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RAILS TO
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Treat yourself to
a midday getaway

10 SMART HOME FIX-UPS



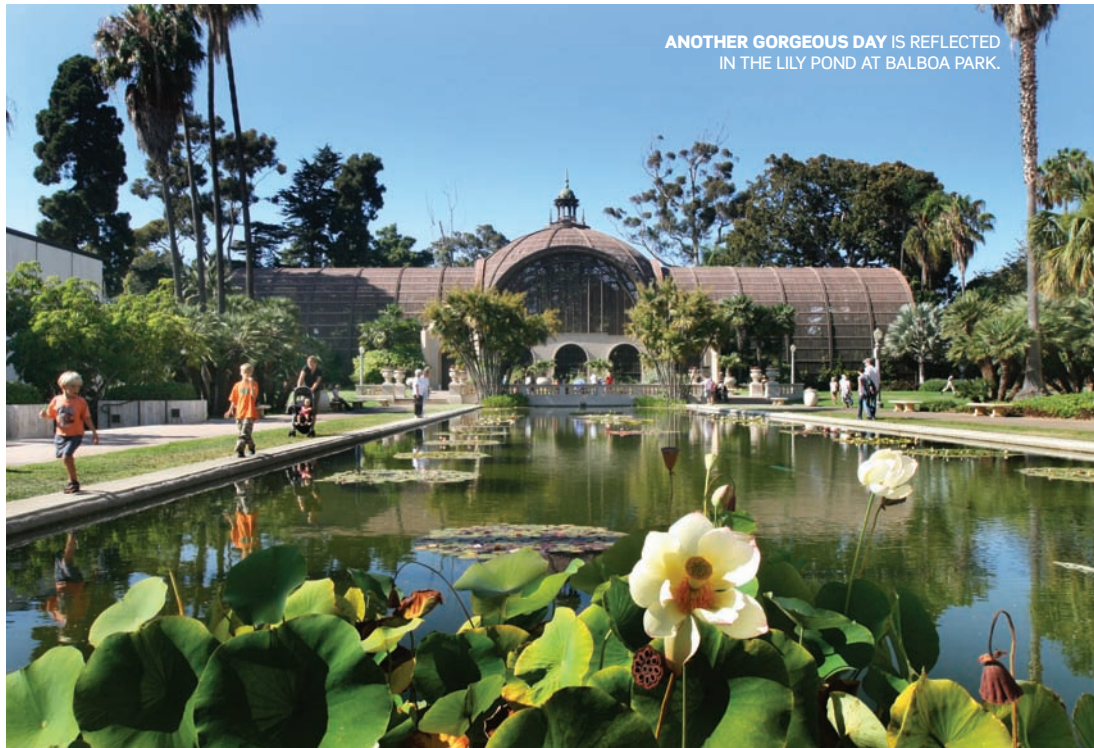
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hit THE ROAD

BY SUSAN BELKNAPP



SAFE, RELIABLE, CONSISTENT - IT'S HARD TO BEAT THE SAN DIEGO TROLLEY SYSTEM.



ANOTHER GORGEOUS DAY IS REFLECTED IN THE LILY POND AT BALBOA PARK.

Ride the rails

Get away to sunny San Diego and leave the car behind.

Public transportation is great, especially when traveling. Maybe it's because, as a born and bred Southern Californian, I see it as a kind of novelty. It's more likely because I have a tragically bad sense of direction, and when I don't have to find my way around an unfamiliar city by my own devices, I am all for it.

Though my body compass is defective, I can read a map and usually master a subway directory. (Washington D.C.'s Metro system is great, but the London Underground took me at least a week to decipher).

I commute from Riverside to Newport

Beach four days a week, so the prospect of spending a weekend in San Diego sans car had an obvious appeal. My sister and I opted for a girls' getaway, and on Friday morning we went straight to the very clean, comfortable Amtrak terminal at the Irvine Transportation Center to wait for the Pacific Surfliner, which parallels the coast in eye-pleasing luxury.

The trip from Irvine to downtown San Diego takes about an hour and 30 minutes. The train's swivel seats are wide and comfortable, with power outlets for each passenger. The Surfliner stops at Del Mar, San Diego Zoo, Balboa Park, Sea World and

Old Town, and round-trip coach fare is \$19 for an adult, \$9.50 for children.

We leaned back and chatted while the sun-drenched coast sped by. In no time, we arrived at the historic Santa Fe Depot in downtown San Diego and hopped across the platform to a trolley stop.

The San Diego Trolley System is fantastic. It's fast, efficient and easily accessible; above all, it makes sense.

We stopped two blocks from the chic boutique Hotel Indigo Gaslamp Quarter (hotelsandiegodowntown.com). Newly constructed, this property provides optimum service and comfort for business

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SAN DIEGO CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU.



THE SKYLINE VIEW
FROM CORONADO ISLAND



OLD TOWN TROLLEY
TOURS ARE FUN AND INFORMATIVE.



THE STAR OF INDIA IS THE
WORLD'S OLDEST ACTIVE SHIP.

and luxury travelers, families or weekend tourists. A few blocks in any direction will take you to places to shop, galleries and vibrant nightspots.

After checking in, we enjoyed a mid-afternoon appetizer at Phi Bar & Bistro in the lobby. The fruit-and-cheese platter was perfect, especially when complemented with a crisp, tangy ginger martini.

The fluid floorplan is open and airy, conceived to optimize the use of natural light. A glass-encased lobby overlooks the street. The décor, with its bright colors and patterns accented with chrome, cut glass and elegant water features, reflects and refracts the ample sunlight.

When dressing for dinner, we took care to wear comfortable shoes, though the walk is only about four blocks – two to the trolley stop and another two to Ruth's Chris Steakhouse on North Harbor Drive.

It was San Diego Restaurant Week, so we had the option of a three-course prix-fixe meal. The available choices were exactly what we would have selected.

Sharing everything, we started with crab-stuffed mushrooms and seared ahi, then ordered filet mignon with blue cheese and a rib eye with peppercorn sauce, garlic mashed potatoes and creamed spinach. Everything was beyond exceptional, as was the service. For dessert we shared bread pudding with whiskey sauce and Chocolate Sin cake. I'm still plotting my return.

The next morning, we jumped on an Old Town Trolley tour (trolleytours.com/san-diego), planning to go three-quarters though the city loop before ending up in Balboa Park. This was a blast. We started near the Gaslamp Quarter then circled the harbor, headed over the Coronado Bridge to the island for which the bridge is named. (While on the bridge, the wind can really pick up; be sure to hold on to any loose items!) After a quick tour of the island, we headed to Balboa Park (balboapark.org).

Once we arrived, we strolled among

gardens and manicured grounds, taking in art and musical performances, both spontaneous and orchestrated. It was a postcard-perfect day.

Our daily pass gave us access to the many amazing offerings at Balboa Park. We went to the Museum of Man, the Natural History Museum, the Rubeen H. Fleet Science Center and the Model Railroad Museum. The last one is a *must* for any model train enthusiasts.

That evening, we dined at a hip new California- and Italian-inspired eatery, Cucina Urbana (sdurbankitchen.com) in Banker's Hill. It is fun and funky, and an obvious draw to the well-heeled crowd.

The next day, we strolled the few blocks to Café Chloe (cafechloe.com) for brunch al fresco. As we enjoyed our breakfast and mimosas, we tried to plan a return trip, as we barely scratched the city's surface. ■

SUSAN BELKNAPP is OC Family magazine's managing editor.