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Downtown's hidden treasures

by John Gregory

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Darlynnne and Marc Menkin, owners of Where You Want To Be Tours, stand before Georges on 5th restaurant, pointing to one of their favorite Victorian-style buildings. The building used to be Wyatt Earp's gambling hall and saloon. Photo by Paul Hansen

The frenzied pace of urban life seldom leaves time for enjoying the details that make city living so attractive to some. But applying the brakes to savor the often-overlooked landscape is worth the effort — and downtown San Diego has its share of hidden gems.

Just ask Darlynnne and Marc Menkin, owners of Where You Want To Be Tours, a company that makes its mark by pointing out these treasures.

Where You Want To Be Tours takes care to highlight the not-so-obvious — whether it be concealed pathways, secluded watering holes or serene gardens.

The Menkins and their tour guides are also quick to share historic lore and urban legends.

The company offers a variety of interactive tours, including scavenger hunts, a "Downtown with a Difference" walking tour, cycling adventures and bus tours.

"Our goal is that ... at some point in your adventure with us you'll look around and say, 'You know what, I'm exactly where I want to be,'" Darlynnne said.

Marc can easily rattle off two dozen points of interest on a surprisingly quick stroll starting at Seaport Village and ending in East Village.

First of all, Marc suggests a different way of getting around coastal San Diego that most overlook. Take a water taxi from the dock near Roy's restaurant at Seaport Village instead of land transportation. Water taxis come by twice an hour or they can be called for pick-up. They will deliver passengers to a number of destinations, including several restaurants along the ocean front.

"You don't have to own a boat to have a nautical adventure," Marc said.

Nearby, the Manchester Grand Hyatt, One Market Place, provides spectacular views at the Top of the Hyatt lounge, 40 stories high. Tourists and locals alike can peek at an urban landscape, San Diego Bay or get a bird's-eye view of the USS Midway aircraft carrier museum.

Next door, the tropical setting of the swimming pool area at the Marriott Hotel & Marina, 333 W. Harbor Drive, complete with water falls, also features a tiki bar that is open to locals. Anyone can walk into the area, buy a cool drink and take in the scene. "It's a slice of paradise," Marc said.

Those who prefer a coffee drink may go inside to the Marriott's second floor Starbucks, order a cup and sit in the plentiful seating while looking down on the tropical view from above. It's definitely one of the most scenic Starbucks locations and it rarely has a line, Marc said.

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The La Jolla Community Planning Association (LJCPA) will vote on La Jolla's list of priorities for the city's Capital Improvement Program (CIP) budget at its upcoming meeting on Nov. 1 at 6 p.m. Th...

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Back on the ground level, a few steps east of the pool area reveals a mermaid wire sculpture on the side of the Convention Center — one piece of hidden public art the tour company delights in showing off.

"It's totally hidden and never gets mentioned," Marc said.

Between the Marriott and the Convention Center is a rarely seen tropical pathway with a variety of leafy plants. The opening of the path on the other side reveals another wire sculpture, this one titled "For the Benefit of Mr. Kite."

Parked nearby is a large vehicle used to shuttle Marriott guests. Mounted on its roof is a huge double-wide paddle board made from wood. Marc said he has tried to use the paddle board on a few occasions, and the hotel has been obliging, but the schedule hasn't worked out so far.

A glance at the Convention Center between the old and new structure offers a look at the many locals who use the steps as a workout course. But a closer look uncovers a little-used incline elevator that takes guests upward parallel to the stairway, and provides a great view. Anyone can hop on.

Marc mentioned that a pedestrian bridge under construction further to the east is scheduled to open this spring close to the Bayfront Hilton, allowing pedestrians to cross over Harbor Drive toward Petco Park. The new bridge will have a nautical look, he said.

Crossing Harbor Drive from the western edge of the Convention Center brings pedestrians to Martin Luther King Walkway and more public art in the form of a powerful sculpture called "Breaking the Chains of Hate."

Along the walkway an outdoor fireplace signals the San Diego Culinary Center, 200 Harbor Drive, housed on the ground floor of the Harbor Club Towers. Aside from a selection of fine wines for sampling and purchase, the center hosts Dizzy's live jazz club.

Walking up some stairs and through a gate, Marc leads the way into the deck outside the Hilton San Diego Gaslamp Quarter, 401 K St. Here, he provides details of all the many historic photos on display. He explains that, long before the Convention Center existed, a dock once came all the way up to where the hotel now stands, and that a metal overlook jutting from the deck of the Hilton was built to acknowledge the position of the old dock. He explained that some photos illustrate the old Stingaree district dotted with brothels, and that the name stingaree comes from the stingrays that inhabited the bay. Then he came to one of his favorite characters, Alonzo Horton. Marc explained that Horton came to the area in the late 1800s, bought land and promoted the area. "I see (Horton's) long beard and I think, 'Did ZZ Top get their inspiration from Alonzo Horton?'"

Back to the subject of the Stingaree district, Marc said he is fascinated that some local bar and restaurant establishments are named after madams from that era. For instance, madam Cora's Marble Room Kitchen & Saloon, 535 Fifth Ave., is named for a madam whose brothel operated on a color scheme. If a patron chose a woman in a red dress, for instance, then he would be taken into the room with a red door at the entrance.

The Horton Grand Hotel, 311 Island Ave., has a restaurant named Ida Bailey's. Bailey once ran a high-end brothel where none of her workers were allowed to swear. While inside The Horton Grand, Marc was sure to point out the highly-detailed Victorian staircase, which is well preserved.

Nearby, at the Chinese Historical Museum, 404 Third Ave., Marc unveiled a tranquil pathway and garden sandwiched between the museum building and its neighboring structure. It's a place he and Darlynnne have visited to share a peaceful moment, he said. Marc also detailed the efforts the city is undertaking to promote and establish an Asian cultural district in the area.

Then came a walk to Petco Park.

"Even locals are very captivated by what they see in Petco Park: special access areas, rooftop lounges, public art, colorful restaurants," Marc said.

He mentioned that Park at the Park is fairly substantial, open from sunrise to sunset. It's a dog-friendly park. He said he brings tours to the park to hit a bucket of tennis balls at the miniature ball field situated at one corner.

"When you're hitting a line drive at Park at the Park, you're really hitting the ball inside Petco Park," he said.

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Here are a number of other treasures and tales throughout San Diego's downtown area that Marc mentioned:


- Jessop's clock in the middle of Horton Plaza: Commissioned by jeweler Joseph Jessop, it began keeping time publicly in 1907. It only stopped running three times according to fable — 1) the day that Joseph Jessop died, 2) When a horse and buggy ran into it, 3) when an earthquake struck.
- University Club Atop Symphony Towers, 750 B St. It is accessible to the public and you can schedule business meetings or hold weddings there, Marc said. The view from the bar is incredible; you can see the ocean and Petco Park, he said.
- The Courtyard Marriott, 530 Broadway. An old vault is used as a meeting room.
- Downtown's rooftop lounges: the Andaz San Diego (formerly The Ivy Luxury San Diego Hotel), 600 F St.; Se San Diego, 1047 Fifth Ave.; Hotel Solamar San Diego, 435 Sixth Ave.; the W San Diego Hotel, 421 W. B St.; Hotel Indigo San Diego, 509 Ninth Ave.
- Dog-friendly hotels: Omni San Diego, 675 L St.; Hotel Indigo San Diego, 509 Ninth Ave.; Hotel Solamar San Diego, 435 Sixth Ave., Hilton San Diego Gaslamp Quarter, 401 K St., the Andaz San Diego, 600 F St.
- Anthology, 1337 India St. "Just the look of the place is amazing," Marc said. A jazz place, it has three levels. People are still finding out about it, he said. It has live music, great sound system, an outstanding house band and happy hour.
- Hike through canyons in Banker's Hill (with foot bridges): Maple Canyon and Kate Sessions Canyon.
- Palm Canyon in Balboa Park: 400 different palms. "A total sanctuary on a hot day," Marc said.
- World Beat Center in Balboa Park: It's colorful and exciting. Always something going on; music, even workout classes and healthy eating courses.
- U.S. Grant Hotel, 326 Broadway: A knock-your-socks-off vintage look and great colors. They are trying to bring local music back into the bar, Marc said.

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