

By Gary Warner of The Orange County Register

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Carlsbad is 25 miles south of San Clemente and can be reached by Interstate 5. I prefer to get off the freeway in Oceanside and enter town via Historic Highway 101, which becomes Carlsbad Boulevard. It's possible to go by train, taking Amtrak's Pacific Surfliner from Orange County stations to Oceanside. From there, transfer to the Coaster train, which has two stops in Carlsbad. Carlsbad Village is the more central. gonctd.com and click on "Coaster." Or call the tourists offices listed below, who will help you with an itinerary.

Sleeps

Sheraton Carlsbad Resort & Spa: Less than two years old, the hotel has a fresh feel and its own entrance to Legoland. If you are going to stay on the east side, this is the place. 5480 Grand Pacific Dr., 760-827-2400. My AAA rate on a Thursday cost \$189 plus tax and included room service breakfast. A deal earlier this spring had rooms at a little more than \$110 a night. Summers likely will be much higher, particularly on weekends. 800-325-3535 or sheratoncarlsbad.com

La Costa Resort: A classic resort with Spanish-style architecture. A big draw is Splash Landing, a great water-park style swimming pool (one of six on the grounds), whose biggest slide emerges from what looks like a Mission-era bell tower. Lots of golf and tennis. The only drawback is that non-resident members can add to crowds during busy periods. The resort isn't cheap, but it has been running some 30 percent off specials. It's a California classic. It is home to the Chopra Center, which specializes in traditional Indian medicine. Rates from \$360, but

look for discounts and package deals. 2100 Costa Del Mar Rd., 800-854-5000 or lacosta.com

Best Western Carlsbad: There is a flock of beachfront hotels, but this is my favorite - pulled back a little from the beach, but with a nice elevated patio to look out to the ocean or watch the families playing Frisbee in Frazee Park. For a motel, the rates are a little high, topping \$200 during busy times (again, look for midweek rates and specials), but the location is unbeatable. 3180 Carlsbad Blvd., 760-729-1151 or bestwesterncalifornia.com

South Carlsbad State Beach Campground: Incredibly (and frustratingly) popular during the summer, snagging a spot here is the ultimate in great views at low cost. According to ReserveAmerica.com, reservations can be made a maximum of seven months in advance and a minimum of two days. New dates are released in blocks, one month at a time. Rates are \$50 per night for premium spots, with inland spots going for \$35 per night. The park and campground have been hit with some cutbacks in services because of the state budget crisis. For more information, go to parks.ca.gov and type in Carlsbad in the search box. Calls about state parks should go to 800-777-0369.

Eats

West Steak Seafood and Spirits: The West Inn & Suites is a popular place, but the location between a freeway and a power station is just too unattractively odd for a California beach town hangout. I go for a shorter visit to this great eatery next door. The USDA Petite Filet Mignon doesn't have a petite price at \$33.95, but it's a great steak. This is a restaurant where you feel you are paying for good food rather than good views (they don't have any of the latter). 4980 Avenida Encinas, Carlsbad, 760-930-9100. weststeakseafood.com. Note: I've never made it there, but steak lovers swear by Tip Top Meats for their barbeque needs. There's also a little restaurant. 6118 Paseo Del Norte, Carlsbad, 760-438-2620 or tiptopmeats.com. For great food, it is hard to leave here spending more than \$25 per person per meal.

Harbor Fish House: The flip side of West Steak Seafood and Spirits. Here, it's all about the ambience and the food is serviceable and relatively inexpensive - stick to the basics like fish & chips or fish tacos. The big draw here is the location right next to Frazee Park and the views just across a small parking lot of the Pacific Ocean. It's a great place to spend the sunset, the time of which is helpfully posted to the minute on a chalkboard out front. This feels like Southern California ought to be. 3179 Carlsbad Blvd., 760-729-4161

The Counter: For east side eats beyond the hotels, I really enjoyed this high-end burger bar, where you are given a checklist to design your own meal. Make sure to order a side of the onion strings. The milk shakes looked good and there's a full bar. Sit at the bar/counter and you can watch the Padres, Chargers or whatever else is in season on the flat-screen TVs hung above the vodka bottles. Work it off with a stroll to the Apple Store or Borders in Forum Shops. 1923 Calle Barcelona #148, 760-652-5480 or thecounter.com

Bookstore

Fahrenheit 451: This is the kind of store that is fast disappearing throughout America - a small independent used bookstore whose bibliophile owner creates a quirky collection that defies categorization. For those who don't know, the name comes from a Ray Bradbury science fiction story about book burning - 451 degrees Fahrenheit is the temperature at which paper was said to burn. 325 Carlsbad Village Dr., 760-720-3373

Attractions

Museum of Making Music. Decidedly hands-on museum dedicated to musical instruments and the people who play them. 5790 Armada Dr., 877-551-9976,

museumofmakingmusic.org

For information:

On hotels, restaurants and businesses mention in the story, contact the San Diego North Convention & Visitors Bureau, 760-745-4748 or SanDiegoNorth.com . They can also help guide you to long term rentals if you want to make a week or more out of your Carlsbad trip.

Click on it: visitcarlsbad.com . Another good spot for information on the basics, plus nature sites, lagoons and Leo Carillo Ranch.

Summer weekend tip: The city's 25-year-old Jazz in the Parks offers free Friday night concerts at three parks over the summer, beginning June 25. Despite the name, the music ranges from big band to Afro-Cuban to blues. The two-hour concerts begin at 6 p.m. Go to carlsbadca.gov/arts for the full schedule