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Carlsbad, Calif.: Kidtown U.S.A.

Fun stacks up in the sun-kissed resort city with lagoons, flower fields, a music-making museum, and zillions of Lego blocks.

By [Josh Sens](#) | [March/April 2013](#)

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Southern California's Legoland has its own water park.

IF YOU'RE GOING...

Travel has a way of inspiring aha moments, flashes of discovery that reveal something deeper about ourselves even as they teach us about our destination. On a recent trip to Carlsbad, Calif., a sun-kissed resort city just north of San Diego, one hit me when I realized, with crystal clarity, that I should have packed an extra bathing suit.

It was nearing noon on a cloudless Saturday, a warm breeze puffing off the Pacific, and I was following the lead of my kids at Legoland, the Carlsbad theme park that's as good for children as

it is for your inner child. Since showing up in town, I'd been living the relaxed life of a *Baywatch* star, splashing in the surf, lazing in pools, piloting Jet Skis on placid blue lagoons. It was nice to be aquatic.

But my waterlogged swimsuit was now back at the hotel, and I was fully dressed and very much enjoying my state of dryness, a condition I could tell was coming to an end as my elbow-tugging offspring, ages 8 and 6, pulled me toward a new attraction called Pirate Reef. As the name suggests, the ride appeals to would-be buccaneers, first plunging them down a watery track that leaves them dripping like stray dogs in a downpour, then enlisting them in a playful water-cannon fight between two ships that pretty much ensures a double drenching. As we neared its entrance, a park employee must have seen me balk. "You're here," she said, smiling and waving me aboard. "You might as well get wet." It was sound advice.

It could also serve as a civic motto for a city built on water. Carlsbad doesn't just sit by the ocean. It rests on ancient aquifers that first gained renown in the late 1800s, when a former sea captain named John Frazier, digging a well to sustain his family farm, tapped into the source of a fledgling industry. The mineral-rich waters that surged to the surface, said to be similar to those in the Czech city of Karlovy Vary, called Karlsbad in German, gave the growing settlement its name. A few decades later, a thriving hotel and health spa attracted wealthy travelers from around the country.

Today Frazier's original well still pumps at the heart of Carlsbad Village, a historic quadrant of the city ornamented with Victorian homes, craftsman bungalows, and other character-rich architecture. Among the local landmarks is the Alt Karlsbad Hanseatic House, a turreted structure that stands beside the well and houses the Carlsbad Mineral Water Spa and Alkaline Water. For 50 cents, you can fill a gallon container with sweet-tasting artesian water. Or, for slightly more (\$149), you can book a two-hour spa treatment that includes, among other highlights, a carbonated mineral bath.

Both the spa and the well are owned by Ludvik Grigoras, a Czech-born engineer who lives in Carlsbad but was raised in—get this—Karlovy Vary, where in his youth he often bathed in the soothing waters. "Being here reminds me of my childhood," Grigoras told me. "Only now I'm just a short walk to the beach." Seven miles of beach, to be precise, a scenic stretch of shoreline punctuated by a boardwalk and softened by sand perfect for sun-bathing and sunset strolling.

In 1986, Carlsbad voters passed legislation requiring the city to leave 40 percent of its land as open space. One 50-acre plot called the Flower Fields at Carlsbad Ranch overlooks the ocean and, from March 1 through mid-May, becomes a kaleidoscopic quilt of ranunculus flowers. Carlsbad also has three lagoons, and one, Agua Hedionda, is set aside for jet-skiing, boating, wakeboarding, and all manner of other splashy recreation.

Not that every Carlsbad outing calls for water wear. The Museum of Making Music's business-park setting belies its engaging exhibits on the evolution of music in the United States, from the distinctive twang of the Delta blues to the distorted strains of Jimi Hendrix's electric guitar rendering of "The Star-Spangled Banner." You also get to make music of your own. "I like this place," my son called out while banging on a drum in the museum's studio. "They let you be as loud as you want."

Nowhere in Carlsbad do so many make so much noise as they do at Legoland, the sprawling hilltop playland that reinvents the world in plastic blocks. Spread across 128 acres, the park is home to some 60 rides and attractions, all featuring Legos in creative forms and functions. There are Lego factories and fire stations and design studios for aspiring engineers, to say nothing of the roller coasters, castles, clubhouses, dinosaurs, rocket ships, and waterslides.

It's a bit much to digest in just one day, so we all chose to focus on our favorite parts. I stopped counting the trips my son and daughter made to Volvo Driving School to steer mini cars through mini city streets, just as I never tried to tally in my head the number of bricks used to create models of New York, Las Vegas, San Francisco, New Orleans, and other cities in jaw-dropping detail. Still, I had to ask: Together, the skylines add up to more than 24 million Legos.

In response to the swelling throngs of fans, the park will open Legoland Hotel just outside its gates in early May, replete with pirate-themed suites and a dragon-guarded entrance built from you-know-what. Meanwhile, other lodgings come with their own perks. The Sheraton Carlsbad Resort & Spa offers a private Legoland entrance, and La Costa Resort and Spa's many amenities include a championship golf course and a humongous waterslide.

On my final day in Carlsbad, I spent several hours lounging poolside at La Costa while my children wore themselves out on that slide. Every now and then, I got up to watch them. But a lifeguard was on duty. So mostly I just lay there in the sunshine, wearing the only swimsuit I'd stashed in my suitcase, and let the warm rays bake me dry.

Read VIA's article about [the history of Legos](#), how a little idea became a worldwide phenomenon.

Photography courtesy Legoland California Resort (water park, San Francisco scene); courtesy of Peter Bretschger (Flower Fields); Sean Arbabi (Miniland USA, John Frazier)

This article was first published in March 2013. Some facts may have aged gracefully. Please call ahead to verify information.

If You're Going:

Request the *Southern California TourBook* and *Oceanside-Escondido* map at AAA.com or any AAA branch. For help booking your trip, call AAA Travel at (800) 529-3222. Many AAA branches sell Legoland tickets with a member discount. For more information, contact **Visit Carlsbad:** (800) 227-5722, visitcarlsbad.com. Area code is 760 unless otherwise noted.

To do and see

Carlsbad Mineral Water Spa and Alkaline Water 2802 Carlsbad Blvd., 434-1887, carlsbadmineralspa.com. **The Flower Fields at Carlsbad Ranch** 5704 Paseo Del Norte, 431-0352, theflowerfields.com. **Legoland** 1 Legoland Dr., 918-5346, california.legoland.com. **Museum of Making Music** 5790 Armada Dr., 438-5996, museumofmakingmusic.org.

Eats

Chandler's Regional cuisine and ocean views at the Hilton Carlsbad Oceanfront Resort & Spa. 1 Ponto Rd., 683-5500, chandlerscarlsbad.com. **Pelly's Fish Market & Cafe** Fish tacos, sandwiches, and seafood plates with casual counter service. 7110 Avenida Encinas, No. 101, 431-8454, pellysfishmarket.com. **Tip Top Meats** House-made sausages, onion-stuffed pork roast, and other German delicacies at a restaurant, butcher shop, and specialty food mart. 6118 Paseo Del Norte, 438-2620, tiptopmeats.com.

Sleeps

To find a place to stay, including these hotels, visit AAA.com/hotels. **La Costa Resort and Spa** From \$269. 2100 Costa Del Mar, (800) 854-5000, lacosta.com. **Sheraton Carlsbad Resort & Spa** From \$142. 5480 Grand Pacific Dr., 827-2400, sheratoncarlsbad.com.