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A Natural Wonder

Outdoors and In, San Diego is Alive with Activity.

A year-round land of surf and sun, just an hour from the Mexican border, San Diego is a splashy, youthful icon of Southern California's good life. Every spring break, tourists flock to the San Diego Zoo and SeaWorld and make a run for straw hats and tequila in Tijuana.

But on a reunion trip last month with two of my former college roommates, we were after the unhyped quiet of the outdoors and a laid-back neighborhood feel. Forget Shamu and LEGOLAND; we said hello to spa treatments, local wine bars, and breezy beach hikes in pristine state reserves.

Just north of the city is the relaxed seaside community of Carlsbad. Perched serenely on a cliff overlooking Batiquitos Lagoon is the Four Seasons Resort Aviara. It was the ideal spot to make our tranquil—and pampering—home base. Set in a nature preserve filled with birds and lined with palms and eucalyptus, the grounds are crisscrossed with walking trails.

Our suite was large, with cushy beds, a private balcony facing the lagoon, and a comfortable sitting area (all of Aviara's rooms got face lifts last year). A must-see in this calm oasis is the spa: 15,000 square feet of newly renovated treatment rooms, whirlpools, sauna and steam rooms, and a solarium lounge. The Four Seasons in One treatment, which includes a vigorous peppermint scrub (be warned—it's a chiller); a warming body wrap; expertly executed lomi lomi, Thai, and Swedish massage; and an herbal scalp rub was enough of a muscle-melter to make me lose all concept of space and time.

It was hard at times to extricate ourselves from the warm embrace of the resort. (One evening, we were too tired to go out, so we ordered room service from the simple but excellent California Bistro downstairs.) But we were happy when we did venture out.

Heading south toward downtown San Diego, we encountered a string of cool outdoor offerings, including Carlsbad's beautifully uncrowded beaches—where we watched small pods of surfers dance on the waves—and relaxed small-town scene. Here, locals played chess over steaming mugs of chai, and an old-school diner called Mariah's, on Carlsbad Village Drive, showed itself to be the breakfast hot spot. The sunny back room is cheery and decorated with old "Drink Coca-Cola" signs, ornate mirrors, and flowered wallpaper you'd find at your grandmother's house; made-to-order omelet options range from avocado and alfalfa sprouts to bacon and cheddar, accompanied by fresh, chunky salsa. On our visit, locals and out-of-towners made up the diverse, all-ages crowd, and free refills of strong Colombian coffee helped fuel us through a heavy stack of weekend papers.

A big local attraction is the Carlsbad Company Stores, an exhaustive collection of outlet shops in a typical SoCal-outdoor-mall setting, where shoppers descend en masse. If you poke around there, don't forget to look



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uphill to the famous Flower Fields, which explode in April and May with 50 acres of blooming Tecolote ranunculus flowers. It costs \$8 to stroll among the flowers—worth it when all the fields are in bloom. But you can take excellent snapshots from the residential neighborhood just above the gardens.

On our second day, we pulled over on Highway 101 to spend a couple of hours hiking through Torrey Pines State Reserve, which is home to 10,000 of the rarest trees in the United States (these days, the *Pinus torreyana* exists only here and on Santa Rosa Island, one of the Channel Islands off Santa Barbara).

With a distinctively windswept posture, these trees are particularly fragile because of their uniqueness and sensitivity to environmental conditions.

The park hosts guide nature walks on weekends, and friendly park aides in the visitors center are happy to give advice on hiking trails and discuss the site's history. We started with a brief climb up High Point Trail to take in panoramas of the reserve and the ocean beyond, then descended along the Razor Point Trail to the sheer-drop cliffs at Yucca Point overlook.

Blazes of orange California poppies, flowering yucca, and other wildflowers colored the dramatically eroded landscape. What I did not expect to find here were the coastal badlands, characterized by deep gorges and rippled red earth. It seemed as if a piece of South Dakota's Badlands had been lifted up and plunked down in Southern California, juxtaposed against the startling aquamarine gush of the Pacific. For a close-up of where desert meets ocean, hikers can trek down to the beach from the north entrance. (At the time of our visit, the Beach Trail to Flat Rock at the southern end of the reserve was closed because of erosion.)

On the way out to the highway, we happened upon Roberto's, a family-owned Mexican place on Carmel Valley Road in Del Mar. A line of people snaking out onto the sidewalk was a sign that the fish tacos and the burritos were top rate (and a steal, at about \$2 apiece).

Refueled, we cruised past the neighborhood of La Jolla—famous for its dramatic coastline, popular for biking and kayaking—and arrived in downtown San Diego, ready to survey the scene.

San Diego has a lot going on in the spring, including the start of the Padres' baseball season and this month's San Diego International Film Festival. And while it's a behemoth, Balboa Park is a 1,200-acre cultural institution and a must-see, with such top attractions as the San Diego Zoo, Old Globe Theatre, and San Diego Museum of Art. Most of the park's gardens are free and open year-round. For a less hectic way to enjoy the botanical gem's rolling lawns and flowers, bring a picnic and pass the afternoon under the shaded umbrella of a towering eucalyptus tree.

The city has become known for its theater, with plenty of Broadway hits making their first appearances here, including "Thoroughly Modern Millie," "Into the Woods," and "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels" (ending Sunday at the Old Globe is the world premiere of "Himself and Nora," a musical about James Joyce, and still playing is "Vincent in Brixton," which won London's Olivier Award in 2003). The historic Gaslamp Quarter has seen a revival, with offerings such as the San Diego Symphony and the San Diego Opera and theatergoers taking advantage of new restaurants and bars.

"After many years of struggling to gain a culinary place, the face of San Diego is changing," said Pamela Wischkaemper, a food consultant who handles restaurant openings in the city. "There is a big influx of young chefs in town"—everywhere from CafŽ Chloe in downtown's long-dormant East Village to the forthcoming Jack's in La Jolla and up the coast to Escondido

at Asia-Vous.

Indeed, we found that exploring the restaurant renaissance neighborhood by neighborhood was the best way to spot these superstars. Between downtown and the Gaslamp district is Caf  Cerise, where chef Jason Seibert, formerly of Spago Maui, offers European-influenced California plates; in La Jolla, seafood at Fresh and fusion tapas at Roppongi rule; and Hillcrest has Region, an unpretentious yet sophisticated restaurant that serves what chefs Michael Stebner and Allyson Colwell call "Southern California comfort food." You'll find, as we did, that this is the ideal way to wrap up a weekend seeking out San Diego's comfort zone.

TRAVELER'S TASTE

A Region worth exploring in Southern California.

On a quiet block in San Diego's lively and eclectic Hillcrest section, there's a little restaurant that I wish I could call my neighborhood hangout. Its name is Region.

With a small menu that changes daily according to what the chefs find at local farms, Michael Stebner and Allyson Colwell's fresh, modern interpretation of "Southern California comfort food" is a real find.

Bright, contemporary paintings of fire-colored pears and barn-wall close-ups hang across from dark wood cabinets filled with ceramic souffle dishes shaped like roosters, ducks, and chickens. The color palette is forward-thinking; the walls are painted in brick red, pear green, robin's-egg blue, wheat, and olive. Dim lighting sets the mood. If there were such a thing as chic country kitchen, this would be it.

Two friends and I recently stopped in for dinner and were met with excellent service from a friendly, accommodating young waitstaff. We arrived an hour early for our reservation, but the hostess found a way to seat us in record time while we busied ourselves with aperitifs in the comfortable lounge area. The owners' ethos of fresh, seasonal foods is found even in the cocktails: The last of winter's sweet tangerines were used to make the house's fruity spin on the mojito.

We started with a plate of oil-cured olives, country bread, and braised greens—still-crunchy warm Swiss chard—prepared with garlic and parmesan. The wine list—or "juice list," as the restaurant refers to it—favored California selections as well as choice bottles from around the world, including a Laurent Miquel Nord Sud Viognier Vin de Pays 2003. Recommended by our server, the wine had refreshing apricot flavors and a clean finish.

After those mouth-pleasers, we moved on to share several plates. From the pasta menu, we tried beet risotto, which was served topped with sliced baby beets—not too sweet—that added an earthy finish to the rice, complemented with a touch of parmesan. The pappardelle with peas, spinach, and crumbled goat cheese kept its flavors light, anchored just enough by the cheese's creamy consistency. As an entree, grilled black bass came beautifully browned (though slightly rare in the middle), presented on a bed of half-pureed black-eyed peas with sliced carrots, rutabaga, and fennel, which all added a nicely contrasting texture.

Even after that stellar lineup of well-prepared, innovative dishes, our desserts, created by dessert chef Jack Fisher, managed to steal the show. A generous serving of dense chocolate coffee gelato was thick and fudgy, light on the coffee and round in flavor like chocolate pudding. We chose to pair it with a dish of caramel panna cotta and blood orange; to our delight, it worked beautifully. The panna cotta was more pure cream than caramel ("There is an entire cow in that bowl," my friend keenly observed), leaving

a buttery feel on the lips and a fullness in the mouth. The whole creation was topped by chewy, candied blood orange in a light, filmy syrup. To our surprise, it was all far from gimmicky—and ended up tasting simply excellent.

Region, 3671 Fifth Ave., San Diego. 619-299-6499. Tuesday-Friday 6-10 p.m., Saturday 5:30-10. Dinner for two with a glass of wine apiece, \$80.

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