with interesting marine life, La Jolla is home to the Scripps Institute of Oceanography and its Birch Aquarium, one of the region's most popular group venues. A new addition to Scripps is the Seaside Forum, a conference facility that accommodates up to 600 people for a reception.

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While just minutes from downtown San Diego, La Jolla is filled with outdoor activity options, according to Cami Mattson, president and CEO of the San Diego North CVB, which markets La Jolla as part of its region.

"There's hiking in the Torrey Pines reserve, a beautiful open space," she says. "Groups can do ocean kayaking with an ocean naturalist from Scripps. They can see leopard sharks, which are very tame, plus get up close to sea caves and sea lions. Surfing lessons are great for team-building events. Another option is to take groups to La Jolla Cove where they can paint seascapes with watercolors. It's a good way to learn about the environment."

Meetings-friendly hotels in La Jolla include the Lodge at Torrey Pines; the Estancia La Jolla Hotel & Spa, which boasts the IACC-certified Executive Learning Retreat; the Hilton La Jolla Torrey Pines; the Hyatt Regency La Jolla at Aventine; La Jolla Shores Hotel; and Embassy Suites San Diego-La Jolla, which recently completed a \$13 million renovation.

Just south of La Jolla is Mission Bay, where prime attractions include Sea World San Diego and group-ready properties such as Bahia Resort Hotel, Hyatt Regency Mission Bay Spa and Marina, The Dana on Mission Bay, Catamaran Resort Hotel and Paradise Point Resort & Spa.

San Diego North

Cutting a 4,000-square-mile swath up the coast from La Jolla to Oceanside and inland through vine-covered hills to the Temecula Valley in neighboring Riverside County, the region known as San Diego North is a mix of quaint villages, lush lagoons and resorts celebrated for their golf and spa amenities.

According to Mattson, the region's proximity to much of Southern California, including Orange County and Los Angeles, has proven to be an advantage during a down economy.

"More than ever, meetings are going regional and coming from a drive market," she says. "So they are looking for accessibility. The fact that we are within a 200-mile radius of a huge population base bodes well for San Diego North. We offer the chance for groups to get away without going a long distance."

Although accessible, Mattson says San Diego North offers a sense of seclusion that comes from being the antithesis of a "big box environment."

"We have the ocean and plenty of preserves, lagoons and golf courses—all of these things match the stress-reduction element that many groups are looking for," she says. "And many of our properties are smaller—200 rooms or so. You can own the property and have that intimate experience. You can zero in on what you're trying to accomplish."

San Diego's impressive resort portfolio includes La Costa Resort & Spa, a renowned destination spa resort with a new Meetings Make a Difference program that enables groups to receive a 10 percent credit that can be donated back to the organization or to a charity; Rancho Bernardo Inn, which unveiled a \$25 million renovation last year; and L'Auberge Del Mar Resort & Spa, which opened a new spa with 10 treatment rooms in March.

Two upscale resorts that have opened within the past two years are The Grand Del Mar and the Sheraton Carlsbad Resort & Spa. In May, owners of the Four Seasons Aviara Resort announced that Dolce International would be taking over management of the property from Four Seasons, but at press time the matter was in legal dispute.

The region is also home to two gaming properties: Harrah's Rincon Casino and Resort and Pala Casino Resort, which recently completed a \$100 million expansion that included additions to its dining and casino areas.

Activity options are on the increase in San Diego North, including Flightime, a new zip-line attraction at the San Diego Wild Animal Park that enables visitors to soar above the Asian and African field exhibits, and mule rides through the park's coastal sage scrub habitat. Also new is the San Elijo Nature Center in Cardiff, a LEED-certified facility made entirely of recycled materials where visitors can engage in interactive exhibits devoted to lagoon ecosystems.

Visits to local wineries and quaint shopping villages figure prominently on the list of choices for free-time activities and spouse programs, according to Dave Wilson, owner of LeftCoast Destinations, a local DMC.

"North San Diego County and Temecula have dozens of excellent wineries, where you can have sunset dinners right out in the vineyards," he says. "One of our favorites is Briar Rose, a boutique winery that produces well-regarded wines, including one that was served at the White House last year. It's a great venue for small groups of up to about 25 people. For larger groups, we like to use Leonesse Cellars, which has beautiful facilities, including a spacious patio with an outdoor fireplace, barbecue and stage area."





Also a big hit with groups are excursions to Carlsbad and Old Town Temecula.

"Both offer very unique shops and are very walkable," Wilson says. "Carlsbad has a lot of antique dealers as well as artisan shops featuring handmade items. Old Town Temecula has great food-related stores, including an olive oil company that makes 16 different kinds of olive oil and a spice merchant that sells amazing rubs made from exotic spices."

East San Diego County

Nature preserves, historic towns, outdoor activities and an increasing number of upscale casino properties with superb recreational and meeting facilities have come together to put East San Diego County on the map as a resort destination.

"Our Native American casinos are the major attractions that cater to groups," says Eric Lund, executive director of the San Diego East Visitors Bureau. "They've really brought a new level of full-service resort properties to the region."

Among local casino resorts is Sycuan Resort in El Cajon, a 100-room property where the amenities include three 18-hole golf courses, golf practice facilities, 11 tennis courts, a spa featuring Native American-inspired treatments and meeting

space for up to 300 people. Another standout is Barona Valley Ranch Resort, which offers 400 guest rooms, golf and extensive meeting and event space.

Last year the Viejas Band of Kumeyaay Indians announced plans for an \$800 million expansion to the Viejas Casino and adjoining outlet shopping mall. Slated for a 2012 completion, plans call for a second casino, a hotel and meeting space.

In December, the former La Casa del Zorro was renamed the Borrego Ranch Resort & Spa following a change of ownership and renovation. Bordering Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, a vast wilderness area with hiking trails and abundant wildlife, the resort offers 19 casitas, 44 guest rooms, a Tom Fazio-designed golf course and spa facilities.

Along with resorts, Lund says East County is a place where groups will find opportunities for rejuvenation and team building.

"If groups are green-oriented, we have a lot to offer in the way of nature preserves, including a wolf preserve and a sanctuary for wild cats," he says. "We have wildlife viewing, hot springs, mountain biking, paragliding and tons of golf courses. We also have a lot of heritage and cultural destinations, including Historic Highway 80, where there are unique towns like Alpine, Pine Valley and Estancia—each with its own character and shopping and dining opportunities."

South San Diego County

While plans for a major Gaylord Entertainment convention hotel have been scrapped, the city of Chula Vista, the second largest in San Diego County, draws groups to hotel properties that include Holiday Inn Express and Comfort Inn & Suites, which recently remodeled its meeting space.

The coastal city also lures groups to its off-site venues, including the U.S. Olympic Training Center, the only year-round facility of its kind, which offers meeting space and opportunities for team building. In addition, there is Coors Amphitheater, an outdoor performing arts center with seating for up to 20,000 people in reserved sections and a lawn area.

Other attractions include Otay Ranch Town center, a shopping, dining and retail complex, and the Knotts Soak City waterpark.

Meanwhile, the Port of San Diego, which owns the 556-acre waterfront site where the Gaylord property was to be located, is seeking other development opportunities. Gaylord withdrew from the project last November. ●

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