

CLOSE-UP ON CALIFORNIA MAKING ROOM FOR SAN DIEGO

Newly renovated downtown hotels add to city's many incentives for an urban escape

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Sunday, April 8, 2007

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Ask someone for places to see in San Diego, and the list comes easily: Gaslamp Quarter, San Diego Zoo, Old Town, Coronado, Seaworld, Balboa Park, Pacific Beach ... you get the drift. Ask someone for places to stay in San Diego, and the list pretty much stops after the Hotel Del Coronado -- which, if it isn't in your budget, pretty much leaves you adrift.

Oh sure, there are skyscraper chain hotels aplenty, all seemingly in the daredevil flight path of the airport's Lindbergh Field, and stucco motels ready to funnel street noise to the tiny rooms behind their pink facades. But a memorable stay? Until recently, the answer might have been: Forget it. Yet with all the new reasons to stay in downtown San Diego -- catching a game at Petco Park, an exhibit at the expanded modern art museum or a ship at the nearby cruise terminal -- it was inevitable that hoteliers would also begin to catch up.

With that in mind, here are the ABCs (ambience, back story and close-by sights) plus the DEFs (dining options, essentials and fun facts) for three examples of San Diego's room renaissance, from ultra-budget to ultra-luxurious. Bonus: They're all about a \$10 cab ride from the hair-raising airport. More new lodgings are on the way, too, so keep that list of places to go handy.

FROM 'ROOM WITH A BATH' TO YOGA CENTRAL

The Sofia Hotel

150 Broadway (between Front Street and First and Avenue)

Ambience: Formerly the Pickwick Hotel, the dramatically renovated Sofia opened this year with a luxurious modern look that appeals to a slightly younger crowd than the US Grant without being achingly hip (a la the W San Diego around the corner). The flat-screen TVs are 20 inches, the mattresses are pillow-top and the comforters are down; suites come with a spa tub (standard rooms are shower-only) and a separate sitting area. There's no excuse for skipping a workout here: The newly opened yoga studio and well-stocked fitness room are both open 24 hours a day, and yoga instructors and personal trainers are available on call. But the overall mood is serene, not manic, with soothing dark woods, leaf patterns on fabrics and, in the lobby, vintage photos from its storied past. Pets are welcome.

Back story: When it first opened in 1927, the distinctive Gothic Revival building housed one of the most luxurious hotels in the city. After all, the Pickwick was the first to boast en suite bathrooms (Its ad campaign: "A room and a bath for two and a half!"). Eventually, the hotel -- like the Gaslamp Quarter and much of downtown -- fell on hard times; by the late '80s, the Pickwick had partially converted into single-room-occupancy residences (a polite way of saying "flop house"). The present owners poured \$16 million-plus into renovations last year and were rewarded with sold-out nights (at moderate prices) in their

first weeks of business.

Close by: The Sofia is between the US Grant and 500 West hotels, so it's also close to all the Gaslamp goings-on, the Convention Center, and the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego's new branch and waterfront wonders such as the USS Midway. Across the street is Spreckels Theater (next up: soul singer Brian McKnight, April 25). Unfortunately -- or fortunately, depending on your view -- the Sofia is also next to the Greyhound bus terminal (120 W. Broadway) and its occasionally noisy parade of passengers.

Dining: The opening of chef Jonathan Pflueger's in-house American brasserie, Carrant, is still TBA, but expected in the next six weeks or so. Until then, Sofia's livelier guests might take advantage of the Gaslamp's gastronomic diversity by rocking the sushi at Ra (474 Broadway, 619-321-0021, www.rasushi.com), perusing the Persian menu at Bandar (825 Fourth Ave., 619-238-0101, www.bandarrestaurant.com) or bonding over Aussie beers at the new anti-Outback Steakhouse, Bondi (333 Fifth Ave., 619-342-0212, www.thebondi.com).

Essentials: (800) 826-0009, 619-234-9200; www.thesofiahotel.com. 212 rooms, including 20 suites and three wheelchair-accessible rooms. Online rates from \$149 double.

Fun fact: Art Linkletter, then a student at San Diego State, started his "Man on the Street" feature while working on a show broadcast from the Pickwick.