

SoCal Splendor: Torrey Pines State Reserve, and the author's daughter, Casey, offering her elbow to Lorikeets at Wild Animal Park.

San Diego Steamboat-style

Winter-beating beach vacation closer than you think

YOU DON'T HAVE TO CARRY NECK PILLOWS and update passports to escape Old Man Winter. An easy flight lands you in sunny San Diego and 70 miles of SoCal coastline, with sandy beaches and waves replacing the blariness of winter.

You can pack your itinerary as full as your ears with sand. The problem is how to prioritize. Between beach time, boardwalks, surfing and theme parks, you'll barely have time to shake sand out of flip-flops before the next adventure.

Luckily we had a good basecamp: Paradise Point on Mission Bay, where we made it back in time each evening to bike, stroll the beach, swim and sip beers in the Jacuzzi while making the next day's plans. While we couldn't do it all — that wave that got away and tours of the historic Gas Lamp Quarter will have to wait — we put a dent in the area's activities like our footprints in the squishy California sand.

BEACH TIME

Coronado, the Travel Channel's "best family beach in North America," offers sand as white as Mount

Werner in winter. Other hot spots include La Jolla Shores, where we snorkeled among kelp and Nemo-like clown fish; Ocean Beach for cotton candy on the pier; and three-mile long, boardwalk-bordered Pacific and Mission beaches, whose gentle waves are great for body surfing and running away from incoming flows. While our kids weren't necessarily hanging 10, their instructor, Alyssa, at Surf Divas, had them standing in no time — though I still don't know what they thought was cooler: the surfing or full-sleeve wet suits. While the kids yelled "Cowabunga!" San Diego's version of the winter sports club van — only pink with bright orange flames — pulled up and kids piled out like local rug-rats descending on Howelsen Hill. www.surfdivas.com

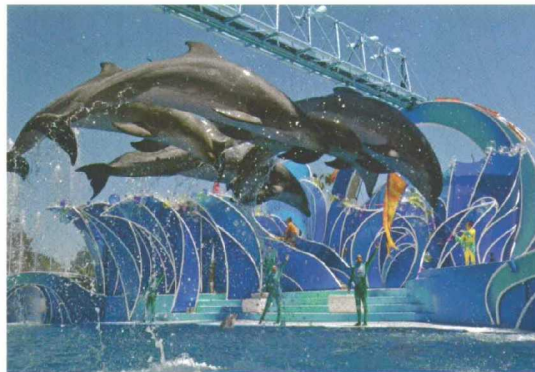
SAN DIEGO ZOO

Even Steamboat's wild critters would pine for a stint at the San Diego Zoo, a 100-acre tropical garden housing 800 species. Set in a lavish jungle setting, it's all viewable from a double-decker bus, sky tram or by walking through leaf-lined tunnel paths. Family





Courtesy of the San Diego CVB



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Beaches and Bottlenose: A sunset at La Jolla Shores and dolphins putting on a show at Sea World.

favorites were the tail-swinging monkeys and sloth bear, which looked surprisingly like dad back home, and the Hula-Hoop contests to Jimmy Buffet-like bands. The newly opened Conrad Prebys Polar Bear Plunge reminded our youngest of the winter we had escaped; and the Elephant Odyssey, complete with 120,000-gallon pool for their squirt gun-like noses, reminded our oldest to buy a new water weapon for our annual summer rafting trip. www.sandiegozoo.org

WILD ANIMAL PARK

Drag some sand into the rental car and hit the road. Next stop: the Wild Animal Park, an 1,800-acre preserve where the wild things are. Inspired by the Dark Continent's safari trains, Journey into Africa is an open-air tram bringing you eye-to-eye with rhinoceros, Cape buffalo, elephants and African crowned cranes (or try the 400-foot Flightline zipline). Don't forget to feed multi-colored Lorikeets nectar from a plastic thimble — and snap pictures of four of them on your tyke's torso at a time; and feel your ACLs cringe at the sight of Pretzel-like African dancers. www.sandiegozoo.org

USS MIDWAY MUSEUM

A tour of the USS Midway aircraft carrier let us climb around berths, bulkheads and brigs in an eye-opening feat of engineering. Requiring a third of the population of Steamboat (4,500 people) to run, the docked vessel was part of the Navy fleet for 47 years and home to 200,000 sailors during the Vietnam and Persian Gulf wars. Hint: take the audio tour, which describes how sailors hoisted aircraft up three stories to the flight deck and deployed hair-raising cables to catch landing planes. Perhaps that's what Steamboat's airport needs instead of a longer runway. www.midway.org

SEA WORLD

Steamboat's Spring Splash has nothing on Shamu. Located on Mission Bay, this 189-acre park features six major shows, a multitude of marine life, and stomach-

churning rides like Journey to Atlantis and Arctic World Helicopter. But the real stars are the high-flying bottlenose dolphin (was that a cork McTwist?) and Shamu. We crowded in to find three seats in the front row, suspiciously right in the splash zone (now we know why they were empty), and emerged like drowned rats, no thanks to a grinning and gyrating Shamu. Hint: it's not the Meadows Lot; remember to look where you parked. www.seaworld.com

LEGOLAND

While the new LegoLand Water Park is a far cry from tubing the Yampa, it offers a 128-acre package of fun. Miniland — with models of Washington D.C., New Orleans, New York City, San Francisco and Las Vegas (sorry, no Oak Creek) — is made from 20 million Lego bricks, dwarfing any mundane square building you built as a kid. The water park, complete with a six-person raft slide, lets you float a lazy river while customizing your own soft Lego raft. Thankfully, our kids tired of it all after a few hours and wanted to go the beach — now that's Steamboat upbringing. www.legoland.com ■

Where to Stay

- **Paradise Point Resort & Spa:** A private 44-acre island tucked away on Mission Bay, adjacent to SeaWorld. Info: www.paradisepoint.com
- **Rancho Valencia:** Sitting atop 40 acres in the hills of Rancho Santa Fe, Rancho Valencia made *Condé Nast Traveler's* Gold List and has been ranked the #1 U.S. Tennis Resort. Stay in one of 26 casitas with 49 one- and two-room suites, complete with white-washed beams, cathedral ceilings, stucco walls and private patio spas. Info: www.RanchoValencia.com

IF YOU GO:

Direct flights from Denver will get you there in two hours. Driving takes 18 hours, but you can leave at noon, overnight in Mesquite, Utah, and be at the beach by 1 p.m. the next day. Info: www.sandiego.org