

Published in
San Diego Union Tribune
January 24, 2003

OLD TOWN

Intercepting history

Today's Old Town is steeped in a vibrant Mexican past

By Liz Morrison
SPECIAL TO THE
UNION-TRIBUNE
January 24, 2003

No trip to San Diego is complete without a visit to historic Old Town. With its mixture of preserved Victorian buildings, Spanish colonial architecture, and charming shops and restaurants, Old Town offers a lesson in history as well as an opportunity to enjoy one of San Diego's most delightful neighborhoods.

In the center of Old Town is Bazaar del Mundo, which means "Bazaar of the World," and that's exactly what it is. Here you'll find lots of shops, boutiques and restaurants. Wear your walking shoes, because you'll want to explore every corner of the Bazaar's fragrant gardens and quaint courtyards. The relaxing sound of splashing fountains will accompany you as you take in the sights, smells and sounds of what feels like Old Mexico.

Two of the better-known eateries in Bazaar del Mundo are Casa

de Pico (2754 Calhoun St.; 619-296-3267), which is located on the original site of the home of Gen. Pico, the last governor of California during Mexican rule; and Casa de Bandini (2660 Calhoun St.; 619-297-8211), named after Juan Bandini, secretary to Gen. Pico and a prominent early San Diegan in his own right. Both restaurants offer indoor and outdoor dining.

Even when the weather is a little nippy, patio dining, with its colorful umbrella tables and lively mariachis, is where you'll find the locals. If you're waiting for an outdoor table at Casa de Pico, you'll be tempted by the aroma of warm, fresh tortillas from the tortilla maker situated close by. Go ahead and sample a few. They're hard to resist.

Once you're at your table, you can toast your favorite team with bucket-sized margaritas. Nothing goes better with a frosty margarita than a basket of crispy tortilla chips and a bowl of tangy salsa. But don't fill up; the menu at Casa de Pico is full of tempting Mexican dishes that require a healthy appetite.

Other well-known Mexican eateries include the Old Town

Mexican Cafe (2489 San Diego Ave.; 619-297-4330), a favorite with locals and known for its scrumptious carnitas as well as its extensive selection of tequilas and margaritas.

For Mexican seafood, try Rockin' Baja Lobster (3890 Twiggs St.; 619-260-0305). Its famous Baja Buckets are chockfull of spicy Baja-style lobster tails and shrimp, chicken and steak. Steak, chicken, and traditional Mexican dishes are also available.

Got a hankering for other types of cuisine? Lino's (2754 Calhoun St.; 619-299-7124) offers classic Italian fare including pizza, pasta, sandwiches and salads. For the more adventuresome palette, Berta's Latin American Kitchen (3928 Twiggs St.; 619-295-2343) tantalizes diners with Brazilian, Argentinean, and Peruvian cuisine complemented by a varied Latin American wine list.

Cafe Pacifica (2414 San Diego Ave.; 619-291-6666) has a cozy bungalow feel with a touch of refinement. This eatery is a favorite with locals because of its contemporary California cuisine, award-winning wine list, and inviting ambience.

To walk off your meal, stroll


FRIDAY
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The San Diego

Union-Tribune.

through Old Town's colorful shops. You'll find handcrafted Mexican folk art, creative dinnerware, international home furnishings, Mexican colonial antiques, jewelry, hand-woven textiles and ethnic clothing from all over Latin America.

If you've got a sweet tooth, you won't want to miss the delectable choices from La Panaderia (2754 Calhoun St.; 619-291-7662), a Mexican bakery. Try a sweet, sticky churro, which is a footlong stick of fried dough covered in cinnamon sugar. You'll also find tasty old-fashioned candies and rich gourmet chocolates as you wind your way through Old Town.

For you duffers who just need a quick fix on the links, the Presidio Hills Golf Course (4136 Wallace St.; 619-295-9746), offers 18 pitch-and-putt holes. Each hole is a par three, 100 or fewer yards in

length, and the entire course only takes an hour and a half to play. And with greens fees at a mere \$10, you can't go wrong.

If you're looking for entertainment in an intimate setting, visit The Theatre in Old Town, located at 4040 Twiggs St. (619-688-2494). There's not a bad seat in this cozy venue. Tickets start at \$25.

Old Town's full name is actually Old Town State Park because of its many historical sites. One is Heritage Park, a 7.8-acre area dedicated to the preservation of San Diego's Victorian architecture. Here you'll find seven buildings, all constructed in the late 19th century, that are open to the public.

Take some time to go through these quaint structures and experience the lifestyle of early San Diego. A park ranger is available daily from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. to

answer questions.

If the macabre is more your style, don't miss the Whaley House, (2482 San Diego Ave. 619-297-7511) an historic and reputedly haunted house. Admission is \$5 for adults, \$4 for seniors, and \$3 for kids. Hours are 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. daily except Tuesdays.

After you've been sufficiently frightened, walk a little further down the street and you'll find the Little Adobe Chapel, which was Old Town's first church, and El Campo Santo, a Catholic cemetery that dates to 1850.

Old Town State Park is easy to find. From Interstate 8, take Taylor Street, or from Interstate 5, take the Old Town Avenue exit.

Liz Morrison is a San Diego writer.