



The magnificent 1887 Queen Anne-style Britt Scripps Inn, a block from Balboa Park on Banker's Hill, is one of the finest examples of Victorian architecture in all of Southern California.

The Embarcadero cruise terminal ensconced in San Diego Bay, the city's largest and most vibrant attraction, is an enormous windfall for cruise passengers.

Cruise ships are anchored squarely at the edge of downtown and fronted by the soaring cityscape that locals with a wild imagination say resemble a toolbox, complete with a Phillips screwdriver and sanding block. While standing on the bow of Holland America's *Oosterdam*, it seems as if one can reach out and give that screwdriver a couple of good twists.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Fourteen large hotels are only steps away, as are many of the city's attractions. Cruisers can roll their luggage across the street to their ship, and along the way take in a bustling street scene filled with art, restaurants and pedi-cabs, designed like giant tricycles propelled by male and female cyclists who have legs of such steel as to make Lance Armstrong proud.

Mission Bay Park, along the great bay, north of the cruise ship terminal, is a bustling 4,600-acre aquatic sports showcase accessible via pedi-cab. The park is the largest of its kind in the world, buzzing with swimmers, sailboarders and those plowing about on water skis in a foamy wake, while brightly decorated sailboats are in search of an offshore breeze. Park access is free, as is parking.

Mission Bay is also home to SeaWorld, where visitors call on celebrity killer whales in the best-planned, best-stocked oceanarium in the country. SeaWorld surveys reveal the average visit is from six to eight hours, enough time to experience the multifaceted, 189-acre complex fea-

turing six major shows and dozens of exhibits, including a Shark Encounter that may leave you forever thinking of your swimming pool as a best friend.

Balboa Park, the city's number-one attraction, is the largest urban cultural park in the United States and the city's cultural heartbeat, with ponds and paths, acres of cool lawns, leafy trees and renowned gardens surrounding predominantly Spanish-Moorish architecture on 1,200 magnificent acres.

Cruisers can browse through 15 major museums, seven within easy walking distance of one another; see a performance at the plush 581-seat Old Globe Theatre; enjoy colorful street entertainers who can simultaneously tap dance, blow up a balloon and sing Spanish love songs; or spend the day at the famed San Diego Zoo, traipsing over 100 acres of canyons and mesas. If time is short, 80 percent of the zoo can be experienced by a three-mile guided double-decker bus tour.

New visitors to San Diego simply must drive over the 2.1-mile San Diego-Coronado Bridge, or take the short ferry ride to Coronado, for fine dining, boutique shopping, viewing San Diego's skyline and visiting Loews Coronado Bay Resort, tucked away on an exclusive 15-acre private peninsula bordered by the Pacific Ocean, San Diego Bay and a small boat harbor.

Lowes, a local favorite, has a 10,000-square-foot spa/salon and fitness center, a remarkable chef, al fresco dining and live Spanish guitar music in the lobby, where guests with their family dogs relax and enjoy the moment. (Dogs must have good California manners. Their social graces are inspected at the door.)

Before You Go

Contact a AAA Travel counselor to plan a cruise that departs from San Diego. AAA Travel can also book pre- or post-cruise accommodations at any San Diego area hotel or resort.

- **Britt Scripps Inn**
www.brittscripps.com
- **Loews Coronado Bay Resort**
www.loewshotels.com
- **San Diego**
www.sandiego.org
(619) 236-1212

Back in town there's another jewel, and since it also one of the most romantic of all San Diego properties, it makes the perfect beginning for a cruise, a second honeymoon or any memorable romantic getaway. The estate-like Britt Scripps Inn, a block from Balboa Park on Banker's Hill, is one of the finest examples of Victorian architecture in San Diego, with each room representing a different design genre from within the Victorian period.

Built in 1887, the opulent three-story Queen Anne-style inn with 12-foot-high ceilings, has 1,000-thread-count bed linens, heated towel racks and, well disguised so as not to seem out of place amid the period decor, high-speed wireless Internet access and flat screen televisions. A full American breakfast is a tradition here, as is the luxury of an 1883 Steinway piano, a grand staircase perfect for dramatic entrances and a two-story stained glass wall that make wonderful travel memories.

San Diego will capture your heart and is a wonderful bonus when sailing round-trip. But even two visits are rarely enough. ■

RICHARD CARROLL is a writer from Shadow Hills, Calif.