

ONE TO 101



CRUISING OUR HISTORIC COASTAL HIGHWAYS

• BY MELISSA BRANDZEL

"Old Town San Diego"

To commemorate *American Road's* fifteenth anniversary this year, we're going all the way back to another historical "fifteen"—the 1500s, where the history of the city we know as San Diego began, in an area now called Old Town.

Stroll through the calm, grassy plaza of Old Town San Diego State Historic Park, and it might seem as though the place had always been this way. In truth, this pocket of San Diego, known as "the birthplace of California," wasn't always so peaceful...or so green. A couple hundred years ago, it was a dusty, cactus-laden hotbed of activity: town troublemakers dueling on horseback; bull and bear baiting contests; party-loving dons planning revolutions...hardly a bastion of art and slow charm.

That was then. But within the mile-long by half-mile-wide area of Old Town San Diego today still lie its secrets and its rich history—all waiting to be discovered by modern-day explorers.

Whose Land Is It Anyway?

Back in the day—somewhere around twelve thousand to thirteen thousand years ago—the Kumeyaay made their home here, near the San Diego River. In 1542, Portuguese explorer Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, working on behalf of Spain, sailed into San Diego Bay, befriended the Kumeyaay, had a look around, dubbed the place San Miguel, and took off a few days later. It wasn't until 1769 that the action really began to unfold as Father Junípero Serra and Gaspar de Portolà arrived from Spain to found missions and presidios here. The area was renamed San Diego and became part of New Spain. It was the first European settlement in California.

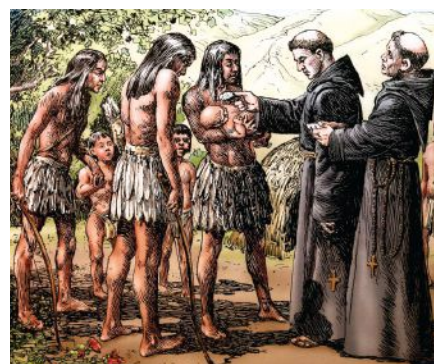
Father Serra, leading the charge to bring Christianity to the area, built a mission here called San Diego de Alcalá (later relocated to a site about eight miles northeast), the first in a string of twenty-one missions stretching from San Diego to Sonoma that became known as El Camino Real, or, loosely translated, "The King's Highway." High on a hill overlooking what is now Old Town, the mission site soon included a presidio (fort)



US HIGHWAY 101 travels from Olympia, Washington, to Los Angeles via Oregon. Historically the route extended south to San Ysidro, California, at the border of Mexico.

and a pueblo (town) built by the Spanish military. Residents began cultivating gardens down in Old Town and—perhaps tired of trekking up and down the steep hill—built homes there as well. A town was born.

In 1821, Mexico gained independence from Spain, and so began Mexican rule in Old Town. The locals built a community of adobes, and by 1835, the town officially became El Pueblo de San Diego. They began trading goods with foreign ships—mostly cow hides (so prevalent they were nicknamed "California banknotes") and tallow (rendered animal fat used in soap,



A LIGHT HEART: Conceived in 1986, constructed in 1990, and dedicated in 1991, San Diego's iconic Gaslamp Quarter Archway brightens nights with a combination of neon, incandescent, and fluorescent lights. [Above] Father Junípero Serra sought to enlighten the area, too. He founded California's first Catholic mission on the site of San Diego in 1769.

candles, makeup, and more) from the plethora of ranches that popped up in the area. The brief Rancho period came to an end in 1848 as Mexico lost the Mexican-American War and California became part of the United States—with Old Town the first American settlement in California.

Just a couple of decades later, the once-thriving Old Town began to disintegrate. Drought and flood, the Civil War, and boom-and-bust cycles took their toll on the area. In the late 1860s, Alonzo Horton started building New Town San Diego a few miles away, moving the center of government and commerce there as well, and much of the population of Old Town followed. A fire ravaged Old Town in 1872, destroying many of its buildings.

But all was not lost. Preservation efforts were launched—with a spurt in the early 1900s, and then again in the 1950s and 1960s. California State Parks helped return the area to its former glory, creating Old Town San Diego State Historic Park in 1968, and listing it as a National Register Historic District and a state park in 1970. Only three of the original buildings remain—Mason Street Schoolhouse, La Casa de Machado y Stewart, and La Casa de Carrillo (now part of Presidio Golf Course), each of which had to be restored from partial ruin. The remaining sites we see today were reconstructed to look as they did back in 1821–1872.

Everything Old Is New Again

There's a lot to see in Old Town—more than meets the eye at first glance. Perhaps the best place to start is at the Robinson-Rose Visitor Information Center in Old Town State Historic Park. See a scale model of the town circa 1872, grab a map, and get a guided tour of the sites and history from a volunteer tour guide in period dress. Each site can be explored in a short amount of time, and historical information is provided via plaques and brochures, so you always know what you're seeing.

Check out the McCoy House, chock full of engaging exhibits on the fascinating history of Old Town. There's the San Diego Union Building—the editor's office and shop where the *San Diego Union* newspaper was printed beginning in 1868.



HOLY ROLLER: Located inside the reconstructed 1851 Colorado House Hotel, the Wells Fargo History Museum contains a red-and-yellow Concord coach from 1867 [above] and a recreation of a Wells Fargo agent's office [right]. The first Wells Fargo agent in Old Town was John F. Damon, co-editor of the *San Diego Herald*. He eventually repented of the banking and newspaper businesses and became a reverend in Seattle.



SAUCE AND SPICE: Billing itself as the place "Where History Lives and the Fiesta Lasts Forever," Fiesta de Reyes is comprised of nineteen locally owned specialty shops, three distinct restaurants, and the boutique overnighiter that is the ten-room Cosmopolitan Hotel [left]. One of its most charming icons is the Margarita Fountain [below], which is graced with fish-bowl-size glasses of the famous frozen drink.





SAINTS AND SOLDIERS: [Above and right] Mormon Battalion Historic Site honors the Latter-day Saint men and women who served the US Army during the Mexican–American War. Equipped at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, in August of 1846, they marched nearly two thousand miles, passing through Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Tucson, Arizona, before arriving in San Diego on January 29, 1847.



ONE WHALEY OF A HOUSE: Constructed in 1857 by California merchant-turned-Whig-politician Thomas Whaley, the Greek Revival-style Whaley House was more than the first brick home in San Diego. It contained Whaley's general store, and the second courthouse, while an upstairs room was outfitted to become San Diego's first commercial theatre. All of these areas have been accurately restored to their period splendor.



La Casa de Estudillo, a former social and political center of San Diego that's now a National Historic Landmark, features a supersize outdoor adobe *horno* (oven). Other highlights include the Seeley Stable, with wagons, carriages, ranching tools, and a couple of real donkeys; the Colorado House, aka the Wells Fargo History Museum, which houses a genuine stagecoach; and the old courthouse, with a teeny-tiny jail in the backyard. When it's time for a rest, pop into Old Town Jerky and Root Beer or the 1860s-inspired General Store for a treat, and just relax on a bench in the park for a while, taking in the scene.

Living history demonstrations, led throughout each month by costumed volunteers, are fun: woodworking, printing, soap making, tintype photography, blacksmithing from a functional shop, and more. The park hosts a variety of holiday celebrations and summertime "Stagecoach Days." On Saturday or Sunday, you can watch shopkeepers pull toffee, hand-crank ice cream, or make pottery.

Street artists are scattered about town with their easels, painting, while stores offer goods ranging from pottery to pewter to candles; there is also an artisan market on Harney Street on weekends. Fiesta de Reyes, a breezy outdoor complex, features a variety of higher-end shops, restaurants, occasional live music, and The Cosmopolitan, a renovated hotel from 1869 that was once a social center and stagecoach stop. For inexpensive, colorful souvenirs, Old Town Market has dozens of stalls with kitschy American, Mexican, and American Indian products.

Outside of the State Historic Park, in the village of Old Town, there are more points of interest. There's the Mormon Battalion Historic Site, where you can learn about the volunteer Mormon army that marched to Old Town in 1847 at the request of President James Polk—a historic tale told here via Disneyland-style sets and films (you can even pan for gold, in a nod to the region's Gold Rush days).





There's Victorian Heritage Park, which contains six homes built in the 1890s, plus San Diego's oldest synagogue; the Whaley House, dubbed "the most haunted house in America"; Adobe Chapel; Immaculate Conception Church; El Campo Cemetery; the Sheriff's Museum (great for kids); an information center for the village of Old Town; and, of course, an assortment of shops and restaurants.

Bypass the typical cheesy trinkets, San Diego T-shirts, and serapes with football team logos and try some Mexican candies or handmade tortillas instead. Hike or drive from Old Town San Diego State Historic Park up the hill to take in the views at Presidio Park and visit the Junípero Serra Museum on weekends (the fort is long gone).

Be sure to visit during the day, as most of the historical sites close in the late afternoon; they're run mostly by volunteers, whose schedules vary, so be aware that a few sites may be closed at the time you happen to stop by. Even if you miss a couple of buildings, there's still plenty to explore—simply move on to the next site.

History buffs will get their fill here, no doubt. For others, the colorful stories just might be the most interesting part of it all: the criminal who broke out of jail and beelined across the street to the saloon to buy everyone a round of drinks; the interesting multiple uses for prickly pear cactus; the legendary poacher who finally got caught and was given the plum job of game warden instead of being incarcerated; the "kit house" that was imported by a wealthy family and then accidentally built inside out; the sheriff and his deputy who had a boxing match each morning, with the loser having to cook breakfast. These are the little gems that really make Old Town San Diego history come to life in living color. ♥

MELISSA BRANDZEL is a freelance writer and editor based in Los Angeles. She is also the copy editor for **AMERICAN ROAD**. Gaslamp archway photo © Susanne Neal. Wells Fargo History Museum Concord wagon and telegraph agent office by the author. Fiesta de Reyes Margarita Fountain by the author. Cosmopolitan Hotel © Giuseppemasci. Mormon Battalion Historic Site statue courtesy Wayne Hsieh; visitor center façade courtesy Ken Lund. Whaley House interior © Irina88w; exterior and Historic Route 101 road sign © Mariusz Jurgielewicz. Closing photo of La Casa de Estudillo © Adeliapenguin.



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