

Staycations: At long, long last, the tank is half full

By LAURIE SMITH | DOWNTOWN NEWS

Let's take a look at the positive side of skyrocketing gas prices.

"Did she just say 'the positive side of rising gas prices?'" you might be asking in disbelief. The answer is: "Yes." Apparently, moaning and groaning at the pump isn't doing a heck of a lot to make us feel better as we turn our pockets inside out filling our tanks. So how about a different approach?

As San Diegans enter the summer season and begin to plan their all-too-precious time off, the crazy cost of gas has created a whole new way to vacation at home. The "staycation" is a hip new trend catching on like wildfire – and the term has become a buzzword, showing up everywhere from business reports and travel guides to the New York Times and Wikipedia.

Imagine doing away with the hassle of airport travel or endless hours of driving, constantly answering the inevitable question, "Are we there yet?" That alone may constitute a vacation.

Just about everyone who lives here, whether a native or a transplant, becomes involved in the day-to-day routine of life and tends to forget just why we live here in the first place. When was the last time – if ever – you visited the world-renowned San Diego Zoo, strolled around Balboa Park or played tourist at Seaport Village or the Gaslamp Quarter?

Sure, you can do that or take part in other, more typical, tourist outings, such as taking a trolley to Old Town, dining at a Mexican restaurant while watching traditionally garbed women handmaking tortillas, or checking out one of the many beautiful beaches our city has to offer.

Not that there's anything wrong with that, mind you. But how about something a little different?

San Diego resident Jon Pokorski, a research associate at a local biotech company, said, "I've lived here a little over two years, and I really haven't seen much of the local attractions."

Pokorski, who decided to stay in town for his week off in August, read a story in March's Downtown News about San Diego Boat Tours and got an idea. For one of his vacation days, he has chartered a private yacht with a group of friends for an onboard barbecue and a personalized cruise around the Big Bay, complete with area history, local lore and ideas of other fun things to do.

Capt. Dana Parks, San Diego Boat Tours owner, commented that he has noticed a recent increase in such charters.

"Most of our charters have been corporate meeting-type things, happy hour cruises during conventions, out-of-town visitors wanting to cruise the bay, and burials at sea ... with an occasional longer charter to the Coronado Islands [Mexico] or Catalina.

"However," Parks added, "in the past few weeks, we have seen a noticeable increase in locals chartering the boat – like Jon."

Pokorski said he has planned a few other outings, such as attending a Padres game, discovering what the buzz is about at the nightclub Anthology and playing a round of golf at the Coronado Golf Club. "It's only \$13 at twilight," smiled Pokorski, adding, "Maybe I'll even take the ferry over."

The money saved in airfare, gas, and other sundry things during traditional vacations can perhaps go toward dining in all those fabulous downtown restaurants, about which you say, "Someday, I'd like to try that place." There are dozens of world-class restaurants downtown, featuring many of America's top chefs. So turn off the Food Network and experience the whole sensory package: ambiance, aroma and taste.

Of course, there are enough ideas of things to do and places to go on a "staycation" in San Diego to fill a good-size book. The details and planning are in your hands – just like with a long-distance vacation.

Customize your "trip" as much as you want. When calling to make hotel reservations (Yes; stay in a local hotel – it's fun), ask the reservationist if there are any special local packages or discounts. Such offers are also available at many area attractions. It never hurts to ask.

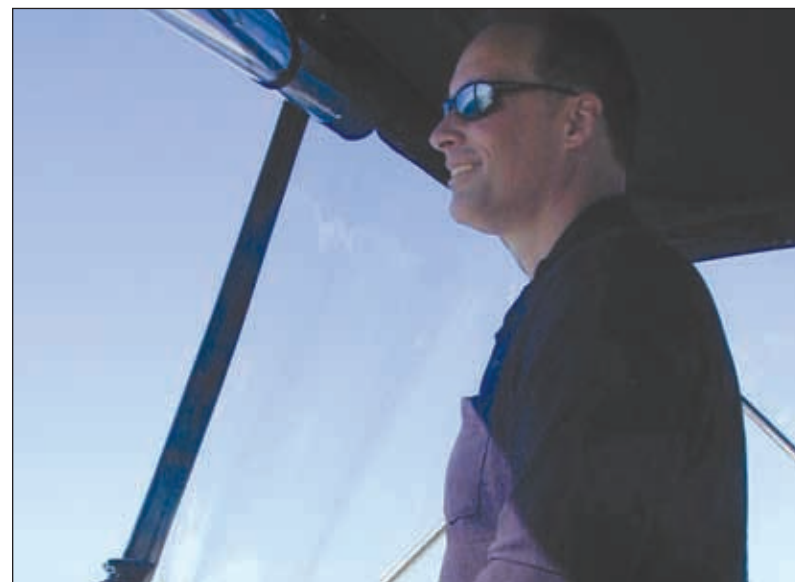
One example: the Omni Hotel,

next to Petco Park, has several package plans, including a family package, complete with bedtime milk and cookies; a Georgia O'Keefe package that includes tickets to the exhibit at the San Diego Museum of Art; the homerun package, complete with two tickets to a Padres game, peanuts and Cracker Jacks, breakfast and complimentary parking; SeaWorld and Birch Aquarium packages; and many others, all offering something for everyone. Surf the 'net, make some phone calls, talk to neighbors – the possibilities are endless.

Warning: Staycations are not without risk! The temptations to

clean out that crammed closet, fertilize the lawn or catch up on some office work are right under your nose every day. Ignore this temptation. It's important to activate the e-mail vacation mode; don't answer the home phone; arrange for a pet sitter; and absolutely do not check in with the office. You are on vacation – just as if you had boarded a plane that whisked you to a far-off destination.

Save money this summer, thumb your nose at the gas pump and have fun right here in America's Finest City ... and remember: the tank is half full rather than half empty.



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Dana Parks notes an upturn in San Diego Boat Tours patronage.