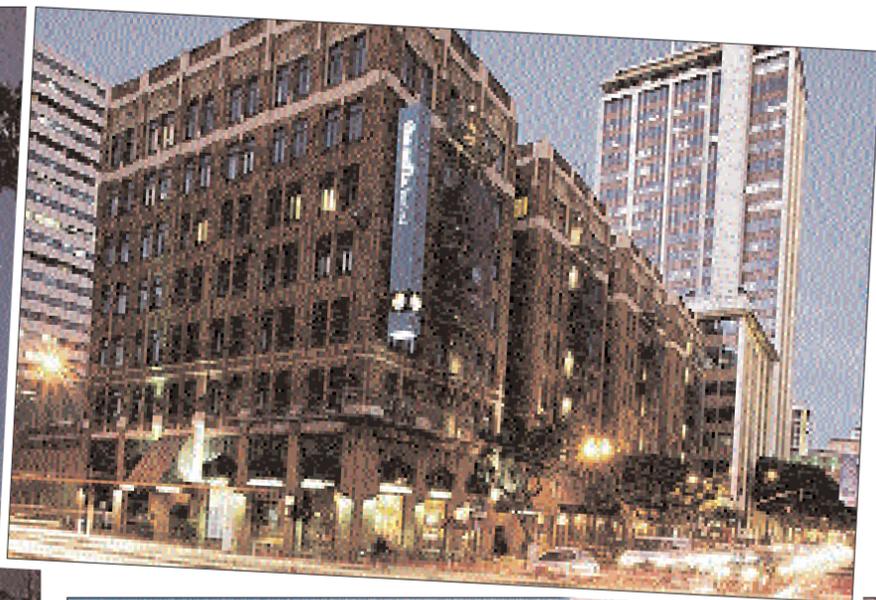


getaway



Making the most of your time off

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From the beaches to gritty Downtown

YOU can't avoid repeating "this is the life" if you holiday in San Diego. The phrase is often accompanied by a satisfied sigh as you sink your third blended strawberry margarita and dunk your complimentary tacos into tangy tomato salsa.

Maybe you've just dined at superb Fish Market in North Harbor Drive, polished off an ice cream sundae from Extraordinary Desserts in Downtown or taken a walk round the evocative Old Town and Little Italy.

No, it's hard to stop saying, "this is the life", because with all there is to see and do here, it really is.

San Diego (SD) is pretty spread out, from Chula Vista in the south, then Downtown and Gaslamp in the city centre before north takes in La Jolla with all the famous beaches along the coast including Mission and Pacific, then further inland is Miramar and La Mesa.

We combined a stay Downtown with chic La Jolla in our two-week visit.

We first stayed at the historic US Grant hotel – incredibly glamorous in a classic 1940s style – with tremendous rooms and a stunning bar and restaurant serving unbeatable food. No wonder it's been around since 1910. Our suite was amazing including two king size beds, a bathroom bigger than most living rooms and a complimentary platter of fruit, chocolate-dipped biscuits and caramel sauce.

It's hard to stop saying 'this is the life', because it really is

Known across the Atlantic as 'America's finest city', it is no wonder **SARAH DAVE** loves going back to San Diego

Nearby is The Sofia Hotel, a stylish and equally historic building, with probably one of the most comfortable beds I've ever slept in – and the bar's happy hour drinks and food were impressive.

The outside of the building is stunning, with a plush inside refurb making sure you never want to leave.

Further out of Downtown, The Pearl hotel is a funky option about five miles away in Point Loma. It's very popular, has a 1960's style and shows movies on a huge screen above its swimming pool.

Back Downtown and shopping includes the mall at Horton Plaza and Seaport Village at San Diego Bay, where you can also take a boat ride past the impressive naval base and historic sailing ships.

Here, the USS Midway is now a museum ship where you can wander around its catacomb-like belly for a taste of warship life. A ferry also takes you to Coronado, an isthmus, with grand Victorian homes, boutique shopping and a white sandy beach – it's where they filmed Marilyn Monroe's *Some Like It Hot*. Coronado is also one of 100 points of interest covered by Old Town Trolley Tours – a hop on/off two-hour trolley bus ride which is a good way of getting to know SD. Central SD is also home to one of my favourite attractions, Balboa

Park, which not only houses 15-plus museums and arts venues but also the sprawling San Diego Zoo. Elephant Odyssey is its newest attraction. We also spent a few nights up the coast in La Jolla which is like a mini Monte Carlo village or Rodeo Drive with its coves, verdant hillsides and millionaires. Kayakers row past basking sea lions as families frolic on the beaches or weave through its boutique stores.

SeaWorld is a half-hour drive away – an attraction well worth visiting to say hello to killer whale Shamu. If you have children, also visit Legoland California.

We were thrilled to stay in an ocean-view at the glamorous La Valencia. The art deco style hotel, a member of Preferred Hotels & Resorts (www.preferredhotels.com), has been around since 1926 and was a gathering spot for Hollywood celebrities, especially at its famous Whaling Bar. Its old-world charm is a thrill to be around yet it doesn't scrimp on modern comforts.

We were also lucky enough to spend three nights at the Grande Colonial. Although there is a main hotel with rooms, it also has adjoining apartment-style accommodation

in its Little Hotel by the Sea where we luxuriated in a suite including a kitchen with daily free snack replenishments including ice cream and pop.

An option away from central La Jolla is the haven of Estancia La Jolla, with its rancho-style architecture and courtyards, a cracking pool and heavenly spa. It's very serene with its rambling gardens and couldn't be further from city hotel-living.

After a week in the beautiful and relaxing suburb, it was exciting to move back to the bustle and urban grit of Downtown SD.

There is much to do in the city but if you visit at the end of July Comic Con must not be missed. The spaceship that is San Diego Convention Centre hosts this massive international four-day expo of popular arts, which this year celebrated 40 years.

There are two arms to Comic Con as I see it. Firstly the film, TV, games and animation giants bringing the latest in science fiction movies and products such as the new Prisoner film starring Ian McKellen, James

Cameron's *Avatar* with Sigourney Weaver, *Lord of the Rings* director Peter Jackson's *District 9* and the latest from colossi Marvel and

DC. It's like being at the Oscars with the sort of big names so keen to attend. The other side to it are the scores of established and upcoming artists and

illustration houses displaying their latest work including books, comics and clothes. The lovingly presented range is breathtaking and inspiring whether manga/anime to digital illustration. My favourites are Fleet Street Scandal, Corey Godbey, Emonic, The Bazaarium and Ben Walker.

This year crowds attended to see exclusive films, stock up on new release comics and meet their heroes as my boyfriend did with James Bond actor George Lazenby (who, incidentally, said he had "a good looking bird".)

SD is often referred to as "America's finest city" and the combination of location, activities, nightlife, the beach/city mix and unrivalled climate make it a perfect holiday destination.

FACTFILE

■ Sarah stayed at The US Grant, 326 Broadway, www.usgrant.net, Grande Colonial, 910 Prospect St, www.thegrandcolonial.com, Estancia La Jolla, 9700 North Torrey Pines Road, www.estancialajolla.com, La Valencia, 1132 Prospect St, www.lavalencia.com, Sofia Hotel, 150 West Broadway, www.thesofiahotel.com, The Pearl, 1410 Rosencrans St, www.thepearl.com.

■ For next year's Comic Con visit www.comic-con.org.
■ Sarah travelled to Heathrow Airport by Rail Air bus from Reading station. For details visit www.railair.com.

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