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San Diego on a fall budget

San Diego budget travel: Fall is an ideal time to visit this Southern California city.

By Carol Pucci
Seattle Times travel writer

With plenty of sunshine and the summer crowds gone, fall is an ideal time for a weekend in San Diego. Bike along the beach at Mission Bay. Catch one of the ethnic heritage festivals in September or October, or check out the dining scene in the historic Gaslamp Quarter.

Getting there

Competition among Virgin America, United, Southwest and Alaska Airlines is keeping round-trip fares from Seattle in the \$215-\$250 range for weekend travel in September. Cheapest are flights through connecting cities that take 4-5 hours. Nonstop flights take about 2 ½ hours.

Where to stay

Special rates are available on the San Diego Convention & Visitors Bureau Web site. Go to http://hotels.sandiego.org/3708_deals.html or call 888-260-7060.

San Diego's budget-hotel headquarters is Hotel Circle, about three miles from downtown and the Mission Bay beach area. Days Hotel is a budget property that earns high marks on TripAdvisor.com. Rates start at \$99. The hotel has a pool and offers free meals for kids.

Many hotels offer a third or fourth night free or discounts for longer stays. The Best Western at Mission Bay has a three-nights-for-the-price-of-two offer through Dec. 31. Not all dates are available, but a check on the Visitors Bureau site for an October midweek stay showed a 3-for-2 rate of \$88 per night.

Downtown tends to be expensive, but with convention business down, it's possible to find deals. Rooms at the highly rated Sofia (www.thesofiahotel.com) boutique hotel start at \$118 if booked on the Visitors Bureau site for weekend stays in October.

Getting around

The San Diego Trolley, operated by the Metropolitan Transit System, offers an easy way to reach many attractions. One-way fares are \$2.50. Day passes are \$5. See www.sdmts.com/Trolley/Trolley.asp.

What to do

Kids along? Mission Bay, anchored by **SeaWorld** (www.seaworld.com/sandiego), is San Diego's oceanfront aquatic park with miles of sandy beaches, bike paths and playground.

ADVERTISING

Rent a car and head to **Legoland** in Carlsbad, about 30 miles away (www.legoland.com). Admission to the **San Diego Zoo** and the zoo's **Wild Animal Park** (www.sandiegozoo.org) is free in October for children ages 3-11.

Beyond the beach, **Mission Trails Regional Park** (www.mtrp.org) is 5,800 acres of recreation 10 miles from downtown. Also within the city limits is **Torrey Pines State Reserve** (www.torreypine.org), with high bluffs overlooking the Pacific.

For nightlife and dining, hit the **Gaslamp Quarter**, San Diego's Old Town historic district (www.gaslamp.org). The **San Diego International Film Festival** returns here Sept. 23-27.

The quarter will also be headquarters for **San Diego Restaurant Week** Sept. 13-18. More than 180 restaurants will offer three-course meals from prix fixe menus for \$20, \$30 or \$40 per person.

A day trip to **Tijuana** is easy on the San Diego Trolley's blue line that runs between Old Town and the San Ysidro border crossing into Mexico. Remember to bring a passport or other government-approved ID.

Festivals and fairs

Don't miss:

- The San Diego Bay Wine & Food Festival, Nov. 18-22. Gourmet food, celebrity chefs, wine tasting. See www.worldofwineevents.com
- The 10th Annual San Diego Asian Film Festival, Oct. 15-29. Films, videos and workshops. See www.sdaff.org
- Little Italy Festa, Oct. 11. Italian culture, music, foods, specialty crafts and Gesso Italiano, a classic Italian street chalk painting exhibition. See www.littleitalysd.com

What's new

The nature center at the **San Elijo Lagoon Ecological Reserve** (www.sanelijo.org) includes interactive exhibits and "green" amenities including solar panels, irrigated roof plants and recycled water. Free admission and guided nature walks.

Budget tip

Print out coupons for discounts at Legoland, hotels, restaurants, kayak trips, etc., at the Visitors Bureau site, www.sandiego.org. Click on "Coupons."

Tourist information

Contact the San Diego Convention & Visitors Bureau, 619-236-1212 or www.sandiego.org.

Carol Pucci: cpucci@seattletimes.com

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Papel picado banners, or traditional Mexican paper cutouts, decorate a walkway at Old Town San Diego State Historic Park.

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