

SO CAL SO FUN

San Diego has long been high on my hit list of hot places to visit. For starters, it has an almost perfect climate. Stepping out of the airport after a very early morning flight from Denver was like slipping into a bubbling hot tub on a cold December day. There's nothing quite like those first few minutes in a place like Southern California - or 'SoCal' as they say locally...

BY DAVID J. WHYTE

WHAT ELSE TO DO

SAN DIEGO ZOO

So that was my golf encounters in this lovely part of the world but there's lots more to do in the San Diego area and number one on my list is the San Diego Zoo, famed for being the number one zoo in the world.

zoo.sandiegozoo.org

OLD TOWN

San Diego's Old Town is the area's oldest community, the first European settlement on the California coast. Quite touristy with lots of 'speciality' gift shops, it's worth taking the Old Town Trolley out here for a wander and maybe some tacos.

www.oldtownsandiegoguide.com

LA JOLLA

La Jolla (pronounced La Hoya) is a smart, seaside village near Torrey Pines, chock-full of chic galleries and upmarket restaurants. I didn't spend much time here apart from a quick stop to see the sea lions atop the cliffs - smelly, noisy creatures - but La Jolla struck me as being affluent and conservative.

lajollabythesea.com

WHERE TO EAT

CITY TACOS LA MESA

You'll want to sample some fine Mexican food down here. Put City Tacos (City Tacos La Mesa) into your Google Map and go! It's Mexican with an American slant.

citytacossd.com

CAFÉ COYOTE IN OLD TOWN

In the evening, try Café Coyote in the Old Town where the mojitos and fresh, frosty margaritas flow - not to mention 100 different types of tequila. This is more traditionally Mexican with a noisy, festive atmosphere.

www.cafecoyoteoldtown.com

BAR PINK IN NORTH PARK

For apres-dinner entertainment, Bar Pink in North Park is a hipster hangout with local bands playing most nights. It's laid-back, not pretentious and a great place to meet SoCal gals. Just saying...

www.barpink.com



OPENING PICTURE - PREVIOUS PAGE: Torrey Pines.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Torrey Pines; Taylormade; The Kingdom; Taylormade; The Kingdom; Del Mar beach.

Gliding down a mile-wide, 12-lane highway gilded with palm trees and glimpses of a sparkling Pacific Ocean, this is surely the leading edge of the American Dream, the 'Promised Land', a perfect place full of perfect people!

Well, maybe not quite.

I pulled into the Lodge at Torrey Pines where the carhops wear kilts and the bellboys look like those wicked 'wee' monkeys from the Wizard of Oz. From my room I had an expansive view of Torrey Pines South Course, venue to the 2021 US Open - and my round the following day.

In the evening, I drove up to Del Mar Beach where the 'surf meets the turf' and

all the beautiful people congregate to swim, sight-see, meet and eat. It's the iconic SoCal scene and on a beautifully sunny Friday evening, and there was no shortage of takers.

There are also no shortage of golf courses in this area either. From the town of Carlsbad to Tijuana across the Mexican border, the Greater San Diego area has in excess of 90 golf tracts, and top-of-the-leaderboard are the two 'munis' at Torrey Pines.

Torrey Pines South, with the swanky village of La Jolla in the distance, came up first when I visited. Of the two Torrey Pines Municipal golf courses, the South Course is the more illustrious, host to a dozen top tour events and (not far off now)

the 2021 US Open.

Perched high above the Pacific Ocean and open to all winds, there is something about Torrey that puts me in mind of Bandon Dunes, that uber-infamous set of courses up in Oregon. Americans tend to venerate such stark, elemental courses thinking perhaps they're akin to Scottish links. To me they lack the finesse and subtlety! But then I might be a tad bias towards my homeland.

Also, on the day in question, my A-game had gone AWOL and the South Course under any such circumstances, is a demanding drill-sergeant. You need your best shots, both long and short to cover the South's length

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(7,600 yards) and hit and hold its defiant greens that are firm and tricky to read.

The second course at Torrey Pines Municipal Golf Courses is the North, recently overhauled by Tom Weiskopf to the tune of \$12.6 million. “The greens are bigger, bunkers more strategic and a ton of trees taken down,” the marshal told me as we took a buggy tour after my round on the South.

“Basically, it's a brand new golf course with an altered routing to accentuate the closing holes and Pacific Ocean views.” The Par 3s are immense, none less than 200 yards while the 18th has been converted from a soft Par 5 to a spiteful 486-yard Par 4.

After Torrey, I needed comforting and it doesn't get any more comfortable than the Fairmont Grand Del Mar. Situated up in Carmel Valley, this is an exquisite Tuscan-type retreat, an opulent oasis where the high and mighty come for some downtime.

I played the 'Grand Golf Club' in the company of Shawn Cox, its director of golf and will forever think fondly of his companionship while here.

After the drubbing I'd endured at Torrey South, my ailing game suddenly leapt back to life. Shawn didn't give me much input and we both arrived at the same conclusion - I just needed to fire my hips ahead of my arms 'Hogan-esque' style. I've worked on this in the past but I've never made such sweet, effortless contact that simply 'collected' the ball on the way through!

And after another birdie at the 18th, I arrived back at the clubhouse anticipating a standing ovation from an admiring gallery. Instead, there were policemen with dogs and grey-suited goons talking up their sleeves,

skulking around the pot plants and azaleas.

“What's going on?” I whispered to Shawn thinking some dangerous animal had escaped San Diego Zoo!

“It's a POTUS,” he replied. “A POTUS?” I repeated, none the wiser still thinking 'escaped animal'. And it must be an extremely dangerous one to cause all this fuss.

“A Past President Of The United States!” Shawn clarified. “Ah! Clinton!” I immediately guessed, and indeed, it was! Bill was teeing up just as I was sinking that final birdie putt on the 18th. With all those pistol-packing goons going about, it was just as well I didn't shout.

The next day, I headed to a facility that was featured in the magazine recently and one that is akin to the greatest armoury of golf equipment - 'The Kingdom' where club-making maestros shape the clubs of our future.

The drive up to the town of Carlsbad let me see where many of golf's major equipment manufacturers are headquartered. Taylormade, Callaway and Cobra are all here while Titleist and Aldila, the shaft manufacturer are but a short drive away.

As you might have already guessed, my purpose was to visit Taylormade's somewhat furtive fitting centre grandly entitled 'The Kingdom'. For a princely fee, you can pitch up, be fully-fitted and come away with the perfect set of Taylormade golf clubs. Unlike Golf Vacations writer Darryl, who bought a set when he visited last year, I came away with a cup of coffee, but it was an interesting afternoon nevertheless.

Later that afternoon, I met up with an old pal, Pete Wlodkowski, who runs AmateurGolf.com from his Carlsbad base.

Pete and I usually meet at some top-drawer Scottish venue but he wanted to show me a course in his neighbourhood that was doing things a little 'differently'.

Overlooking US Interstate 5 stands Goat Hill Park Golf Course, an unassuming, rough-in-parts, pint-sized 18-holer surrounded by high-density/low-rent apartments, a laundromat, pizza parlours and auto body shops. Space is obviously at a premium in these parts and it feels like this little island of sanctity with its rolling hills and stately cypress trees just shouldn't be here. And it very nearly wasn't.

In 2014, Goat Hill and the local community made national headlines when they stopped yet another attempt to flatten these wooded, sandy hillocks and turn them into more condos and strip malls. Clothing magnate and local Oceanside resident, John Ashworth stepped forward with a team of locals and a couple of movie stars to save 'the Hill' for the community. And so they have! It's a great little course and keenly enjoyed by all who partake of it.

After that heartening little encounter, I moved accommodation to San Diego's downtown area and a cute little boutique pad called 'The Sofia', checked in and took a stroll up to 'Little Italy', a popular restaurant and bar district just north of downtown.



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
 Goat Hill Park Golf Course; Little Italy; US Navy at San Diego; Downtown San Diego; Hotel Del Coronado.



I was dining at The Kettle Room, a beer-pairing alehouse with a restaurant tucked in beside the mash tuns and beer kettles. In typical American fashion, they take something 'kinda weird' and turn it into something special. The food was great and the beer pairings were, well, worth getting over any initial hesitancy about drinking craft beers with good food. A beer that tastes like dessert, now, that was interesting!

The bridge over to Coronado looks precarious but the community's municipal course is a much more solid track.

The City of San Diego, somewhat surprisingly to me, is the eighth largest conurbation in the USA. Spread over several subdivisions, it doesn't seem like it. It's also home to the US Pacific Fleet with around 50 ships based here.

I drove across the bay to the resort community of Coronado. The bridge onto this long, sandy peninsula looks temporary, reminding me of the 'Hot Wheels' track my little brother used to play with. I kept my eyes firmly on the road ahead to avoid going over the side. I exaggerate of course, but it isn't a great bridge for those with vertigo.

At the other side, the town of Coronado is famous for its Hotel del Coronado, a grand edifice opened in 1888. More conveniently known as The Del, it is one of few surviving examples of wooden beach resort hotels and still the second largest wooden structure left standing in the United States.

At the time of opening The Del was largest resort hotel in the world and has hosted presidents, royalty, and celebrities of all sorts. Edward, Prince of Wales stayed here in the early 1920's and there was speculation that he first met the divorcee, Wallis Spencer, later known as Wallis Simpson, who lived in Coronado at the time and for whom he gave up the English throne (although both Edward and Wallis wrote in their memoirs that they met much later).

But it's greatest claim to fame in my estimation is as the backdrop for the 1958 comedy, "Some Like It Hot" starring Marilyn Monroe, Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon, considered the greatest all-time comedy film. It's definitely worth another look if even just to appreciate how Marilyn was such 'hot' property!

Unlike Torrey, Coronado Golf Course



SAN DIEGO INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

I'd felt great arriving at San Diego Airport a week earlier. Now I felt just as good to be leaving! I'm not saying my time in SoCal had been anything short of excellent. It's just that San Diego International Airport is only three miles northwest of downtown, a mere 10-minute drive so it's surely the easiest, quickest airport to access which meant my early morning departure was that much easier.
www.san.org

is more what you would expect from a local muni. Out on the bay, paddle boards mingle with battlecruisers while golfers parade up and down Coronado's flat, palm and cypress-lined fairways. It's an easy amble; beautiful in the early morning California sunshine and very busy. But then \$37 a round might account for that.

My two local golfing buddies had a taste for tequila, apparently particularly good in these parts.

More topographically challenging is Maderas Golf Club, up in the hill country north of San Diego. Winding over high rocky outcrops and descending to flat creek beds, this is Mountain Lion country if ever I encountered it. I guess they think the golf is not tough enough here so they've added rattlesnakes. There were warning signs not to go looking for balls in the deep canyons.

Because of those canyons, Maderas is very much a thinking course and I really enjoyed it for that. You have to study each hole rather than just blast off into the great

beyond. If you do, you will probably end up in the sage bushes with the rattlesnakes!

Hole 14 has to be one of the most difficult Par 5s in the whole San Diego area; long and uphill with a yawning canyon placed just ahead of the green, it is a monster.

The next day, I made sure to tuck away a large breakfast before taking on Steele Canyon, a 27-hole Gary Player complex. It brings together three distinctly different topographies; the Canyon is the most dramatic with lots of shot-making opportunities while the Ranch circles around an old farm and is fairly flat. I never played the Vineyard but it looked more pastoral weaving through woodlands, streams and vineyards along the valley floor.

I had a blast playing the Canyon. What I liked most was that there was just me, the birds, bees and ground squirrels plus lots of absolutely lovely blue flowers. I had the place to myself! It's much hotter further inland away from the cool Pacific breezes and I guess SoCal residents just don't 'do heat'. ☺

LEFT PAGE - TOP TO BOTTOM: Coronado Golf Club; Steele Canyon Golf Club's signature hole; Fairmont Grand Del Mar.

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