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Interstate 5 divides Carlsbad like the Berlin Wall or the Green Line in Cyprus or the Mason-Dixon Line. Take your pick of metaphors, but take my word that eight lanes of elevated concrete full of cars and trucks going 60 mph or more do that to a place.

It's more than just a thick red line on the map, but a divider of who you are in this city of a little more than 100,000 residents. For the traveler, it defines why you are here.



To the west of the red line is the old beach community, the area called "the Village," with its funky stores and doughnut shops. The land of surfers and suburban commuters taking the Coaster to San Diego.

To the east is Legoland, the 900-pound gorilla of local tourism - albeit one that would be made of tiny colored blocks from Denmark artfully rendered to look like King Kong. It's the biggest chunk of the modern city, which also includes office parks, shopping malls, resorts and condos.

"I consider everything over there another city," said Phil Phillips, owner of the Fahrenheit 451 bookstore not far from the beach. "I know we're a little provincial over here, but at least we don't look like every other damn city in California."

It's clear that many on the east side love the sunrise side of Carlsbad. The big houses that sprout off either side of El Camino Real have their own gourmet markets, coffeehouses, bars

and top-flight restaurants. The two flashiest places to stay in Carlsbad, the La Costa Resort and the Four Seasons Aviara (which is switching brands to Hyatt as of June 21), are on the high and dry side of I-5.

Like a lot of Southern Californians, I've taken Carlsbad in bits and pieces. A stop at the Flower Fields on the way to a Padres game in San Diego. A stroll on the beach while visiting friends in nearby Oceanside. Lunch at the Daily News on a drive down Highway 101.

I wanted to try a longer look. A couple of days to experience both sides of Carlsbad. To see what there was on either side of the great divide - something beyond the main tourist attractions: Legoland and its neighbor, the Sea Life Aquarium.

GOING SOUTH

The trip to Carlsbad, to anywhere in San Diego County, begins with one of the oddest crossings between two major population centers. Orange and San Diego counties are divided by about 25 miles of coastline on Camp Pendleton. One minute it's subdivisions, then, poof - rolling hills right out of Spanish times, albeit with the occasional AH-1 SuperCobra helicopter gunship overhead. There's even an immigration and customs stop on the northbound side, adding to the dividing line. Finally, the red tile rooftops of subdivisions and the Denny's by the off-ramps signal that I've crossed into San Diego County. After passing through Oceanside and over the Buena Vista Lagoon, I'm in Carlsbad.

FAR WEST

I first go west. The big attraction here is hard to miss - the Pacific Ocean.

The lifeguard stations number 38 from the north down to 20 at the southern end. For a real budget option, there's Carlsbad State Campground, sandwiched between Carlsbad State Beach to the north and, aptly, South Carlsbad State Beach to the south. The long, thin west side of town runs down until it hits Batiquitos Lagoon, where old 101 crosses into Leucadia.

Though west Carlsbad stretches far south, the center of action is in the little triangle that forms Frazee Park, where Carlsbad Boulevard does a squiggle to make its way inland. The lifeguard station painted a sea foam green is all boarded up - summer is officially not quite here. But on this summerlike day, everyone else is in the swing of the season to come. A woman in a black bikini with iPod earplug wires dangling over her sunglasses is oblivious to a pair of backpackers in boots, shorts and sweatshirts tied around their waist making their way south through the afternoon haze of evaporating fog.

Waves roll off a stone groin, which draws a couple of surfers to the break while a fisherman tries his luck with a cast (more are across the way at Aqua Hedionda Lagoon). Joggers share the sidewalk with young couples with strollers, and families who have made the trip from Legoland to enjoy the late-afternoon sun. A bus passes with the slogan "Catch the Breeze." The big eyesore along the stretch is the "tower of power," the 56-year-old Encina Power Station, with its faded sign on the gate "CURRENT SECURITY THREAT LEVEL: ELEVATED." Local officials have talked for years of trying to get the utility moved farther inland and convert the prime beachfront to parkland or other less industrial-looking activities. The possible shutdown has been given added impetus by a federal report that criticized it and 18 other plants as damaging to sea organisms.

WESTERN TOWN

In Orange, where I live, they call the old part Old Towne. Here, it's the Village. There are short streets with lots of outdoor cafes, old and trendy Italian restaurants and a few antique stores. The gut-check economy of the past year or so has left the Village with scattered vacancies and "going out of business" signs.

The Village is the one part of town where it feels OK not to be moving around by car. The train and bus stations are nearby, there's an old-fashioned doughnut shop with a counter, and benches under shade trees. I bought a bag of treacle toffees at the "Bit-O-Britain" on State Street and window-shopped for an hour or so.

Not too far away is a statue of Joseph Frazier, the guy who started Carlsbad by discovering spring water in 1883. Like many entrepreneurs, he gave the place his own name - Frazier Station, but later the town decided on Carlsbad, the English name of Karlsbad ("Charles' bath"), a famous spa in the old Austro-Hungarian Empire named after a 14th-century Holy Roman emperor. Today, the town is Karlovy Vary, in the Czech Republic - it's Carlsbad's official sister city.

My favorite stop in the Village area is Fahrenheit 451, a used bookstore that the owners say has no connection to the late and sometimes lamented bookstore of the same name in Laguna Beach.

It has a great collection of oddball and classic vintage paperbacks on the wall. One group has a lot of World War II themes: "Coral and Brass," "Escape From Colditz" and "The Fleet That Had To Die." Another featured pulpy titles and classics juxtaposed - "Lassie Come Home" near "The Homicidal Virgin."

The Ocean House Restaurant is the latest incarnation of a 19th-century mansion-turned-hotel-turned eatery. It features seafood and always seems to have special events - over the two days I visited, there was a "Ukulele Night" followed the next day by "Sculpture Party."

One of the oddest hot spots I've ever seen in a town is the West Inn & Suites complex, fronted by a gas station sandwiched between the hulking power station and the buzzing freeway. The Inn, basically a deluxe motel, gets the highest ratings for customer satisfaction in town on the TripAdvisor website. The adjacent restaurant, West Steak Seafood and Spirits, earns top marks in several guidebooks and websites. On a Thursday night, the parking lot was overflowing, and signs everywhere warned of tow-aways.

Picking a hotel on the west side is tough. The big Carlsbad Inn, much of it given over to time

shares, dominates the Village area. I like the Best Western, with its elevated patio looking out on the ocean. The nearby Tamarack has perhaps the best views of the ocean, but the balconies are too close to the four-lane highway for my taste.

NEAR EAST

Time to cross the line. Underneath I-5 to the other Carlsbad.

I stayed at the new Sheraton overlooking the backside of Legoland. So new that it isn't in most guidebooks or even on the map they hand out at the Sheraton hotel desk. The elevator has that new-car smell, the arts & crafts accented room features plein-air prints, and there is nary a nick, stain or rumple in the carpet.

The inland area has the feel of Scottsdale or Palm Springs (or parts of south Orange County), with wide winding arterial roads bearing long Spanish names. An occasional resort, like La Costa, will swirl by. The shopping areas have a decidedly upscale feel (Jensen's Finest Foods is the gourmet-heavy market). Besides the usual mall suspects, there are occasional interesting features - eateries like The Counter, a gourmet burger bar.

There are a few hidden fun spots in between all the blacktop, like the 10-year-old Museum of Making Music, tucked away in the back of an office park. Why Carlsbad? Because its home to NAMM. That's what used to be called the National Association of Music Merchants, which they've ditched for just using the acronym. The temporary exhibit, "ON! The Beginnings of the Electric Sound Generation," examines how early musical pioneers harnessed electricity to amplify and modulate music. Your ringing ears after a Led Zeppelin or Lady Gaga concert are due to old-timers like Thaddeus Cahill, who invented electromechanical instruments that prefigured today's streaming audio. There are guitar pioneers like Leo Fender, who worked on taking the six string and pumping up the volume with voltage. The big draw for musicians is the "interactive" exhibit where visitors can try out a Gretsch Sparkle Jet guitar, Deering Goodtime banjo or just wail away on a set of Hapi drums.

FAR - AND

'FAR OUT' - EAST

Another find is the Chopra Center, which moved from La Jolla to the La Costa Resort. Deepak Chopra, the most popular evangelist of traditional Indian medicine, has his U.S. headquarters in a resort surrounded by tennis pros and polo-shirted golfers. For a while, Chopra was offering a way to integrate Indian mental centering techniques with golf - though I didn't see it on the spa menu. The materials did mention that those with a "pitta dosha" personality (one of the Ayurvedic body types) can be especially angry when they hit a bad shot. There is a full menu of yoga and meditation. It's a world within the La Costa world - and one that fits the word "east."

The sidewalks roll up early in this part of Carlsbad - I went to La Costa Coffee to find it closed at 8:30 p.m., and when I went to the nearby Borders, the clerks started shooping customers away at a quarter to 9.

Just when it seems that everything on the east side of Carlsbad is fresh out of the box, you go about as far east as you can go and still be in Carlsbad to Leo Carrillo Ranch. It's a rancho that's a California Historical Landmark and on the National Register of Historic Places. Supporters call it Carlsbad's "Sleeping Beauty." Leo Carrillo came from an early California family, and he parlayed his rough-hewn persona into a stage and movie career, especially as Pancho, the buddy of the Cisco Kid in the long-running TV show. The Hollywood cash went to acquire land and build his getaway in eastern Carlsbad. Most of the buildings date to the early 1930s, though there are traces of the earlier rancho scattered about. Today's 27-acre site is all that's left of a rancho a hundred times larger.

NORTH PASSAGE

At the intersection of Paseo del Norte and Cannon, across from the entry to the auto mall, I pulled off into the U-pick-em strawberry field. This is not the tiny little patch you find throughout Southern California, but a huge operation on the side of a sloping hill. Parking in a dirty and gravel lot, I lined up behind the school groups getting their baskets to head out into the field. The morning fog had burned off and the sun glinted through the corners of my polarized Ray-Bans. I looked at the bucket, then the people playing farmworker in the field, then the three-pack of strawberries for sale. "The deeper the red, the more juicy they are," the guy in the MEXICO sweatshirt said. I slapped down \$9, found a collection of the most ruby-colored I could find and swung onto the northbound I-5. Soon the SuperCobras were circling overhead, I passed through the immigration station and safely across the border into Orange County.