



The Sofia Hotel is centrally located and a restful haven, with a great restaurant in the lobby.

Published Aug. 3, 2009 at 8:23 a.m.

SAN DIEGO, Calif. -- On a warmer than normal Friday night, Little Italy is hopping. Hungry patrons spill out on to the street awaiting restaurant tables and a long line snakes out of the legendary Filippi's Pizza Grotto -- a tradition here since the 1950s. San Diegans love Filippi's pizza.

Down the block at Zia's Bistro -- one of a number of Little Italy restaurants owned by the Busalacchi brothers (yes, they're related to the Milwaukee Busalacchis) -- guitarist and singer Daniele Spadavecchia is chatting with customers. When the dashing Alessandria, Italy native launches into his set -- a mix of gypsy jazz a la Django Reinhardt and Neapolitan classics -- everyone pays attention, especially -- Daniele's wife notices -- the young women seated nearby at the bar.

My first night in San Diego and I realize it's nothing like I expected.

Sun, Sand, Surf & Sailors

Of course, what everyone expects to find in San Diego, which is just 15 miles from Tijuana, Mexico: sun, sand, surfers and sailors. As one resident told me, "this is a military town."

That's because there are a handful of bases in and around San Diego and the city's shipyards have a number of warships under construction, it seems, at any given time.

But on the street, the casual and quick visitor wouldn't necessarily notice. In mid-July there are no groups of rabid sailors on the prowl in The Gaslamp Quarter (think an engorged Water Street with hotels and shopping added to the mix). If they are there, the military boys must be well camouflaged.

However, there is plenty of sun -- 68 percent of possible sunshine warms this oceanside (and bayside) city -- and the average temps range from 57 in December and January to 72.6 in August. Unsurprisingly, this tempered warmth fuels nearly year-round traffic at the many beaches that line the coast and the edges of Coronado Island.

But despite the unusual heat here during my two-day stay, I step on a beach exactly once -- on Coronado Island -- and that's to snap some pictures of the San Diego skyline.

Instead, this tourist is focused on checking out the culture (and the culture of wine) in and around San Diego.

And I start right there on Coronado Island, a chic-ish place dotted with boutiques, restaurants and built up to the sky with condo towers. After popping into Scottish Treasures in the Ferry Landing Marketplace for an Aero bar (a bit of blighty in the sunny southwest), I head out to the sprawling, historic Hotel del Coronado -- where "Some Like It Hot" was filmed exactly 50 years ago with Marilyn Monroe and Tony Curtis -- and sit outside at Sheerwater restaurant, under an umbrella with a glass of wine and some crab and cheddar ale fondue and watch people on their way to the beaches. I also gaze beyond them out to Point Loma lighthouse -- lightly veiled in the foggy mist of the marine layer -- and the ships leaving the bay for the open water of the Pacific.

Exploring Balboa Park

With more than a million people in the city and three times that in the metro area, it's no surprise that San Diego has a world class tourist industry, especially when you add the beautiful weather and its access to the Pacific Ocean to the mix.

Balboa Park is perhaps THE major tourist magnet, with its campus of 15 museums and performing arts groups occupying the lovely Spanish Revival buildings constructed for the 1915 Panama-California Exposition.

The range of the museums is amazing, from the Museum of Man anthropological museum, to the San Diego Museum of Art, the Museum of Photographic Arts, the Air & Space Museum, Centro Cultural de la Raza, San Diego Automotive Museum, Hall of Champions Sports Museum, Model Railroad Museum and on and on ...

The museums tend to offer bite-sized morsels, with the San Diego Museum of Art especially standing out for its collection of European Old Masters (Milwaukee Art Museum devotees will enjoy a handful of Francisco de Zurbarán paintings; the artist's haunting and huge "Saint Francis of Assisi in His Tomb" is a MAM standout).

I spend an inordinate amount of time in the galleries housing French painters from the 19th and 20th centuries, standing in front of works by Corot, Daumier and Modigliani.

Depending on your mood, this amalgam of museums is either a wonderland of history and wonder or a draining overload. Suggestion: don't try and see all of them at once.

Also in Balboa Park and requiring a day all to itself is the world-renowned San Diego Zoo. Lined with trails and paths that open into unexpected displays, approach the zoo like the Louvre. Know that you're unlikely to see it all, so ride the bus tour to get a good overview and then pick what you want to focus on -- I choose the pandas, since we don't have them here at home.

Tomorrow, the park will come alive with the annual Gay Pride Parade and festival. One of the city's largest civic events, it draws upwards of 150,000 people to Balboa Park and the nearby Hillcrest neighborhood.

But by then, I'll be headed north.

First, however, I return to The Sofia Hotel to freshen up and to check my e-mail in the free business center in the lobby. Built as the Pickwick Hotel in the 1920s, the Sofia is a member of the National Trust Historic Hotels of America. Completely renovated in 2006, the Sofia has well-appointed rooms that create a nice (and, yes, quiet) haven on the north end of the lively Gaslamp Quarter.

In the lobby is Currant American Brasserie, which serves convenient and tasty early morning breakfasts (from 6:30), lunch and dinner, of course, and is open late for drinks, too, making it a nice stop for the last drink of the night. The night I stopped in was Absinthe Minded Fridays and it was fun watching so many people get initiated into the ritual that is the absinthe experience.

The World of San Diego Wine

While Sonoma and Napa to the north have a lock on Americans' wine imagination, just an hour's drive north of San Diego is Temecula Valley, home to dozens of wineries. On a particularly warm day, my cousin is driving me up there for an afternoon of tastings and we watch the (theoretical) mercury on the dashboard. In San Diego's University Heights, we hop in and it reads 85 degrees. As we leave the city behind, the landscape turns more barren -- although there is still plenty of development -- and we creep up to the low 90s. A few minutes later, we're into the triple digits. When we hop out at our first stop, Thornton Winery, 102 degrees of dry heat make my body tingle all over.

Inside, the place is bustling with activity. There are tastings in a production area off the shop and in a small restaurant-style room, too, where patrons are checking out the locally grown and produced sangiovese, nebbiolo, zin, cabernet and whites, especially of the sparkling variety. The wine is good and place is lovely, but I'm hoping for something a little more agricultural, a little more rustic. So, after a plate of cheese, and a four-wine flight (the satisfyingly tannic nebbiolo is the best of the bunch; we traded the cloyingly sweet late-harvest zinfandel for a much more enjoyable sangiovese), we move on.

We hit three more places -- Wilson Creek, Ponte Family (which is so packed to the gills that we don't even taste; too bad, Ponte makes the only barbera I see today) and Leonesse, which boasts, hands down, the most lovely scenery -- and I'm amazed that there is so much diversity, so many wineries here in a place I've barely heard of.

Although I'm disappointed that I never get to chat with a winemaker in his cellar or a grape grower hopping off his tractor, I'm impressed by the way the organized vintners in Temecula have created a demand not only for their wines but for high-end shopping, tastings and wines.

Back in San Diego, the air has settled down into the upper 70s and it feels heavenly. Perfect for baseball.

Forty Diamond Years

It was 40 years ago that the major league San Diego Padres first took the field at San Diego Stadium (later Jack Murphy and now called Qualcomm Stadium and still home to the Chargers) and five years since the team moved into Petco Park on the south end of the Gaslamp Quarter.

The Padres won their division in 2006, so it's little surprise that the fans seem to be rebelling after terrible seasons since. It's Saturday night in downtown San Diego and the grounds crew is grooming the infield as the umpires huddle and a few stray players stretch or toss the ball around.

I've got a fish taco and a Foster's and feel like a million bucks. The weather is gorgeous and some of the city skyline resides just outside the park.

There's just one thing missing: fans. The announced crowd numbers more than 28,000, but it's hard to believe even that many are here to watch the Padres beat the Rockies, 3-1. The fact that the team tanked the night before certainly didn't help. But the fans on hand tonight for retro visor night are the die-hards and they cheer every hit and grouse about every miscue.

When four differently dressed "Padres" take to the field for a sausage-style race, I feel both at home and a little foreign. But like the song says, "let me root root root for the home team, if they don't win it's a shame."

So, I cheer every Padres hit, and I'm horrified (as are fans of both teams) when Edgar Gonzalez is floored by a 93 mph bean ball tossed by Colorado's Jason Hammel. But I don't complain when they stumble. After all, I'm a guest here in this beautiful city. And I hope to be one again soon.