

WINTER IN SAN DIEGO

SHIPS, CASINOS AND DRAMATIC WEATHER

Winter in southern California's backcountry has strengthened our adaptability and sense of humor. The weather has varied from calm, sunny days in the 70s and 80s, to spells of rain and moody skies, to clear winds gusting up to 40 mph, to below freezing temperatures with memorable snowfalls. Winter has also brought us visits from friends and family. Fortunately, most of their stays coincided with sunny days.



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Photo: Rose Muenker

1 Downtown San Diego looks onto the bay. 2 Flowers edge the pond stretching in front of the Botanical Building. 3 The HMS Surprise, a component of the San Diego Maritime Museum, was used in the seafaring film "Master and Commander."



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Photo: Rose Muenker

1 The San Diego Art Museum's secluded sculpture garden looks onto the Museum of Man in Balboa Park. 2 A toddler stands mesmerized by a street musician in Balboa Park. 3 The colorful Spanish Village Art Center in Balboa Park holds 37 working artist studios; artists give demos throughout the day.

By Rose Muenker
Photography by David Muenker

San Diego Bay tops our choice of attractions to show friends. The array of ships and boats in the harbor even fascinates landlubbers. In one short stretch of the waterfront, we strolled by a 19th century steam ferry, towering tall ships and several other historic vessels that comprise the San Diego Maritime Museum. When I heard that The HMS Surprise was used in the film "Master and Commander," dramatic seafaring images popped into my mind, bringing its sails and wooden hull to life.

Farther down the walkway, we spotted visitors exploring the flight deck of the massive Midway, a decommissioned aircraft carrier turned museum. What captured David's and my fancy was the gigantic statue alongside it of a World War II sailor smooching a nurse. Replicating the pose captured in Alfred Eisenstaedt's iconic photograph, the statue plucked our heart strings. We couldn't help but imitate the pose for our own photo.

To see the bay from the water, a friend and I took a two-hour sightseeing cruise. We rode from the bay entrance to the impressive shipyards south of the sweeping San Diego-Coronado Bay Bridge. While we admired the scenery, the captain entertained us with intriguing historic, maritime and cultural details.

Pointing out the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan, he said, "If you stood it on end, it would be twice as tall as any building in San Diego." Using the 40-floor Hyatt as comparison gave us a sense of its impressive size. A variety of vessels filled the shipyard, from Destroyer 88 used in the movie "Transformer" to the USSN Mercy hospital ship, whose medical staff exceeds 1,000 when deployed. As impressive as the ships were, the highlight of the cruise for me was watching harbor seals bask on a floating platform.



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WHEN YOU GO

BALBOA PARK
Balboapark.org

HARBOR CRUISES
Hornblower.com

MARITIME MUSEUM OF SAN DIEGO
Sdmaritime.org

SAN DIEGO CVB
Sandiego.org

SPANISH VILLAGE ART STUDIOS
Spanishvillageart.com

USS MIDWAY MUSEUM
midway.org



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1 A small wind farm sits atop a ridge along Interstate 8, generating revenue for the Campo Indian Reservation. **2** Shipyards repair and maintain a range of watercraft from Coast Guard runners to destroyers and hospital ships. **3** Mary-Ella Keith, a Spanish Village artist (studio 16B) specializing in photography, gourds and mixed media, adds calligraphy to a gourd.

The Fish Market became our favorite waterfront restaurant. Besides its delectable seafood, we discovered it provides a relaxed means to experience the harbor even on blustery, rainy days, which proved a godsend during a quick visit by one set of out-of-state friends. Seated comfortably on its glass-encased dining deck, we looked right onto the water. Through our meal, we watched boats cruise by, cormorants dive for fish, sea gulls circle overhead, and harbor seals poke their heads up just long enough to tease us into grabbing our cameras.

Another enjoyable attraction is Balboa Park. While others explored its 15 museums, we chose to admire the Spanish-Renaissance style buildings along the El Prado walkway, wander through flowering gardens and chat with artists in the Spanish Village Art Center.

NOT FOR GAMBLERS ONLY

We're surrounded by Indian Reservations, which accounts for vast undeveloped lands of natural vegetation. The Kumeyaay Native American people of this region have 13 reservations. Not surprisingly, many of them operate casinos.

In recent years, several tribes have expanded their commercial endeavors. The Viejas Band of the Kumeyaay, for example, has an outlet shopping complex with restaurants, bowling and an ice skating rink. Our immediate neighbors, the Campo Band, have a wind farm. When we scale Sacred Rock Reserve's trails to an overlook, we can see the blades rotating on a ridge seven miles away.

My brother-in-law, Gerard, a renewable energy enthusiast, was eager to see them up close. After asking locals which off-the-grid roads to take, we set out on a gusty day. Guttled dirt roads wound up the mountainside. No gate or fence blocked us from driving right up to the wind turbines. The wind was blowing so hard that we had to open our car doors one at a time to avoid being swept out.

Gerard was like a kid on a playground as he surveyed the farm. Several rotor blades, motor encasements and cones lay on the ground, giving us the chance to appreciate their huge size. As we stood at the base of a wind turbine, my sister and I listened to the rhythmic whoosh of the blades and watched their sleek shadows move across the terrain.

Afterwards we had lunch at our favorite "neighborhood" restaurant, Marie's in the La Posta Casino. The meals are bountiful, delicious, a superb value and tax-free. And the service is always friendly. We backcountry locals especially appreciate the daily specials like Tuesday's Burger Fest.

Showing our visitors around has proven how well we've gotten to know our "winter home." To our delight, southern California promises even more great places to explore before we move on.

Rose and David Muenker, a travel writer-photographer team, are traveling the roads of North America by motor home. Read about their adventures in every issue of Out of Denver and on their blog davidandrose.com. Email them at rose.muenker@gmail.com.