



Above: Surfers prepare to catch a wave near the Crystal Pier at Pacific Beach.

Left: Visitors enjoy the beautiful shoreline at La Jolla's Boomers Beach.

Coastal Trilogy

Exploring Pacific Beach, La Jolla and Del Mar

By Rob Dunton

The soft pinks and blues of sunrise mix with the rumble of Pacific Ocean waves. Two surfers in wetsuits scramble onto their boards and paddle into an oncoming set. As the swells approach, the surfers drop in and carve up the glassy faces.

A lone harbor seal weaves in and out of the surf as the rising sun clears the horizon in the east, sending a golden beam of light to illuminate the waves, and a sense of peace and well-being envelops me. Maybe this explains why Hemingway and Robert Louis Stevenson spent years by the sea. I know for certain it's why I had called San Diego "home" for more than 20

years and why I've come back to rediscover three of my favorite places: Pacific Beach, La Jolla and Del Mar.

Pacific Beach—or "PB" as locals call it—is the most youthful, eclectic and dynamic of the three, laid out on a broad grid pattern with a long wide beach and lively boardwalk. **La Jolla** is cosmopolitan and stunning, with a rich mix of pocket beaches, museums, serpentine shoreline and scenic parks. The Tudor-style village of **Del Mar** is quiet and petite: Only 15 blocks long, with its core half that size, it is home to quaint seaside parks, spectacular vistas, and exquisite shopping and dining.

My friend Susan and I begin our three-day beach-town excursion in Pacific Beach. PB is second only to the renowned downtown Gaslamp Quarter for nightlife in San Diego County, and it offers the bonus of a beachfront location. Susan and I check into Tower23 just before sunset on Friday, and are amazed by our ocean-view suite: spacious, with clean lines, superb amenities and a million-dollar view. Within five blocks of the sleek oceanfront hotel are dozens of restaurants and bars,

great surfing, an eclectic boardwalk and interesting shopping. This diversity is what draws people to PB. Colorful, athletic and spirited, PB is best experienced on bike or foot, beginning at its nexus: where Garnet Avenue meets the sea.

Since it is nighttime when we arrive, we begin our visit at T23's JRDN, the most upscale restaurant on the boardwalk, and indulge in a sumptuous meal of seared scallops, lobster bisque and grilled ahi, finished off with two sensational desserts: crème brûlée and the signature chocolate tart. After our feast, we decide to experience PB's renowned nightlife. In classic beach style, patrons cruise the main drag on foot, bike and skateboard more than by car. There are beach bars, sports bars, pubs and dance clubs interspersed with vintage-clothing and surf-wear boutiques; sushi, Mexican food and ice-cream shops; and coffeehouses and pizza joints.

Our destination is the hip new Bar West, a lounge and restaurant that would be right at home in New York. The club is packed with people decked out in evening attire



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that ranges from L.A. cool to beach casual. Susan and I relax at a table strategically placed on the dance floor for prime people watching. The DJ mixes tunes from the '70s to the present, and soon we too join in the fun, dancing until last call sends us home.

The next morning we rise to the sound of the surf, and walk a few blocks to a charming 1920s beach-cottage-turned-coffeehouse, Café 976. We sip chai tea over a copy of San Diego's weekly *Reader* and order the Mykonos steamer with eggs, tomatoes, basil and feta, and a bowl of Brazilian acai berries, guarana berries, strawberries, blueberries and bananas.

After a leisurely breakfast, we rent a pair of beach cruisers and spend hours pedaling along the three-mile boardwalk, where the beach show is in full swing. Beachgoers with impressive physiques play horse-shoes or volleyball or tan on the sand. We pass bodybuilders wearing big fashion sunglasses, a guy with a large pet boa, bicycles customized to look like choppers, BMX trick cyclists, rollerbladers and surfers. We stroll by waterfront bars, restaurants, custom homes and condos whose onlookers grill and chill out, enjoying their front-row seats for the parade. Before we leave, Susan and I order a burrito at Hawaiian-themed Kono's, a popular eatery by the Crystal Pier, and enjoy a scoop of ice cream from a tiny shack on the sand.

We drive five miles north along La Jolla Boulevard to La Jolla, San Diego's coastal grande dame and one of its most exclusive enclaves. La Jolla's compact downtown,

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affectionately known as "the Village," is situated along a winding, rocky shoreline with small beaches and a large protected cove that is part of the San Diego-La Jolla Underwater Park, which spans 6,000 acres of ocean bottom and tidelands. The park has become a popular destination for snorkelers and scuba divers. Surfers ride the curl at Wipe Out Beach, and bodysurfers kick into waves at Boomers Beach, while families relax on the beaches and explore the shore. We check into the historic Grande Colonial, La Jolla's oldest hotel, which is located two blocks from the ocean. The shift from Tower23's modernist chic and PB's boardwalk to the Grande Colonial's charm and the tranquility of nearby Scripps Park make me feel like I've been transported to a European setting.

Susan and I spend the day touring the shoreline that forms the western border of the Village. Here, people around us are dressed for walking, not parading or tanning; some even wear sportcoats. We hear German, Farsi, Hindi, Japanese and Dutch

Top: Families enjoy the surf and sand along the coast in Del Mar.

Left: Colorful hot air balloons inflate in a field near Del Mar.

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as couples and families stroll the serpentine path that winds along the rocky promontory around Scripps Park, the pastoral heart of the Village. Nearly 100 harbor seals rest at the Children's Pool, a sanctuary created by a seawall jetty that city matriarch Ellen Browning Scripps built in 1931 to provide a safe place for children to swim. Apparently, the resident harbor seals find it safe and relaxing as well, and have taken the pool's beach for themselves. Tourists line the seawall, watching in amusement as the seals frolic in the water and wiggle up the sand for a siesta in the warm sun.

We take our respite from the sun at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego's stunning ocean-view complex one block from the ocean. Works on view run from odd to extraordinary—from Céleste Boursier-Mougenot's three inflatable baby pools with musical porcelain bowls inside them to Erwin Redl's astounding *MATRIX II*, with thousands of light-emitting diodes you walk amid as if entering the construct of a computer game.

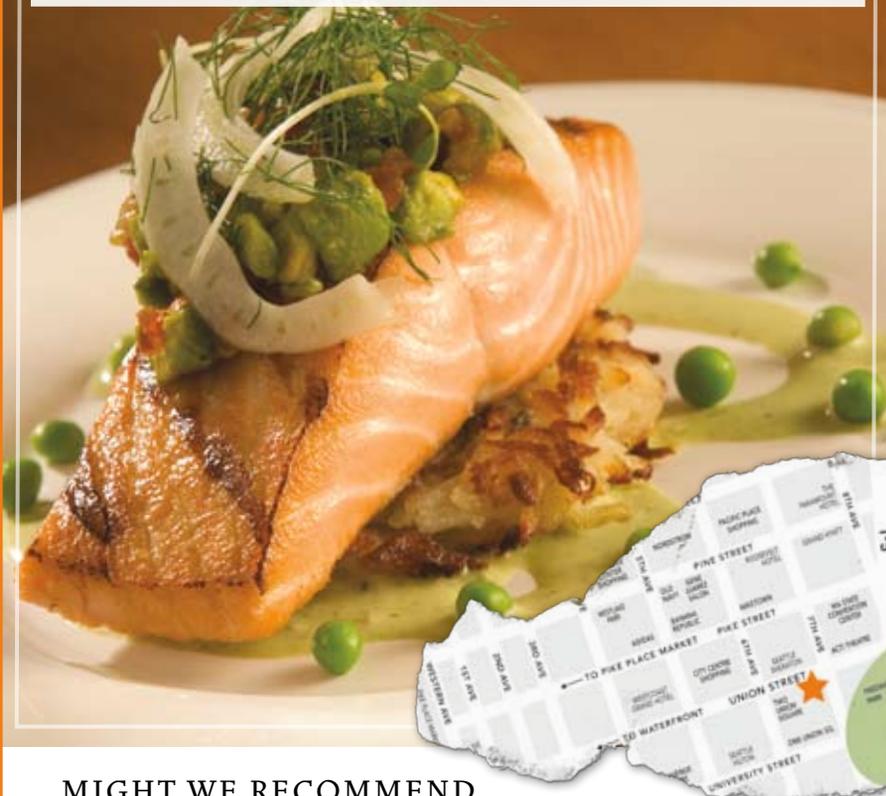
After wandering through the museum's outdoor sculpture garden, we return to the ocean to explore the myriad tide pools rich with anemones and mollusks and teeming with kids who giggle as the occasional wave licks their ankles.

From the promontory near the La Jolla Bridge Club, in Scripps Park, we watch triathletes swim north toward La Jolla Shores across La Jolla Cove; surfers peel across the face of 6-foot waves at Boomers Beach; and kayakers paddle in and out of large caves.

Come sunset, we return to our hotel to indulge in a superb example of California cuisine at the Grande Colonial's highly regarded restaurant, Nine-Ten. Chef Jason Knibb serves fare featuring locally sourced produce, bread and pasta. Susan starts with the hamachi sashimi, then tries a Hawaiian tuna-and-Dungeness-crab salad, followed by a pesto gnocchi she calls perfect. I savor a salad of baby beets with candied fennel and arugula, followed by a rich lobster risotto, and finish with a dessert of apple-butter crepes and vanilla-bean ice cream.

We walk off dinner along Prospect Street, enjoying the assortment of art

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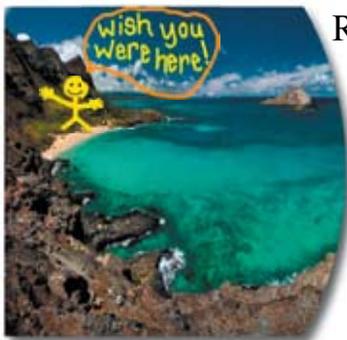
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galleries, boutiques, restaurants, bars and shops. As we return to our suite for the night, we hear the seals barking at the Children's Pool.

Sunday we try a surf lesson at La Jolla Shores, the broad sandy beach we'd spied across the cove. Carla, our surf instructor, is waiting for us at Surf Diva's pink canopy, and a group of six women are already in the water, making progress toward catching a wave.

After 20 minutes of sand-based instruction, we zip into 4mm wetsuits and head into the surf zone where the waves have broken and it's both easier and safer to ride a surfboard. Susan is a first-timer, so Carla steadies Susan's board as she paddles intensely for her first wave. When a wave laps the board, Carla gives a push and yells, "Up!" Susan takes a deep breath and pops up. By her third try, with Carla's tutelage, Susan is riding a wave.

The rest of Sunday is dedicated to Del Mar, 10 miles north of La Jolla. We park near 15th Street and buy picnic supplies at Harvest Ranch Market in the handsome Del Mar Plaza, window shopping along the way, then walk a block to Powerhouse Park, overlooking the ocean. A band of surfers sits offshore at the 15th Street surf break, waiting for the next set. We lunch in relative tranquility near the park's old smokestack and watch families play Frisbee and soccer on the sand. Del Mar is the perfect way to wind down our weekend.

Later in the afternoon, Susan and I head about 10 miles inland for a sunset hot air balloon ride down the coast and over the magnificent estates of nearby Rancho Santa Fe with balloon tour operator California Dreamin' Balloon Adventures.

Balloons are unfurled, and we and other passengers climb into baskets the size of Mini Coopers. Then, with a few loud blasts from the propane burners, the balloons swell and rise, their colors vibrant against the blue sky. Once we're airborne, the quiet is astounding. Floating with the wind is the most silent form of transport I have ever experienced: There is no hum of motor, no clink of gears, no whir of wheels on pavement or splash of paddle against sea. Even the sound of rushing wind is

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muted as we travel on its currents, in sync with the airstream around us.

We rise above greenhouses and neighborhood streets, and within minutes the ocean comes into view. We continue up to 3,000 feet, the long spells of blissful silence punctuated by an occasional whoosh as the pilot lights the propane burner. From our bird's-eye vantage, we can see all the places we've visited in the past three days: PB's Crystal Pier, La Jolla Cove and Shores, and the silhouette of the iconic smokestack at Powerhouse Park. We see the grandstands of the Del Mar Race-track and Fairgrounds, the city's hub of activity during the summer, when the racing season is under way and the county fair takes place. Farther out we can discern the skyline of downtown San Diego and the Coronado Islands off Mexico. Near and far float the other balloons, each carried along its own path on winds and thermals.

As the sun dips to the horizon, our captain releases air from the top of the balloon, and we gradually descend toward open fields in the interior of Del Mar. The van and trailer that dropped us off meets us. With a gentle bump we touch down and slide slowly across the rustling grass. The support team hops on, and their added weight brings us to a halt.

An hour later, the balloon and basket are packed and we are dropped back at Del Mar. Susan and I wind down over a relaxing meal at Epazote, one of the area's best steakhouses, with grand views of the Pacific. As I cut into a thick tenderloin paired with a succulent lobster tail, I recall our view of Del Mar from the air and the slogan for the Del Mar Racetrack, "Where the Turf Meets the Surf." I smile, wishing I could order a slice of Del Mar to go. ▲

Rob Dunton lives in Summerland, California, where he writes about adventure and travel.

GETTING THERE

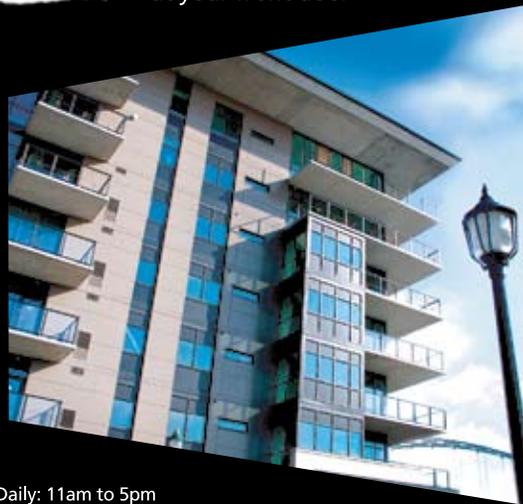


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