

WELLHI!

by Caroline Phillips

CORONADO Island in Southern California is the island Disney would have made, had he created one. There's something unreal in its perfection. It's palm-fringed, between bay and ocean. And its streets are clean enough to eat off — there are \$1,000 fines for littering. Getting here doesn't require a boat and it's connected to mainland San Diego by the soaring Coronado Bridge and it's very lovely.

But don't take my word for it. Wizard Of Oz author L. Frank Baum said that no one who didn't think Coronado paradise, would find heaven unpleasant.

The only time the skies turn grey is when the occasional fighter jet passes over. Plus, it was developed in the 1880s as a playground for the wealthy, and that's how it feels since yet it's still possible to have a budget holiday there. And for anyone who wanderslust, the other end of San Diego, California's second largest city, are just across the bridge.

San Diego is 30 miles from the Mexican border, with rolling hills, sweeping bays and desert wilderness. A destination of downtown skyscrapers and also of La Jolla — its most affluent area — with its mansions — including one-time Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney's. Some of these swanky pads come with private go-kart tracks, lakes and stables. There's also Black's Beach, for nudists. It's illegal, but that's not enforced, says local Yalena Jacobson. "But the cliffs and path to the beach are treacherous."



Sunny scene: the San Diego skyline; inset: Tony Curtis and Marilyn Monroe in *Some Like It Hot* on Coronado

HERE'S also a Coronado federal government beach where they train the crack navy SEALs. (San Diego is a major US naval base and air station.) Jacobson tired guys running in the sand carrying logs above their heads, points Norm Fagge, a former Marine officer, driving me around. "Next, they'll swim in water that almost gives them hypothermia, before some more jogging."

Residential Coronado, contrastively, is like a sleepy film set between takes.

Stars and stripes flags flutter outside retirees' homes and children walk dogs. An old hand here is Anne Anne of Green Babies or Desperate Housewives-style lives being led behind the facades by Colonial Revival houses, Spanish villas and clapboard bungalows. Maybe the Wicked Witch resides inside the residence where Baum wrote *The Wizard Of Oz* series. Among these houses in a quiet residential street is the 1906 Lodge, a turn-of-the-century



boutique hotel of 17 bedrooms that lures mostly American tourists. It's so homely that guests even ring the front door bell to gain entry. It, too, has a film set vibe, with themed rooms — from Country Club to Author's Study. Just two blocks away is Coronado Beach, with its miles of white sand, regularly voted one of America's best beaches. Nearby is the red, peak-roofed, oceanfront Hotel del Coronado of Marilyn

Monroe and *Some Like It Hot* fame — scenes from the film were shot here. Today *The Sand Castle Man* (as his T-shirt reads) has built a 4ft-high sandcastle — \$10 for a photograph in front of it with your signature scratched on. A school of dolphins plays in the ocean.

It's just 15 minutes' drive from here to Souplantation, a US staple which began life in San Diego. The restaurant is a favourite of dieting super-size-me Americans who plough through its 50ft long salad bar and eight hearty soup choices.

Then there's Balboa Park. It's larger than New York's Central Park and home to more museums than any urban park in the US, with 1,400 acres, 15 museums, plus a 1935 Cretaceous Garden and California Native Plants garden. "You're looking for good value things to do?" asks Christina Ahlbad, who has simply introduced herself to me in the ticket queue. "There's Taco Tuesday

when the Mexican restaurants have specials and Happy Hour goes on almost all day. Or breathtaking hiking for nothing."

Alternatively if chastity belts and garrotes are your thing, there's an Instruments of Torture exhibition at the Museum of Man, so popular it looks set to stay.

PLUS there are 65 miles of trails and enough bike rental options to make me go gog-eeved. Do I want a Surrey, Double Surrey, Deuce Coupe, Tandem or Mountain bike?

If outfit villages are your cup of skinny latte, there's Las Americas Premium Outlets. It's a mere 20 minutes' drive — with gas only \$2.10 a litre — from my hotel, the 1906 Lodge. The road is dotted with signs reading "Guns/Medical Marijuana Are Legal in Mexico". The mall overlooks the border and a fluttering Mexican flag and

is full of wealthy Mexicans over for the day, jabbering excitedly in Spanish and wrestling with multiple shopping bags.

Outside, the sky is now star-spangled and the moon bright enough to read by. The best things in life are free. Except when there's shopping, eating and sleeping to be done in San Diego when the pound is temptingly strong against the dollar.

TRAVEL FACTS

DOUBLE rooms at the 1906 Lodge cost from £56, (+00, 856 435-1906, 1906lodge.com). Air New Zealand flies daily to Los Angeles from Heathrow. Return prices from £291 in Economy. (0800 028 4149, airnewzealand.co.uk) Prices for car hire start from £15 a day. (affordablecarhire.com) Return flights from LAX to San Diego Lindbergh flight cost from £140 pp. (inc taxes), (0844 3699 999, gac.com).