

# San Diego could indeed be 'America's finest city'

Author of the article:

[Chris Nelson](#) • For The Calgary Herald

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The Gaslamp Quarter is the place to be with hundreds of restaurants, pubs, theatres, galleries and shops. Courtesy, John Bahu, San Diego Scenics jpg

If indeed it's always darkest before the dawn, then that moment arrived for San Diego a half-century ago.

It was back in 1972 to be exact, that civic morale was at its lowest, having just lost out to Miami in the battle to host the upcoming Republican National Convention.

There were many reasons: a bribery scandal involving local politicians, planned student protests against then-president Richard Nixon, and construction delays to the would-be venue. The air had come out of San Diego's civic balloon big time.

So, if the world hands you lemons then why not make lemonade? This is exactly what the city's mayor, Pete Wilson, did by coining the slogan 'America's Finest City,' a moniker that has stood the test of time.

Hey, maybe he was right, after all. Because there are few finer places to spend quality time in the U.S. than in this most southerly of west coast cities, sitting only a few miles from the Mexican border and blessed with a quite wonderful climate in which the temperature sits all year comfortably between 10C and 24C, while locals can expect only 43 days of rain annually.

And though San Diego's population is roughly the same as Calgary's, the city packs a lot of tourism wallop, encompassing a host of distinct districts, each one with its unique charm.



On the Mission Beach boardwalk in San Diego. Photo, Marina Nelson jpg

For our trip, we picked two – the famous oceanfront playground of Mission Beach and the historic Gaslamp Quarter in the heart of downtown.

The Bahia Resort Hotel, with its wonderful waterfront location, has been the standout tourism location in Mission Bay since opening back in 1953. However, it was the arrival in the neighbourhood of the world-famous SeaWorld theme park – with its killer whales, dolphins, sea lions, belugas, sharks and

penguins – that cemented the Bahia’s reputation as a destination hotel, in addition to backstopping the entire Mission Beach area, as it grew into the largest manmade park of its kind in the U.S.

There are miles of wonderful, sheltered sandy beaches; the calm waters perfect for a host of activities – the Action Sports rental shop adjacent to the Bahia provides kayaks, paddle boards and sailing lessons for any eager enthusiast, just don’t get too enthusiastic and drift off into the Pacific Ocean. (Don’t pass under any bridge and you’ll be fine).



Relax in your private pod on the private beach at the Bahia Hotel grounds. Photo, Marina Nelson jpg

For those who desire some further afield fun on the water, there is a gaggle of local whale-watching operations. We chose the family-run San Diego Whale Watch, a 20-minute walk from the hotel – for a two-and-a-half-hour tour in search of the great mammals. Sightings aren’t guaranteed but the odds are in your favour – gray whales being the most common sight in March, with the giant blue whales arriving a few months later.

For dining out, the almost five-kilometre-long Mission Beach boardwalk offers a host of eateries and pubs, with a preponderance of pizza and taco establishments. And for something upscale and romantic, the Bahia’s Dockside 1953 can’t be topped with its open-air tables, some complete with mini fire pits, offering gorgeous, unobstructed views across the bay.



Fine dining al fresco at Dockside 1953. Photo, Marina Nelson jpg

The big drawback of booking two hotel stays is the hassle of getting between locations. But this city's so nicely compact that a simple 15-minute cab or Uber ride is likely the most time and corresponding money it takes.

This is how we easily arrived downtown at the lovely Sofia Hotel, located on the edge of the historic Gaslamp Quarter of San Diego, a downtown oasis for those who love nightlife, theatre, cocktail lounges and wicked dive bars.

The Sofia, as far away from a dive as you can imagine (visiting one is fun, sleeping in one isn't quite so appealing), has a history of its own, set in a 1927 gothic-revival building at First and Broadway and offering in-room spa services, bike rentals and weekend walking tours of the district.

It's also just close enough for keen walkers to make the trek on foot to the cultural oasis that is Balboa Park. (As the walk there is uphill, most sensible folk will take a taxi or a bus.)

Balboa does indeed have something for everyone: 17 top-rated museums catering to every taste – our favourite bring the wonderful Mingei International Museum with its collection of folk art and design from across the world – along with Japanese, rose and desert gardens, plus gorgeous architecture throughout its massive 1,200 acres. It is indeed one of the most iconic city parks in North America.



Balboa Park is 1,200 acres of museums, gardens, parks and trails in San Diego. Photo, Marina Nelson jpg

Meanwhile, for the child in all of us, there is the world-famous San Diego Zoo on Balboa's perimeter – the perfect book-end to an earlier visit to SeaWorld, to gawk at a whole different set of exotic critters in as close to natural surroundings as any manmade structure allows.

The Zoo, which pioneered open-air, cage-less exhibits to recreate naturalistic animal habitats, now plays host to more than 3,700 rare and endangered animals, as well as a huge botanical collection of more than 700,000 plants. It attracts more than four million visitors a year – more than any other U.S. zoo.

Yes, the city's worked hard to live up to its grandiose claim of being America's Finest City. So much so that the huge disappointment of 1972 is just a quaint memory today.



Exhibition: Pinatas: The High Art of Celebration at Mingei Museum in Balboa Park, San Diego. Photo, Marina Nelson jpg