



USA

San Diego's Got it!

Article and photography by Steve Gillick

Born and Raised is one of San Diego's top 'wish list' steak houses. During a talk with Thomas, the General Manager, he became the quintessential philosopher-restaurateur after I commented on the effectiveness of the dimmed lights, the comfortable wooden interior design and the unbelievably friendly greeting and attention lavished on every guest. Thomas spoke about the restaurant's "very mellow-out experience" where the food and service "provoke you into a state of mindful surrender". And with tables of friends and family chatting, laughing and celebrating, he noted that when you arrive at the restaurant "It's time to release, relax, recharge, refresh, retreat and realize that there's a lot out there to enjoy beyond the bonds of employment, obligation and conformity".

In fact I found this sincere customer service ethic evident throughout the city. At Puesto, a very popular Mexican restaurant in Seaport Village, CJ, one of the Managers, spoke about the client experience. "It's a big world out there and it can be lonely at times...here the attitude is 'mi Casa es su Casa', my house is your house...and you are part of the family". And at Panama 66 in Balboa Park, where you can sip a cool drink in the Sculpture Garden and then enjoy lunch listening to the chimes of the Carillon emanating from the nearby California Tower, Brandon, the Manager, spoke about "this oasis...an easy-going combination of art, architecture, craft beer, wine, cocktails and food, all of which put the visitor's mind at ease".

San Diego is one special treat for travelers. I knew something was unique when I checked into The Hotel Republic, a boutique property in Little Italy, where my greeting, after a five-hour early morning flight was enthusiastic and friendly, and my room was super comfortable. At the hotel's outdoor Topside Terrace, the California vibe immediately started to have its effect on me: Sunny, hot weather, plush cushions, a delicious lunch of Crab Cake Benedict, an icy Beveridge, and a folk singer strumming a relaxed version of Green Day's 'Time of your Life'.

Soon though, it was actually time to start exploring! The Hop-on Hop-off Trolley is a great way to get a feel for the city. It makes 10 stops over a 2-hour period with enthusiastic drivers providing historical and social commentary along the route. My first stop was Old Town, known as the Birthplace of California. This is where San Diego de Alcalá, the first of a chain of 21 Missions stretching from San Diego to Sonoma, was founded in 1769 by Father Junipero Serra of Spain.

Old Town is a collection of museums, historic homes, stables, 19th Century shops, restaurants fun and entertainment. At the Temucula Olive Oil company I experienced "the creeper": a sample of fresh Jalipeno olive oil that 'doesn't hit you right away and then it hits you with a blast of fire', while close by, the foot-stomping music of the group Mariachi Los Rios, charmed a large crowd.

But then it was time to hop-on the Trolley again for an overview of the city. The Waterfront includes San Diego Bay, the USS Midway (Aircraft Carrier) Museum and the Star of India, the world's oldest sailing iron hull vessel that began life in 1863 during Abraham Lincoln's presidency.

Seaport Village, a pleasant park, marina and shopping district is on the way to the Gaslamp area, which comes alive with restaurants and bars at sunset. Petco Park, the home of the San Diego Padres Baseball team leads to the Coronado Bridge and one of the top 10 beaches in the United States, Coronado Beach. The Hotel del Coronado, a grand wooden resort built in 1888 is thought to be the inspiration for the Emerald City in "The Wonderful Land of Oz", as author L. Frank Baum was a frequent guest in the early 1900's.

You know you're in Balboa Park, an amazing, vast collection of museums, cultural Institutions, gardens, theatres and more, when you see the California Tower. Built for the 1915 Panama-California Exposition, the 208 foot tower provides wonderful views of the Park complex that includes the San Diego Zoo.

The magnificent dome next door covers the Museum of Man where exhibitions are based on the theme of "inspiring human connections by exploring the human experience". One such exhibit, called "Post Secret", called on the community and visitors to mail in anonymous postcards on which they shared a secret. Over one million were received and the display of the messages was met with an overwhelmingly positive response. The over-riding message was, "You're not alone. We all have these secrets".

Shannon, the Marketing and Communication manager spoke of 'putting the fun in profundity' and as an example showed me around the exhibit, 'Cannibals: Myth and Reality'. Visitors are challenged to consider questions such as, 'Should you use mummy dust to improve your health? Would you draw straws to see who in your group should be eaten in a desperate situation? If you chew your nails, is this a form of cannibalism? '

The Spanish Colonial Revival architecture imparts a European charm to Balboa Park and the sheer variety of attractions can easily make for a multi-day visit.

Foodies will be enamoured with San Diego's charms. In Little Italy, the new Food Hall in Piazza della Famiglia features fusion food that reflects the influence of Italian, Portuguese, Mexican and Japanese workers who help build up the area. Restaurants include Mein Street Asian Kitchen, Not Not Tacos and Wicked Maine Lobster. And at dinner that evening, at Born and Raised, I reached a level of culinary bliss with a greeting of White Sturgeon caviar and Champagne, followed by a Martini and Caesar Salad, each prepared at my table, and then a perfectly grilled Ribeye steak. So good!

Culinary amazement continued on a visit to Liberty Station. At Breakfast Republic, it was the creamy dish of Shrimp and Grits, along with a side order of Jurassic Bacon (thick slices, baked with paprika and brown sugar). And then for lunch, at the Liberty Public Market, I enjoyed the Poke from Raki Raki: tuna and salmon sashimi on a bed of rice with avocado, seaweed, cucumber, onion and spicy sauce. Josh, the Market Manager confirmed that each of the 30 artisan food vendors were strategically selected for their hands-on experience and passion.

Liberty Station Arts District has become a destination of its own. Alan Ziter, the Executive Director, explained that this former Naval Training Centre houses 96 artist studios plus galleries, workshops, dance companies, cafes, restaurants, stores and museums. Head to the Comic Art Gallery to take a selfie with a life-size Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle!

It was only fitting, on a day of exploring food and art, created with energy and passion, that I spent my final evening at Puesto in Seaport Village. I started with the classic Guacamole appetizer and then indulged in a main course of three terrific tacos: Grilled Octopus (very good), Filet Mignon (really good) and Chicken Tomatillo (really very good). In between bites, and with the friendly guidance of CJ, one of the managers, I sipped tequila, Mescal and a craft Brown Ale. Another superior dining experience!

San Diego was a great surprise for me. I was sure that if I didn't have the famous Zoo on my agenda, it would be difficult to fill the days, but as it was I needed more time to explore this dynamic city where everyone, from tiny cafes to wait-listed restaurants and from studio artists to street musicians seemed to exhibit a warm, welcoming, friendly and helpful attitude toward the visitor experience. This is one impressive destination that I will revisit.

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