

explore the Blue Line trolley

The coast-hugging train is studded with hidden gems: Restaurants and music venues to a park with great bay views



The Blue Line trolley stops in America Plaza. It's about a 90-minute ride from San Ysidro to University City. Carlos Rico / u-t photos



El Rincon Restaurante is a Guadalajara-inspired restaurant in San Ysidro. CARLOS RICO — THE SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE

BY CARLOS RICO

Growing up in San Diego and Tijuana with two parents who worked — and sometimes only one car in a family of four — I gained experience taking public transportation.

I remember riding the trolley to school, a friend's house, to my mom's job in downtown San Diego and to Chargers games at Qualcomm Stadium. It taught me how to get around the county on my own and discover new places.

In mid-March, I had the chance to ride the San Diego Metropolitan Transit System's Blue Line once again for this guide. I found new places to eat, sip on a cocktail, shop, relax and for entertainment.

This guide highlights the Blue Line trolley basics and 16 places to experience and savor the vibes of San Diego County along its route (between San Ysidro and University City). Find ideas for places to visit in the morning, afternoon, evening or late night. Also, these attractions are all no more than a 15-minute walk from a trolley stop.

Blue Line basics

It's the oldest of the three trolley lines and first began operation in 1981, known then as the South Line, from San Ysidro to downtown San Diego. It has expanded over the years and now reaches University City.

A one-day pass costs \$6 for adults, \$3 for seniors and people with disabilities and is free for those 18 years and under until June 30. The Blue Line starts operating at 4:34 a.m. from San Ysidro and 5:03 a.m. from Westfield UTC. The last Blue Line trolley service going south leaving the UTC Station is 11:18 p.m. Going north, the last trolley leaves the San Ysidro Station at 11:49 p.m. It takes about 90 minutes from one end to the other.

Morning

Achilles Coffee Roasters at Park 12: Across from Petco Park and two blocks away from the 12th and Imperial Transit Center is a small cafe serving breakfast, offering free Wi-Fi for remote working and roasting coffee with beans from around the world. Achilles Coffee at Park 12 is a quiet place (when there isn't a Padres game) where you'll get coffee aromas from countries like Colombia, El Salvador, Mexico, Papua New Guinea and Tanzania. You'll also smell breakfast items such as cinnamon pancakes, brioche French toast and a scrambled egg, potatoes, heirloom tomato and spinach breakfast burrito. Space is limited with wooden communal tables for about 12 people inside and three more tables out front. 100 Park Plaza, Suite 175, San Diego. (858) 314-8513. achillescoffee.roasters.com

El Rincon: If you find yourself yearning for authentic Mexican food for breakfast or lunch near the border, try El Rincon in San Ysidro. This family-owned restaurant prides itself on Jalisco dishes such as carne en su jugo, a soup with chopped flank steak, bacon bits, pinto beans, green salsa, onions, cilantro and beef broth. Other classic Mexican dishes on the menu include chile relleno, huevos ahogados (eggs submerged in sauteed tomatoes, cacti and onions) and chilaquiles. The restaurant looks like a small, one-story house with a mural on the side painted by artist Mr B Baby. It's located at the end of an alley that turns into Cyprus Drive. It's about a 10-minute walk from the Beyer Boulevard station. 119 W. San Ysidro Blvd., San Diego. (619) 207-0079. elrinconca.com

Encuentro Cafe: You might not know that one of the few Venezuelan restaurants in the county is in Old Town. Encuentro Cafe has a gated patio with lots of plants along the walls and above the tables, and there is a calming energy to this place, with a small water fountain at the entrance and acoustic Latin music playing throughout the cafe. I tried the papelon con limón, a very sweet Venezuelan classic beverage that tastes similar to lemonade, but looks like an iced tea. To eat, I ordered a Venezuelan signature plate, the pabellón. It is a savory dish with seasoned shredded beef and served with basic black beans, fried plantains that are slightly sweet and not greasy, white rice and avocado slices. Arrive at Encuentro Cafe via the Old Town Transit Center. Just look for the Old Town State Park sign and head south on Congress Street. 3941 Mason St., San Diego. (619) 260-8060. encuentrocafe.com

Little Italy farmers market: Every Saturday and Wednesday, locals can check out one of the county's most wide-ranging farmers markets at the Little Italy Mercato. There are five blocks full of vendors selling numerous things like medicinal powders and tinctures, handmade leather bags and wallets, plants, flowers, jewelry and books. You can also purchase various fruits and vegetables, such as beets, blood oranges and avocados, and taste foods like Cuban sandwiches, vegan sushi and French bread. Lots of diverse families will be walking around, so expect large crowds, especially on Saturdays. To get here via the trolley, get off at the County

Center/Little Italy Station and walk about two blocks north to the corner Kettner Boulevard and West Date Street and start your trek east to Front Street. 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Wednesdays; 8:00 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturdays. littleitalysd.com/events/mercato

Afternoon

Barrio Logan Art Crawl: On the second Saturday of every month, Logan Avenue between Chicano Park and National Avenue is closed to traffic and artists take over the street and shops for the Barrio Art Crawl. Artists will either set up on Logan Avenue or collaborate with storefront owners and do pop-ups inside. Find paintings, original clothing and handbags, handmade jewelry and more. Along with food and beverage vendors selling churros and aguas frescas, there are also DJs spinning music and live performances. Noon to 8 p.m. Second Saturday of every month. [instagram.com/barrioartcrawl](https://www.instagram.com/barrioartcrawl)

Las Americas Premium Outlets: This outlet mall has more than 100 shops and brands that consistently have sales and marked down prices. I receive email alerts when there are sales and it seems like I get one at least once a week. Some of my favorite places to shop are Adidas, Coach, the Disney Store, H&M and Nike. There also are some mom and pop shops selling jewelry, sporting goods and skin care products. Las Americas has a basic food court with items like pizza, fried chicken and Chinese food, but my favorite food options are in the parking lot, where a handful of mariscos food trucks line up and dish out delicious fish tacos, ceviche tostadas, seafood cocktails and more. To reach this outlet mall, take the Blue Line to the San Ysidro station, the last stop and then walk west to the pedestrian bridge. It's about a 12-minute walk. 4211 Camino De La Plaza, San Diego. (619) 934-8400. premiumoutlets.com/outlet/las-americas

Living Coast Discovery Center: This is probably one of the longest walks from a trolley station on this guide, but it's the place that offers the most family-friendly educational activities. A 14-minute walk westward from the E Street stop gets you to the Living Coast Discovery Center in Chula Vista. The highlight of this marine and wildlife life attraction is the

outdoor water tank that houses small sharks and rays that you can touch. There also are reptiles on display like the California kingsnake. Outside the center is the Sweetwater Marsh. Visitors can find walking trails and learn about the local birds like the California brown pelican and plants like the reddish-orange monkey flowers. 1000 Gunpowder Point Drive, Chula Vista. (619) 409-5900. thelivingcoast.org

Mission Bay Park: This park is an option for locals looking for an open space to ride a bike, take kids to a playground, lay on the grass and get tan, walk around Mission Bay, grab something to eat or sip on an adult beverage. It's a 10-minute walk from the Clairemont Drive trolley station via a sidewalk that goes over Interstate 5. At the park, there are basketball courts, picnic areas, benches to catch the sunset and public restrooms. Mission Bay Park also is home to Superbloom, a mostly vegan cafe that offers limited food choices like paninis and sandwiches, but several drink options, like coffee, juices, teas, lattes, beer, cocktails and wine, with a happy hour from 4 to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday. Plus, Superbloom is situated on a small hill with seating and wide views of Mission Bay. 2688 E. Mission Bay Drive, San Diego.

Westfield UTC: Get a scenic route going past Mission Bay, Rose Canyon, UC San Diego and parts of University City on your way to the northernmost stop on the Blue Line, the UTC Transit Center. Trolley riders can walk over a pedestrian bridge and down an elevator to visit Westfield UTC. This modern, upscale shopping center has a mix of higher end brands, department stores, fitness brands, a movie theater, a cocktail bar, a children's play area and various dining options. There also are numerous colorful artistic sculptures and artwork at this multi-level mall, common areas with wooden lounge chairs, a small fountain with dolphin statues and lots of green plants and succulents. 4545 La Jolla Village Drive, San Diego. (858) 546-8858. westfield.com/united-states/utc

Evening

Fish Guts: When I stepped into Fish Guts in Barrio Logan (a 13-minute walk from Barrio Logan Station), I felt like I was transported to a small

mariscos shop away from the tourist areas of Ensenada or Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. This seafood restaurant has a small fishing boat above its six-seat bar, a fake swordfish on one wall and a small kitchen tucked away where — through a rectangular hole in the wall — I could see an older woman making handmade corn tortillas. The menu is simple: one appetizer, one dessert and six different seafood tacos. But the flavors are complex and mouthwatering. On a recent visit, I ordered the blackened swordfish tacos, which tasted like the fish was just caught that morning. This restaurant also creates three margaritas that are made with agave wine. I had the al pastor margarita, which is refreshing, sweet and spicy. 2222 Logan Ave., San Diego. (619) 888-0081. [instagram.com/fishguts_sd](https://www.instagram.com/fishguts_sd)

Lala: Lala is a new and elegant bar and lounge that is about a six-minute walk from the County Center/Little Italy Station. It's behind a parking lot next to Barbusa. This dapper locale gives off the feel of a speakeasy with low lighting, green and gold finishes around the seats and tables for about 45 people and a 15-seat bar with a marble counter that is the center. You can spot bizarre items like high heels and almost nude paintings on the wall, along with various books on how to flirt sitting on top of the bar. The Italian food menu is small with about 20 items, including a sweet tiramisu served in a martini glass. It is layered with a chocolate base, mascarpone in the middle and espresso martini-soaked lady finger cookie crumbs on top. There also are nine signature Italian-inspired cocktails on the menu, such as the Night in Milan. 1919 India St., San Diego. (619) 310-6249. [instagram.com/barlalasd](https://www.instagram.com/barlalasd)

Las Hadas: I still remember the first time I stepped into Las Hadas Bar & Grill in 2008. It had just opened and I was greeted by the owners' parents. They were super friendly and made me and everyone else feel like family. It's more than 15 years later and you still get that same great customer service. My favorite on the menu is the signature tropical taco because it is sweet and savory with fluffy Mexican rice, diced cubes of papaya and pineapple and a house-made crema salsa on a large flour tortilla. You can order it with grilled fish (my favorite), chicken, carnitas or steak. I'd

recommend going on Tuesdays when tacos are \$3. It's a 10-minute walk from the Fifth Avenue trolley stop. 558 Fourth Ave., San Diego. (619) 232-1720. lashadasgrillsd.com

Late Night

Fifth & Rose: Inside Pendry San Diego is Fifth & Rose, an upscale lobby bar with signature cocktails and specials, live DJs on Friday and Saturday nights and a small food menu for those late-night cravings. It's about a 10-minute walk through the East Village from the Park and Market Station and is decorated with glass fixtures like chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. Candles and roses are the decor at the small marble tables for two, reminding me of a friend's fashionable and relaxing living room. The cocktail menu has 10 specialty cocktails, including the Fifth & Rosemary with tequila, sparkling wine, grapefruit bitters, passion fruit and rosemary. 550 J St., San Diego. (619) 738-7123. pendry.com/san-diego/dining/fifth-rose

Music Box: If you are a fan of smaller concert venues like I am, then the Music Box in Little Italy is your jam. This chic looking music venue can be found about five minutes away from the America Plaza trolley station and only has a capacity for about 750 people. The first floor is an open space for standing in front of the stage with some lounge seating and silk curtains along one wall and VIP tables with leather seats on the opposite side. There also is an LED screen behind the stage and a full bar and kitchen on the first floor. The second floor balcony also has VIP seating for bottle service and the third floor balcony is for standing room only with a bar, leather sofas, a fireplace and outdoor balcony overlooking the front entrance. 1337 India St., San Diego. (619) 795-1337. musicboxsd.com

Prohibition Lounge: My favorite speakeasy in San Diego is Prohibition Lounge. The entrance is hidden in plain sight, between The Field and Havana 1920. The front door is small, rusty and dilapidated with a sign that reads, "Law Office Eddie O'Hare, ESQ." Walk through the door and down the stairs to find an energetic and swanky bar. On most nights, there are live bands playing various covers from artists like Amy

Winehouse or performing jazz, funk, soul or the blues. Prohibition also has exquisite cocktails, with close to 40 original selections. This speakeasy also has its own signature single-barrel old-fashioned that is one of my favorites locally because it has the perfect balance of sweetness from the whiskey, spiciness from the bitter and a smooth finish that does not burn. The venue is about a 10-minute walk from the Fifth Avenue trolley stop. 548 Fifth Ave., San Diego. prohibitionsd.com

Seven Mile Casino: About a seven-minute walk from the E Street trolley station and approximately seven miles from downtown San Diego is Seven Mile Casino. In this 24-hour card room, there are a variety of games, such as blackjack, pai gow, EZ baccarat and four different types of poker games. Jam packed inside is also a full bar, several TVs on the walls showing sports at Sammy's Restaurant & Bar. The main food menu has a diverse selection of burgers, salads, some Asian-inspired dishes like roasted duck wonton soup and Mexican choices like barbacoa. But the menu does lack vegetarian and vegan options, besides pizza, pancakes and French toast. 285 Bay Blvd., Chula Vista. (619) 425-3333. sevenmilecasino.com

carlos.rico@sduniontribune.com