

The Other San Diego

Written by Written by David M. Brown

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For Valley families, one of the hottest places to entertain the entire clan—with everything from surf lessons to spa treatments—is San Diego North.



The San Diego everyone knows is SeaWorld, the attractions of Balboa Park (think San Diego Zoo), the central beaches and other well-known venues like the Wild Animal Park.

Many, though, are finding that the communities north of San Diego, including La Jolla, Oceanside and Escondido, offer exciting family-friendly opportunities as well. Many of the finest resorts in Southern California, with full family-oriented schedules, are located in San Diego North as well as a little farther up the Pacific Coast Highway in Laguna Beach and Dana Point.

"San Diego North offers a variety of water activities that individuals and families can enjoy," says Hilary Townsend, former director of public relations for the San Diego North Convention & Visitors Bureau. "Here, there's always something new to enjoy." For example, Oceanside has the longest wooden pier on the West Coast plus great surfing and The California Surf Museum. Once you get hungry, try the 101 Café—the oldest continuously operating restaurant along landmark U.S. Highway 101.

In Carlsbad, at Legoland, the world's first Lego-themed water park features a variety of attractions including Build-A-Raft, where children can help custom build a Lego variety, and enjoy several water slides, a 45-foot-tall tower playground and two wading areas. Adjacent to Legoland is the new child-focused Sea Life Aquarium, which features more than 50 sharks from 14 different species including a scalloped hammerhead pup. Of course, farther down the road in world-famous La Jolla is the Birch Aquarium, showcasing discoveries of Scripps oceanography explorers through displays and touchable tide pools with anemones, hermit crabs, mussels and sea plants.

At Encinitas—the "Poinsettia Capital of the World"—the San Diego Botanic Gardens has added the Hamilton Children's Garden; here, you can discover the art of making music from natural elements as well as learn about farm-fresh cooking through the on-site garden. Two other nature-centered activities your family might enjoy are the San Elijo Lagoon Nature Center and the Butterfly Vivarium. Also nearby is the Lux Art Institute; at the institute, the "Kids-In-Residence Program" provides children the opportunity to experiment with techniques and materials and observe a professional artist at work.

People travel from everywhere to snorkel and surf at La Jolla Cove and La Jolla Shores. Kayaking through the clear water at Cave Canyon (previously known as Seven Caves) is also a can't-miss aquatic adventure. You can learn here, too, at the Surf Diva Surf School; its "Kid's Party Wave" provides children the opportunity to study surfing with peers.

Landmark Torrey Pines State Reserve, between La Jolla and Del Mar, showcases unique evergreens—one of only two places in the world where you can find them. Enjoy eight miles of scenic trails, a nature center and guided nature walks on select days. Bluffs overlook the Pacific, where families might observe "green flash" on the horizon before sunrise or at sunset, as well as dolphins and seasonal gray whale migrations.

If you stay at the adjacent Lodge at Torrey Pines, you can hike to the beach through moderately challenging shore trails. Adjacent to the 18th hole of the landmark golf course, the 6.5-acre resort embodies the spirit of the brothers Greene, whose California Craftsman-style was inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement, popular in the latter part of the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries. "The Lodge at Torrey Pines has an incredible sense of place, a historic and architectural awareness that is simply unparalleled," says Steve Pelzer, executive vice president of sales and marketing, for the 170-room superstar resort. "There's nothing gimmicky here, nothing trendy. If it isn't true to the California experience, you won't find it here."

Other resorts in North San Diego have many activities the family will enjoy. At the 396-room Ritz-Carlton, Laguna Niguel, the children can participate in the new Jean-Michel Cousteau's "Ambassadors of the Environment," enriching them with natural experiences through eco-excursions, games, multimedia presentations, discussions and activities. The list includes cooking with organically grown ingredients, snorkeling and other programs. "The launch of Ambassadors of the Environment demonstrates our strong commitment to our community and our planet," says General Manager Bruce Brainerd. "The Ritz-Carlton, Laguna Niguel is the first luxury resort in the continental United States to offer a comprehensive program that provides guests the opportunity to become advocates of protecting and preserving the planet for future generations through social responsibility and stewardship."

In addition, because of its location to Dana Point (some say it's a reference "landmark" for whales), the resort also offers a year-round watching. Dolphins are also frequently seen, and tide pools are nearby. And, the children will enjoy boogie-boarding, paddle-surfing and other activities at Salt Creek Beach below the 160-foot cliffs on which the resort is magnificently perched. Everyone in the family will enjoy the sun setting into the Pacific from the cliff terrace overlooking the beach.

And, just north along the Pacific Coast Highway, the 250-room Montage Laguna Beach, known for its Craftsman-style design and 20,000-sq.-ft. spa, has plenty of programs for young people up to age 17. For teens, each day features activities like beach bocce ball, stand-up paddle board and kayak excursions or plein-air painting lessons. Between water activities and visiting legendary aquariums and museums, looks like the only thing left to do is find time to charge those cameras and rest those feet.



To Learn More:

Lodge at Torrey Pines Hotel & Spa www.lodgetorrey.pines.com.

Montage Laguna Beach www.montagelagunabeach.com.

The Ritz-Carlton, Laguna Niguel www.ritzcarlton.com.

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