



2015 Winner

Balboa Park, San Diego, CA

Submitted by: City of Chula Vista

Celebrating its 100th birthday this year, Balboa Park exemplifies the criteria of what a Great Place in California is. Originally envisioned in 1868, San Diego civic leaders set aside 1,400 acres, which was referred to simply as “City Park.” Presently encompassing 1,200 acres, the entire region benefits from this regional focal point. The central portion of the park was constructed for the 1915 Panama-California Exposition, which is why 2015 marks the park’s centennial celebration. Balboa Park is a great place of contrasts: the core of the park is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and contains historic buildings from the first exposition, complemented by modern museum additions; while it is one of San Diego’s top tourist attractions, it is utilized as a neighborhood park by surrounding residents; it is a place to come to rest and relax and provides numerous passive recreation opportunities, or you can visit the San Diego Zoo, museums, ride a carousel, or miniature train. While it is a spectacular destination in the summer, crowds also flock to the park for December Nights, when the park is illuminated with lights and activities to mark the holiday season.

The areas highlighted below are a small sampling of the many attractions, museums, and amenities contained in Balboa Park. The park is a stunning representation of San Diego to visitors and locals alike; the park contains numerous playing fields, a pool, a golf course, tennis courts, lawn bowling, disc golf, a velodrome, and dog parks; in the midst of the City’s largest tourist attractions, such as 17 different museums. The park is organic - it is a place that preserves history, but is evolving over time. To ensure the park continues to thrive into the next 100 years and beyond, a combination of public-private organizations exist, such as the Balboa Park Conservancy, Friends of Balboa Park, the Balboa Park Online Collaborative, and the Committee of 100, which all work in conjunction with the City’s Park & Recreation Department as stewards of the park.

Iconic Gathering Places & Historic District

The Central Mesa of the park includes a National Register Historic District, containing excellent examples of architecture from the 1915 World Exposition, which contains iconic buildings that symbolize the park. A key destination is the El Prado promenade, which extends from Park Boulevard to 6th Avenue, extends alongside the California Tower and Museum of Man dome, and crosses over the recently restored Cabrillo Bridge. The 1915 Panama-California Exposition unveiled the spectacular Spanish-Renaissance architecture along the promenade that provides unparalleled ambience enjoyed by both first-time and regular visitors to the park.



San Diego Zoo

The park contains the world-famous San Diego Zoo, which is a jewel of a park within Balboa Park. Its winding walkways, canyons, and mesas provide numerous opportunities for exploration, even without the magnificent flora and fauna. The Zoo resides on 100 acres and contains over 3,700 animals from every continent. While most people think of animals when they think of a Zoo, the Zoo doubles as a botanical garden showcasing over 700,000 plant species.



Spreckels Organ Pavillion

The Spreckels Organ Pavilion, built in 1914, is an incredible public plaza with seating for over 2,000 to listen to weekly free concerts in the park. When constructed, the organ was the largest outdoor organ in the world. It has since been surpassed, in 2012, by the Kufstein Organ in Austria. However, the Spreckels Organ society is nearing the end of funding drive that will add 5,000 pipes to the Spreckels Organ to reclaim the title.



Botanical Building

As one of the largest lath structures in the world, the Botanical Building, with the lily pond in the foreground, is one of the most striking and most photographed views in Balboa Park. This is a year round favorite spot for sidewalk performers; musicians, magicians and jugglers. The building also contains 2,100 plant species on display year-round.

Old Globe Theater

Founded in 1935, the Tony Award-winning Old Globe Theater, located just off the El Prado promenade, is a renowned regional theater offering three performance stages including an outdoor theater that is home to an annual Shakespeare summer festival. The Old Globe's architecture is largely copied from London's Old Globe theatre.