



# So long, San Diego

I feel like I barely knew you

By AnnaMaria Stephens



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I moved to San Diego when I was 17. Daunted by the idea of being too far away from my parents—or too close to them—I chose UCSD over Berkeley and my hometown of Los Angeles. Plus I secretly fantasized about turning into a tanned surfer girl.

I must've cried myself to sleep a hundred times my freshman year. San Diego felt so sleepy, not so much sun-kissed as bleached into cultural oblivion. As for surfing? It really wasn't for me. I swore I'd get out of here the second I graduated.

Well, that day has finally come—though 17 years later. At the end of July, I'm moving to Seattle with my boyfriend, who's landed a professor position at the University of Washington. It's like a great cosmic joke after so much complaining about San Diego's perfect weather.

As our move date draws closer, I've realized there are many things I took for granted in this almost former town of mine. So I've been making a list—a city bucket list, if you will—and I've been ticking off as much as I can. And you know what? San Diego is an awesome place to live. Too bad it took me half a lifetime to figure it out.

### Balboa Park

Until a few months ago, when I was assigned to write about it for a travel book, I'd all but ignored the magnificent public park that's practically in my backyard. I'd visited the museums for work, but that was the extent of it. First stop: the Balboa Park Visitors Center. The staff suggested a 200-page guidebook by Pam Crooks, a worthwhile purchase, and I also downloaded a free map from the park's website.

Since then, I've taken to exploring every nook and cranny of the 1,200 acres, from trails that crisscross through canyons and shady groves to inviting swaths of lawn perfect for picnic blankets and canoodling. Almost every weekend, it's something new. Did you know that the Zoro Garden housed a nudist colony during the 1935 Exposition? Apparently, you're not supposed to run around naked these days, but wander secluded winding paths and you'll see plenty of people who come close.

And what about lawn bowling—have you ever tried that? It's different than bocce, relying on bowls not balls, and I kicked my boyfriend's butt at it. But what I really adore is all the greenery, from towering redwood trees to alien-looking cacti. I know, I know, I'm moving to a place called the Emerald City, but I sure wish I'd spent more of my 17 years exploring this way-beyond-palms park.

On the agenda this summer: Free organ concerts, Screen on the Green, guided architecture walks.

### Beer

Even though most hops come from Yakima, Wash., Seattle's got nothing on San Diego's beer scene. Too bad I only recently discovered that I really, really like beer. Thankfully, though, San Diego has loads of places where I can make up for lost drinking time.

There's O'Brien's in Kearny Mesa, billed as "The Hoppiest Place on Earth." There's South Park's Hamilton's (affectionately known as Hammy's), North Park's Tornado (my personal favorite by far) and Blind Lady Ale House in Normal Heights, which carries a housemade Belgian single.

I've visited the Orchid-winning Stone Brewery in Escondido (take the fun free tour that concludes with a tasting) and plan to check out Lost Abbey, 2008's World Beer Cup champ. I've sampled craft brews from most of the local breweries. Top picks so far include Ballast Point's Victory at Sea, Alpine's Pure Hoppiness and Alesmith's Speedway Stout.

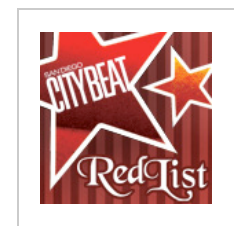
Warm summer weather means more imbibing than ever, and while beer guts and bikinis don't pair well, I'm willing to sacrifice. So I'll be testing my tasting mettle at the 12th annual Real Ale Festival at Pizza Port (June 12 and 13) and the 3rd annual International Beer Festival at the San Diego County Fair (June 26 and 27).

### Bonfires

This is embarrassing to admit: I've never been to a beach bonfire. Maybe it's because I'm a big baby when it comes to the cold and damp (oh, the irony), or maybe it's because it always seemed a little too Lost Boys to hang out around a massive fire with a bunch of possibly bloodsucking strangers. In fact, just last year at Black's Beach, a man was stabbed in a drunken brawl during a full-moon drum-circle bonfire. The Rainbow Family "peaceful anarchists" no longer host the monthly event, which had gotten seriously out of hand with up to 1,000 attendees.

A good way to avoid the freaks is to hang out with geeks—as in the Geek Bonfire, a non-boozing Mission Bay bash for

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techie types. The last one was in March and I've bookmarked Meetup.com for the next one. If that doesn't happen before I head out, I'll gather up a few pals—preferably people who know how the heck to start a bonfire, 'cause I sure don't—and head for a family-friendly beach like Ponto in Carlsbad or Silver Strand in Coronado.

**Borrego Springs**

I'm pale, hate the heat and am ridiculously allergic to wildflowers, which may explain why I always avoided visiting this incredible desert landscape just 90 minutes from Downtown. Turns out Borrego is beyond beautiful, and it's still hospitable in May and June. The tiny town is surrounded by 650,000 acres of protected state park, with plenty of hiking trails and a really neat visitors center.

If you want to rough it, pitch a tent at one of the campgrounds or drop some serious dollars at the posh Borrego Ranch Resort, a gorgeous grown-up getaway. Also, architecture aficionados, you wouldn't believe the mid-century houses out there—it's not quite Palm Springs, but it's definitely worth the drive to check out mountain-framed classics by Cliff May and Richard Zerbe (see Borregomodern.com for details).

**Bidding bye-bye**

Well, *CityBeat* readers, it's been real. You'll still see my byline in the music section, but consider this my personal adieu to you. If I've conveyed anything in this B-for-Bucket-themed list, I hope it's that you should be stoked about what you have here in San Diego. My plan this summer is to enjoy every last minute of it, because as Joni Mitchell sang in "Big Yellow Taxi" (Dylan's version was a cover): "Don't it always seem to go that you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone?"

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