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## Streets of San Diego

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As Pleasant as it May Seem Today, San Diego Is Home to a Deliciously Seedy Past

By Ally E. Peltier --SAN DIEGO-- The bright and shiny SoCal mecca of San Diego is known for its glorious weather, fine beaches, and laid-back, come-as-you-are vibe. Oh, and [Sea World](#). In other words, it's thought to be warm, inviting, and, well, sort of bland. But San Diego was founded on the backs of seedy bars and brothels. For under \$20, you can spend an afternoon traipsing the streets on a guided [walking tour](#) that will take you through back alleys, inside grand hotel lobbies, revealing the city's secrets in a way no museum can.

Your tour guide will undoubtedly take you to the [Grand Horton Hotel](#), pointing out that the adjacent buildings were once the home of Madam Ida Bailey's brothel (pictured below) and the scene of the "Great Raid" of 1912. The Mayor of San Diego and three councilmen actually got the dates of the raid confused and made ill-timed visits to their favorite Bailey girls just in time to be caught red-handed when the police arrived to bust the joint.

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But the oldest profession continued to flourish in San Diego despite the raid: In the early 1900s, the city saw a population boom that created a larger demand for prostitutes than usual, and the response was an expansion of a handful of stables houses where courtesans could rent a bed for an hour or two into a veritable red-light district nicknamed the "Stingaree" (pictured below).



Situated between the crucially important wharf and the main business district, Stingaree ladies catered to sailors--San Diego is a Navy town, after all--and businessmen who joked that you could get stung worse in town than by any of the sea creatures in the bay. At one former house of ill-repute, customers (some of whom no doubt resembled the men in the mural above) would watch the women parade through the streets all afternoon, and then choose a colored marble matching the color of his preferred companion's dress. He would then drop the marble into a jar outside his room. Several years ago, renovations in the building uncovered a jarful of glass marbles in the basement, proof of the house's, er, colorful history.

Only a few decades ago, the Stingaree area was cleaned up and renamed the [Gaslamp District](#) after the faux-vintage lamps that line the sparkling sidewalks. Today, your walking tour of the Gaslamp District will take you past family-friendly theme restaurants like the Hard Rock Cafe and Ghiardelli's ice cream parlor, a corporate facade concealing a smutty past. A tour of San Diego's seedy heritage is a nice counter-point to the city's beautiful-but-bland image. Trust us, Shamu can wait.