

# SAN DIEGO RATES HIGH IN FAMILY FUN

No shortage of activities to drain your travel savings as sun, surf await

MHAIRRI WOODHALL

San Diego is renowned for its laid-back beach vibe, vibrant art, culture and dining scenes, and near-perfect weather. Families like mine flock to the coastal oasis to soak up the sun, play in the surf and drain our travel savings on the southern California attractions topping our children's wish list. Having spent four days exploring the area's most sought-after sights, we've returned rested, recharged and ready to recap all of our highlights.

## OCEANFRONT AMUSEMENT

San Diego's Belmont Park is a dazzling kaleidoscope of sights, scents and sounds. On any given weekend, the lively outdoor carnival on Mission Beach is abuzz with amped-up candy-floss-faced kids trailed by parents, laden with mid-way game loot, bopping balloons and the day's refuse of half-eaten snacks, and sweatshirts made redundant by SoCal's warm afternoon sun. My husband Curt and our daughter Brooklyn are in their element. Unfazed by the surrounding chaos, they flit from game to game, shelling out fivers for the thrill of a win. Forty American dollars for three garishly coloured plush mice? I try not to think about the exchange rate. While small in stature, Belmont Park packs in the fun and rakes in the dough at \$56 per person for an unlimited ride pass. Of the 22 rides and attractions, Brooklyn favoured the free-falling Mic Drop, racing Go-Karts and Belmont's iconic Giant Dipper Roller Coaster. Post-play recovery is on San Diego's largest oceanfront rooftop patio, Cannonball. The Pacific Rim-inspired



LEGOLAND California Resort is paradise for LEGO-loving families, with attractions geared for different age groups. CURT WOODHALL

restaurant, perched over Mission Beach, is well known for its sushi, sunsets and refreshing craft cocktails — all welcome delights after corn dogs and carnival games.

## ANIMAL ADVENTURES

The legendary San Diego Zoo is arguably the city's top family-friendly attraction. At 100 acres, it's a botanical behemoth, offering animal enthusiasts the chance for a fleeting glimpse of a staggering 12,000-plus rare and endangered creatures. Fuzzy, fierce and friendly, we saw them all. Viewing huge hippopotamuses — and puny pygmies — gangly giraffes, cuddly koalas, king cobras, California condors, lions, tigers and bears, Brooklyn's David Attenborough-accented narration created a more authentic safari experi-

ence and kept spirits light while navigating the seemingly-endless exhibits. To fuel the 10,000 steps needed to view the zoo, we first brunchd at Café 21. Touted as one of San Diego's most innovative restaurants, the small-plate, farm-to-fork Gaslamp eatery is a sumptuous staple for epicures and on Instagram. Our meal was breathtaking in taste and presentation — from the scratch-made crumpets and banana caramel Dutch pancake to the potato galette and short rib omelette. And the barista beverages, including the vegan rose-syrup Trained Dragon that I ordered, are works of art.

## LEGO MANIA

Beyond the beaches, LEGOLAND California Resort is the biggest draw for families visiting Carlsbad. Our last trip here was when Brooklyn was two, and we spent most of our time at the Duplo Village Playtown playground and Swabbie's Deck splash park. Seven-plus years later, it's all about thrill rides and the gift shop. We did enjoy viewing the incredible animated LEGO models and landmarks via the Coastal Cruise through Miniland USA, Unikitty's Disco Drop and Emmet's Flying Adventure Ride, a full-dome virtual LEGO movie experience as well. LEGOLAND's lunch options are surprisingly robust, ranging from smokehouse barbecue to a ramen joint, aptly named Everything Ramen. I even found some healthy protein-packed grab-and-

go snacks to sustain our energy. We had to make our theme park reservation well in advance, and while the weather wasn't water park worthy, it looks like fun (for an extra cost) if you're visiting late spring through early fall. It's also advisable to check legoland.com before arrival for an updated list of maintenance-related ride closures.

## RELAXING RESORTS

Exploring San Diego's theme parks and attractions is exhilarating and exhausting. As parents, we embrace the highs and lows of a packed itinerary for our children — creating lasting memories to inspire future trips for their children. As such, I always opt for accommodation that encourages relaxation, ideally with poolside service, to counterbalance our daily adrenalin-inducing, fun-filled adventures. We found refuge at the San Diego Mission Bay Resort for a portion of our trip. Brooklyn loved the large swimming pool, larger-than-life lawn games, live music and marshmallow roasting. And, with spring rates starting from \$207 per night, my husband was smitten as well.

Our splurge-stay was in Carlsbad, at the heavenly Park Hyatt Aviara Resort, Golf Club & Spa. Room rates are considerably higher for the completely reimagined, five-diamond property (from \$592 per night in March); however, the exquisite experience far surpasses the price point. During our glorious 24 hours here, Brooklyn spent half her time underwater, dancing to the in-pool music, while Curt and I swapped between life-guard duty and lounging at the adults-only pool. Dinner at the resort's new Ember & Rye's vintage steak and seafood restaurant was also a treat.

Before returning home, we booked our required pre-arrival COVID test at the COVID Clinic (covidclinic.org), which has more than 100 drive-thru locations across California and was easy to book online. I then completed our family's health questionnaire on the ArriveCAN travel App.

For more destination information, visit [www.arrivalstravel.com](http://www.arrivalstravel.com).

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