

Border song

When LYNN HOUGHTON first visited the sunny SoCal metropolis of San Diego, it was neighbouring Mexico that was the siren call. But the city's appeal has grown as its Latin heritage has been brought to the fore – and no steel-slatted wall can put a stop that.



SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA, USA

I was a naughty nine-year-old when my family first travelled through San Diego on an expedition to Tijuana. We drove from my neighbouring homeland of Orange County across the rural south of the shire, with verdant farmland eventually giving way to vast dry mesquite-dotted canyons and fields and then – as in much of the rest of America – becoming suburbs again.

When we finally reached the border city that butts up against Mexico, it appeared to my childish eyes as a featureless place. Part of the run-down city centre was named the Gaslamp Quarter and one piece of Wild West trivia I remembered was that a bar here was once owned by Wyatt Earp.

San Diego's significant-sized harbour was dominated by slate-coloured warships, plus a fleet of tuna-fishing crafts. These smaller boats, when crowded into the water all at once, reminded me of motorised matchsticks being attacked by seagulls swooping down from above. The tuna fishermen inhabited a nondescript jumble of houses strewn along the shore. The neighbourhood was named Little Italy and may have been ramshackle, but my family and those in the know flocked here for exquisite fresh seafood.

San Diego seemed bland to the younger me, but it was the entrance to an exotic land. Tijuana, by contrast, was exciting and colourful, a sensory overload. A vivid memory is of people living in cardboard boxes along the river and tiny donkeys sagging under the weight of heavy cargos, although many of the burros were also used for tourist photo opps. Bright before-unseen fruit and fanciful *piñatas* caught my eye. The juxtaposition between two entirely different worlds would always stay with me.

Photography by Danny Englander/Unsplash



SUN, SURF AND SAND(IEGO)

Once a dusty smudge on a map, San Diego is now a sprawling city that's just celebrated its 250th anniversary. Defined by its proximity to Mexico, it was built with sweat and mud by the indigenous Kumeyaay people and Spanish padres, the first of 21 missions strung out along California's Pacific Coast like gleaming terracotta beads.

Having grown up nearby, I should have had an encyclopedic knowledge of the place. But it wasn't until I procured my own set of wheels that I'd get the chance to explore this grey navy town. The first trip was with a girlfriend, when we escaped the suburbs to spend a weekend at one of the beaches that creates a fringe between the ocean and the city.

Early on, I thought San Diego was less about the metropolitan centre and more about its open spaces and seaside. One example is the expansive 1200-acre Balboa Park overlooking downtown, which is one of the United States' largest urban parks. It exists because Pueblo land was set aside by Alta California authorities in 1835 for the town's citizens. In 1848, even though San Diego was now one of the spoils of the Mexican-American War, the park still became a reality. Ornate Spanish-Baroque-style buildings from the Panama-California Exposition of 1915 are still here, but the bobcats, coyotes and rattlesnakes have moved on, thankfully.

OLD TOWN

On about my fourth visit, I stumbled upon Old Town, the original San Diego. Hidden from Highway 5, which swoops down from the north into the city centre, this diminutive place isn't easy to locate. It's quite spartan, a field with a flagpole, plus a few wooden and adobe buildings. It does, however, accurately reflect the appearance of the early settlement and to some degree helps the uninitiated understand the origins of Hispanic-Mexican-Californian culture. The Presidio fort would have been one of the first structures and once overlooked Old Town from above, but it burned to the ground long ago.

Today, the area outside the state park is popular with tourists, who wander the streets scooping up souvenirs and brightly coloured embroidered Mexican cotton tops. But this place is far more than a tourist attraction: it defines the culture of the period and provides clear provenance of San Diego's roots. This settlement was a Spanish colony from the 18th to mid-19th century, with no British, Dutch or French colonial influence whatsoever.

Old Town's simple structures once housed governors transplanted from Mexico City or even directly from the mother country to rule over the new territory. Often, their families would join them. El Campo Santo cemetery on San Diego Avenue tells the bleak story of the 18th- and 19th-century residents interred here.

A few of the current establishments around Old Town are in keeping with the history of the area. There is a traditional-style hotel built into the hillside and a few shops tout ceramics from the other side of the border, as well as Day of the Dead paraphernalia. Authentic eateries such as Tahona tantalise customers with traditional Oaxacan cuisine and a hundred flavours of mezcal. But, for a dose of Hispanic-Cali culture evolved over a couple of centuries, one must be east of downtown in Barrio Logan.

HIGH SOCIETY

At one time named Logan Heights, this Mexican-American neighbourhood was originally settled in the early 20th century by refugees fleeing the Mexican Civil War. What's immediately obvious is that a significant portion of this community is bisected by the pylons of Interstate 5, built in 1963, and the elevated Coronado Bridge, completed in 1969. Town planning is partially to blame, as there was little consultation with residents at the time. I recall the area appearing a bit down at heel and I recently discovered that Logan Heights had been re-zoned back in the 1950s as a mixed industrial/residential area.



Photography by Dancestrokes/iStock by Getty Images

The inside track



Derrik Chinn

The founder of *Turista Libre*, Derrik specialises in bespoke tours of Tijuana, as well as longer excursions to Mexico City for its Pride parade. Many of his tours include a stop at Playas de Tijuana to see the border fence. www.turistalibre.com

Eat

Little Italy's Ironside is a contemporary interpretation of the classic fish house and oyster bar and a top spot for nosh. The oysters and opulent seafood trays are stunning and the catch is local. www.ironsidefishand oyster.com

Drink

Tequila and by extension Margaritas are the stuff of dreams. Imbibe on the rocks and with salt around the rim. Excellent options can be found at Café Coyote and Casa de Reyes, in Old Town. www.cafecoyoteoldtown.com / www.casadereyes restaurant.com

Shop

Simón Limón in Barrio Logan is a curated retail and creative space showcasing independent artists and designers from both north and south of the border. Just the ticket if you're looking for unique souvenirs. www.shop simonlimon.com

It was around then that I remember my uncle, who had already lived in California for a while, taking us to visit historic Latin landmarks. He was a European transplant and one of the few to notice the importance and impact of this culture. Although I was mesmerised by the historic, religious 18th-century structures we saw, I soon discovered it wasn't quite so romantic. Already, many of these charming adobe buildings – the main chapel of Mission San Juan Capistrano among them – had disintegrated as a result of earthquakes. The missions and their surroundings were starting to be subsumed by commercial and residential developments, blighted by cheap housing, poor drainage and policing issues.

When the junk yards and repair shops moved in, neighbourhood resentment started to simmer. Later, a long-promised community park, to be located under the jungle of concrete pillars, was approved but never realised. So, when bulldozers arrived on 22 April 1970 to build a parking lot, a local Mexican-American student raised the alarm. Fury spilled over and a takeover of the area by residents and activists ensued, lasting 12 days. During the protest, spontaneous planting of cactus gardens and mural painting began.

Chicano Park ultimately came into existence and is now an exceptional eight-acre park, as well as a nationally recognised historic landmark. In its centre is the Kiosko, a structure reminiscent of Aztec and Mayan architecture which indicates the community's roots. Significantly, it has the largest concentration of mural painting in the country. Since the protests of 1970, important local artists, such as Salvador Torres and Mario Torero, have turned the concrete pylons into works of art. Mario still lives near here and his extensive work includes a spectacular self-portrait and a divine image of La Virgen de Guadalupe, the Catholic patron saint of Mexico.

Though Chicano Park and this barrio have had their challenges in the past, the energy these days is positive. This is a neighbourhood that embraces Mexican culture and shares its traditions throughout the city. Logan Avenue is home to hip coffee shops like Por Vida, quirky retail outlets and enchanting murals. There's an upbeat feel to the place and the residents are proud of their community and genuinely welcoming.

I'm warmed by the stories of minority communities making a place their own and brandishing their culture, but gentrification is inevitable for Logan Avenue, as it bears a close resemblance to the OutThere neighbourhood over at Hillcrest. Formerly thought of as a pink ghetto, Hillcrest is brimming with stories, at least for those who care to discover them: with the exception of a scattering of rainbow flags, there are few reminders of its vibrant occupants today. It's now an affluent district, upmarket and nearly indistinguishable from other swish areas of San Diego, until after dark, when University Avenue has a buzz and a young, exciting vibe. As on Logan Avenue, all manner of fun-seekers flood in for a taste of local culture – a boozy meal, including something as quintessentially American as a Caesar salad perhaps, although this is actually a dish that was first made in Tijuana and brought back by border-hoppers cheating Prohibition in the US in the 1920s and 30s.

THE BORDER AND THE BRIDGE

There's a lot to uncover when it comes to Mexican-American culture in San Diego, but as I've come all this way, I'm keen to reacquaint myself with the friendly locals just over the border in Mexico. Tijuana (aka TJ) is a fascinating place to visit, though for obvious reasons there's currently much more restriction to the flow of people into and out of Mexico than before. But, if your documentation is in order, the simplest option is to walk across the new PedWest bridge located near the outlet malls on Virginia Avenue in San Ysidro.

Like its Californian cousin, TJ has scrubbed up well and is certainly more developed and attractive than previously. Cardboard shacks no longer appear along the riverbed and much of the cacophony and chaos seems to have disappeared. There are, however, a great many desolate-looking folk who, I'm told, are deportees unable to get back to their homelands. A desperate situation.

The thing about TJ is that it throws up much controversy about the border. Many living here no longer notice it, even though the wall/fence not only bisects the land but actually



Photography by Lynn Houghton

Get out there

Do...

...descend on University Avenue early to get a prime seat for San Diego's Pride parade in July. www.sdpride.org

...check out The Blind Burro for the best churros in town and astonishingly good side dishes (corn!) to go with Baja-style burritos and enchiladas. www.theblindburro.com

...check out LGBTQ life. Flicks is possibly the city's best gay bar, but the nearby Hillcrest Brewing Company is being proclaimed as the first-ever 'out and proud' gay brewery. www.sdflicks.com/ www.hillcrestbrewingcompany.com

Don't...

...miss out on the Centro Cultural de la Raza in Balboa Park if you're interested in Chicano and Chicana art. www.centrodelaraza.com

...forget to organise a locker at Tahona. Located on San Diego Avenue in Old Town, the bar has a depository where you can stash your own personal mezcal collection. www.tahonabar.com

...ignore the shopping downtown. The Headquarters at Seaport District on West Harbor Drive has authentic shops and eateries with an historic flare. www.theheadquarters.com

carries on from the beach well into the surf. Just beyond the slatted barricade on the US side are wetlands with patrol vehicles always visible. For a few hours at the weekend, families on either side are allowed to speak to each other through these slats. Look for the V-shaped monument erected in the 19th century at the end of the Mexican-American war which shows where the border between Alta and Baja California was first delineated.

BUILDING BRIDGES NOT WALLS

San Diego and Mexico, while separated, share a lot. American-Mexican relations might be uneasy in Washington, DC, but the overwhelming majority of people in San Diego see the proximity of Mexico as enormously positive. I'm encouraged that its Latin influence is finally being teased out of the shadows, with the hospitality industry paving the way. The food scene is diverse and visitors should seek out tucked-away taquerias, authentic restaurants and bars found everywhere throughout the city.

For the traveller looking for authentic America, San Diego comes into its own as a unique destination, showing signs of differentiating itself from other cities. On the flip side, the economic upswing and influx of wealth might be signalling a move toward unwanted homogenisation. I hope not, since there is so much to experience here that's authentic. Many travelling from the north may get no further than the beauty spots at San Diego's outskirts – La Jolla, Balboa Park and Mission Bay – but they're missing out. The beating heart of the city for me is its quirky Gaslamp Quarter, which I once feared. But alongside that are artistic neighbourhoods such as Chicano Park, the harbour with its military and historic vessels and, though it's separated by political borders, the frontierland, where so much is shared culturally. In San Diego, there are a thousand lessons that can be learnt. ☺

Known on social media as The Roaming Scribe, Lynn is a freelance writer and photographer who focuses on adventure travel and cultural topics for newspapers, consumer magazines and websites. Her journey through California was made easier by www.rentalcars.com.

For more information on San Diego, visit www.sandiego.org.



Photography by Frank McKenna/Unsplash

The Guild Hotel

San Diego, California, USA



It's rare to find history glorified in California, which is why The Guild is blissfully unique. The property was once the Army Navy YMCA, opened in 1924 to provide accommodation for members of the armed forces on leave. Dances accompanied by big-band music would have been all the rage, though Prohibition ensured the purchase of intoxicating beverages on the premises was illegal. Never fear, the nearby Gaslamp Quarter provided easy access to liquor via speakeasies.

A gym was installed in the basement for further recreation. It's still here, with a lovely nod to old-fashioned pursuits such as boxing. For a minimal fee, guests also have access to the roof-top pool across the street at the Broadway Athletic and Swim Club.

The extensive bar in the lobby is a new addition, but many architectural features, such as the ceiling, archways and Spanish tiles, remain. The fashionable outdoor Luca restaurant serves upmarket breakfast options, while, just beyond, there is a Mediterranean garden with seating sequestered between two busy streets – though you wouldn't know it.

Rooms are sleek and modern, with the original all-cement industrial take on timbered-beam ceilings overhead. Ample-sized bathrooms, with large showers, plus enormous mirror and vanity, are engulfed in opaque glass and adorned with Scandinavian-style tiles. There is adequate storage and a wonderful desk, though no plugs in the vicinity.

500 W Broadway, San Diego, CA 92101
www.theguildhotel.com