Something for Everyone in San Diego

By Donald Robertson

CALIFORNIA is a mixed bag in every respect and San Diego is a splendid example of it. In a city whose newspaper monopoly won't print even the title of an X-rated movie in its theatre ads, gay life flourishes with little of the harassment that is an integral part of the Los Angeles scene.

San Diego almost faded into a non-entity after World War II but an enthusiastic citizenry converted its seaport drabbiness into a beautiful seaside resort offering something for everyone. If your something comes in sailor or Marine costume, surfer trunks or campus jeans, you'll get more than your share. There are plenty of gay bars, lots of dancing, several active baths, a paradise of street and john cruising, a very professional female impersonation nightclub, and unlimited provision for sports, dining and relaxation.

Located just two hours drive from Los Angeles and fifteen minutes from the Mexican border town of Tijuana, San Diego has remarkable accessibility. All freeways intercept the downtown area; the airport, surprisingly, is situated in the heart of the city, as is the railway station; and marina docking facilities are only a short taxi ride from City Center.

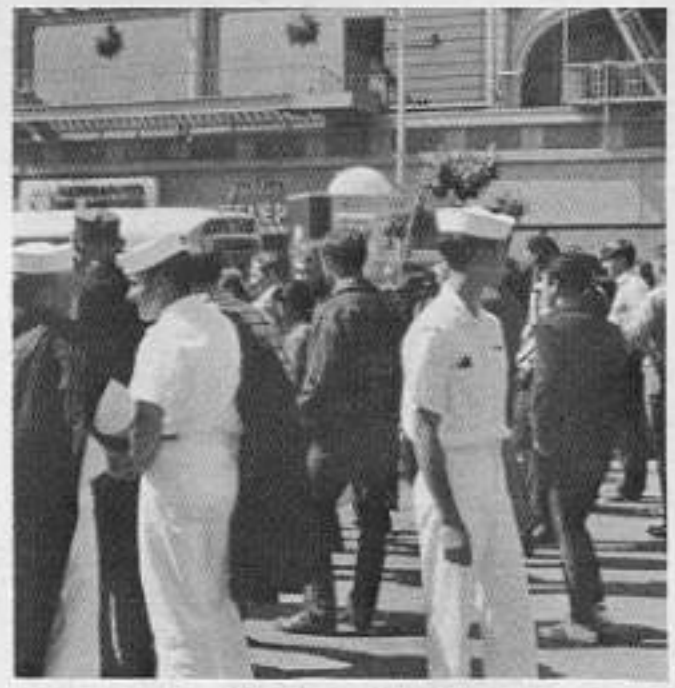
Excellent accommodation is available at the beaches of Mission Bay Park, a complex of sheltered seawater coves. I would recommend the Islandia, Bahia or Hilton Inn in this area. Single rates start at $14, doubles at $18, except during the period July to September when they are raised by four or five dollars. Hundreds of motels provide less expensive rooms on the ocean at Mission and Pacific Beaches, including Dave's Pacific Sands, which is basically straight. Some people might be charmed by the historic elegance of the more expensive and rather isolated Coronado Hotel situated on the island. For a short visit, however, you're probably better off staying downtown close to the heavier action. There are no exclusively gay hotels but the YMCA on 8th Avenue, just off Broadway, although no Embarcadero, is typically Y. More interesting is the Armed Forces YMCA on Broadway at India, but, regrettably, this hostel is reserved on Friday and Saturday nights for servicemen. Take heart, though, because freer souls in uniform, as well as the overflow crowd, roost at the San Diego Hotel across the street, and this I would recommend in any event. Singles and doubles are less than $10, the rooms are clean and decent-sized although not fancy, night-time access with tricks poses no problems, and you'll probably end up socking it to one or more of the guests. To make you feel at home, the bathroom soap is appropriately labeled 'Gay Bouquet'.

The Turkish Navy was in town.

You won't have any problem identifying the military presence on Broadway between the two YMCAs. San Diego hosts a Marine Corps Recruit Depot, a Naval Training Facility, two Naval Air Stations, a huge Navy Base and a Naval Hospital. On weekends, reinforcements (more Marines) come down from Camp Pendleton at Oceanside. Many sailors use the locker club in the basement of the Armed Forces Y and change clothes in the popular washroom there. Every night, the poolroom and front steps are crowded with hungry young types who also frequent the many fun arcades on Broadway, the Plaza, and the surrounding streets. Quite often, the loners take an obvious stance on the quieter streets such as "E", right behind the San Diego Hotel. Remember the rule though: screw the Marines but don't try to kiss them because they're not queer, you know.

O.K., so much for your drooling; let's quench your thirst. Bradley's on the Plaza is a dumpy bar but it attracts

Bradley's Bar, across the Plaza.



Servicemen in the Plaza.

San Diego as seen from Mr. A's.

many servicemen because it's not exclusively gay. Not too far away are two very popular bars, The Club at 2501 Kettner and The Swing at 3175 India. The Club is open during the day and packed at night with lots of dancers, quite a few gay girls, and too much noise for cozy conversation. The Swing, tastefully decorated, is probably the best cruising bar in San Diego and draws a very attractive crowd. The closest thing to a leather bar in the city is B.J.'s, a friendly butch beer bar at 750 India, where customers sometimes park their tractor-trailers overnight while tricking. The bar opens daily at 8 AM and serves a fine Sunday brunch of steak and eggs for $1. The Brass Rail at 3802 Fifth Avenue is pretty quiet these days but two new bars, both featuring dancing, hold great promise: Club 2220 (University Avenue) and Diablo's, 2533 El Cajon, are located close to each other and may be real action centers by the time this is published. Terry's Hole at 1856 San Diego is another dance bar with a young crowd. The newest place, the Downtowner at Market Street and Second, and yet to open when this was written. It was scheduled to feature two bars and two restaurants, a straight and a gay pair. This will be the city's only all-gay restaurant and will feature entertainment.

Special mention has to be made of a 'chicken delight' called the Pirates' Den, a beer bar at 5257 University which appears to exclude anyone under fifteen. The place is packed with friendly cuties and hand-holding and caressing are delightfully common. My host, a 19 year-old who had just ended a seven year love affair, invited me to an after hours party where the chicken draped themselves in trick towels before the dancing began.

If you hit most of these bars on your first night you may need a couple of Bloody Mary's to generate enough energy to do the beach scene next day. San Diego has a long coastline of good beaches, starting with Ocean Beach on the south. Here, at the end of a bus line and closest to downtown, hundreds of sailors and Marines adorn the sand after changing in the friendly dressing room (hint). Just to the north is beautiful Mission Bay Park where acres of grass (not that kind) and sandy beaches offer dozens of attractive sunning and swimming areas to share in relative privacy with last night's trick or 'the one'.

On the coast next to the Park is Mission Beach where the roller coaster at the carnival site marks the end of another bus route feeding seafood and what-have-you to the shore. On the boardwalk side of the amusement park is a huge changing room offering total satisfaction to the voyeur and excellent potential for the active cruiser. For the aesthetically inclined, the toilets feature a decorator-color choice of five rolls of paper in each cubicle: white, yellow, amber, orange and lavender. Which would you pick? And wouldn't you know: the gay beach is right in front.

As an added come-on, the beaches are loaded with surfers who have to be among the most beautifully built kids in the world. Most have been peddling their—pardon me, paddling—their boards since they were in elementary school and have developed impressive, well-tanned young bodies. For me, watching surfers is the old potato chip routine: how do you stop? They congregate at the park at the extreme south end of Mission Boulevard, at Pacific Beach north of the motel-pier

This men's room is called "Snack Bar."

Miles of beautiful beaches . . . .

at Garnet, in Tourmaline Surfing Park just slightly further north, and at the famous Windansea Beach in La Jolla. Many can be had, mostly through contact in the changing rooms, although prudence and patience are required. Hitchhikers, preferably without their boards, are another good bet.

If you are planning a Sunday at the beach you might start with brunch at Skipper's in La Jolla (6737 La Jolla Boulevard, and Jolla is pronounced 'hoya', the Spanish word for 'jewel'), Skipper's Restaurant is populated almost exclusively by the parents of senior citizens and the bar by gays, each group doing their own thing. The weekday patronage in the bar tends to be older but Sunday brunch brings out a younger crowd as well. After brunch, if you dig nude beaches, try the scene at Torrey Pines, just north of La Jolla. Apart from the beach, there's plenty of foliage for outdoor sport. Inquire locally; it's not an easy place to find, but therein lies its success.

After your Sunday swim and sunning you'll find that the action spot is The Outrigger, 844 West Mission Bay Drive, diagonally opposite the roller coaster. Why not join the bikinis shaking it around on the dance floor?

The tearoom scene in San Diego is beyond belief and strictly for the live dangerously set. Or is that the name of the game? After ogling the surfers at Pacific Beach you might try the stepdown facility at Ocean Boulevard and Diamond, or cross the road to the Mission Bay inlet at El Carmel Street, off 3550 Mission Boulevard, next to the yacht club. At Mission Bay Park three active johns surround the Bahia Hotel: across the highway, at the end of the adjacent beach parking lot, and on the beach behind the

Hotel. The last one has a huge sign curiously advertising 'Snack Bar,' although the only eating that takes place is in the cubicles. At Cal State, hardly on the way to anywhere, the action is in the Physics Building, not the Library. The White Front discount store features a glory hole with a lineup so don't go if you're in a hurry. Balboa Park might be called 'gobblers gulch', especially in the washrooms along Sixth Avenue. Highly frequented and less obvious is the facility in the basement of the Model Railway Club at the rear of the building opposite the main Tower in the center of the park. To the south of this complex and in the back of the Palisades area (drive past the sign 'Spreckle's Organ': it's too big and noisy) next to the Ford Building is glory-hole junction. A word of caution: in one week last year there were 56 arrests in this one john, and a friend of mine at the Bahia tells me that police sometimes use rooms at the hotel to monitor washroom activity across from the hotel. Exciting, huh?

There are four baths establishments where you can unload with less worry and more comfort. Dave's Coast Security Baths at 4969 Santa Monica in Ocean Beach is private and pleasant but away from the mainstream and not overly active. The Gents is straight-owned and not very friendly. More popular are the Plaza Baths at 867 Fourth Avenue and the Atlas Baths at 743 Columbia, a block across the park from B.J.'s. Both encourage servicemen and are currently hosting both the Greek and Turkish navies. Each features a party room as well as private quarters.

For theatre buffs, the balconies of the Aztek and Broadway theatres provide action a la Times Square; the

University of California at San Diego.

Ocean Beach: Seafood and lifeguards.

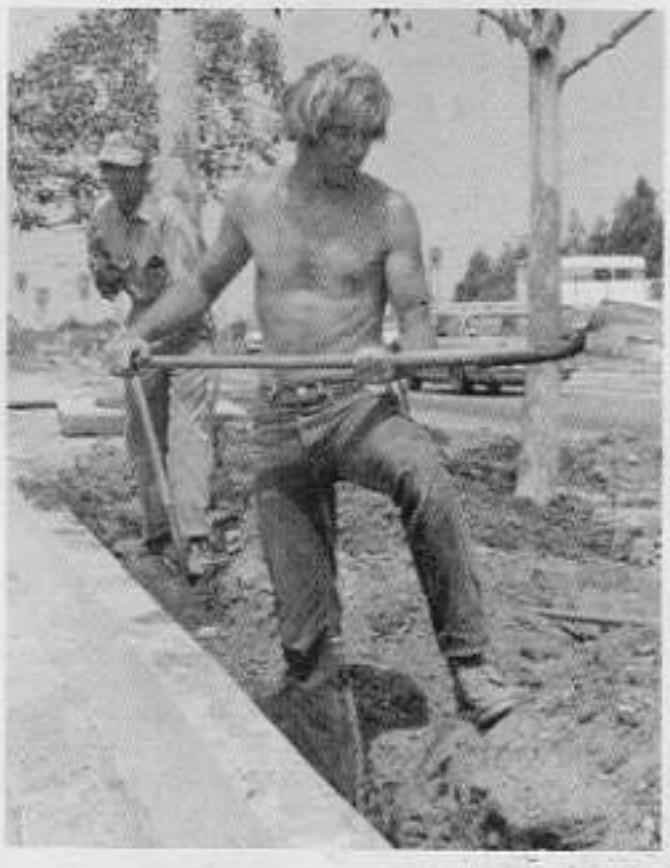
other all-night houses rarely do.

When the sex bit wears thin or when you settle down with something special there's ample diversion for all tastes. San Diego has countless fine beaches, although the water is seldom warmer than 68 degrees, and reserved surfing areas where you can take a rented board and give this exhilarating sport a try. There are sixty-five golf courses in the area, most of them public. Sailboats can be rented for relaxation in the sheltered waters of Mission Bay. Deep sea fishing trips are available daily. Sea World and the San Diego Zoo are rated among the finest in the world. You can tour the Zoo by tram if hiking is not your bag. Just to the north, the ponies race at Del Mar, or a fifteen minute drive to the south will take you to Tijuana and all the fascination of a border town, complete with matadors' baskets and open air urination at the bullfights every other Sunday in season. Although there are no gay bars in Tijuana, anything from boys to donkey shows can be bought for a price. Don't travel alone off the beaten path: it can be expensive and dangerous as a friend of mine found out. If you are a Canadian you can bring five quarts of cheap booze across the U.S. border on each visit. For a quieter jaunt, take a look at the University of California—barefoot U—where the ultra-modern buildings aren't the only beautiful sights. Nearby are the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art and the Scripps Institute of Oceanography.

If you have time left for dining, there's a top-notch assortment of restaurants awaiting your pleasure. View the city from Mr. A's on the roof of the Financial Center, 5th Avenue at Laurel, and use their balcony for picture taking or a romantic stroll. Or, eat at the water at any of the first-class restaurants at Shelter Island, possibly trying the famous Chart House where handsome college kids cook and serve superb steaks during their surfing off-hours. You'll get a sympathetic reception and a superior meal at the Top-of-the-Cove in La Jolla. (It's closed on Sundays and Mondays.) Hotel Row on Highway 8-80 features a variety of fine restaurants. Less expensive and more family style is the excellent Italian dining room at Pacific Beach called Giullio's where the house wine by the litre is unbeatable. Nearby is the misleadingly named pancake house called Uncle Susie's.

For a change of pace, why not enjoy a good show combined with a fine dinner? Show Biz, San Diego's female impersonation entertainment spot at 1421 University, headlines talent from the Jewel Box Review, the Lido of Paris and Finocchio's. Costumes are magnificent, the impersonations first-class and the performances well-balanced with top-notch humor. Shows are staged Wednesday through Sunday with '2-for-1 + $1' dinners on Tuesdays when the clientele is mostly gay. The straights pour in on weekends but you'll be too busy watching the show to notice.

If you have any problems or need any information while in the City, call the Metropolitan Community Church at 234-9909 or the Gay Information Center at 465-7316. After several days in San Diego the only number that I needed was 233-0287—Gay Alcoholics Together Anonymous. As I said, in San Diego there is something for everyone.



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