



Subtle San Diego Personal tours focus on the little things

by Kinsee Morlan

Darlynne and Marc Menkin wear shorts and Hawaiian shirts with pride. They're in perpetual tourist mode and they don't care who knows it. The married couple moved from the East Coast 17 years ago, and they've been savoring the sun ever since. The Menkins aren't like most San Diegans they don't take our little paradise for granted.

With big, white smiles and an almost unnatural glee in their gait, Marc and Darlynne step outside Carpe Diem, a little cafe in Bankers Hill that acts as the starting point for the couple's most popular walking tour, Rent-a-Local, the more personalized arm of the professional tour-guide business they run, aptly named Where You Want to Be Tours.

"Let's first of all talk about the weather," Marc says, looking up at the bright blue sky.

"I think the chances of rain are pretty minimal," he says. "In fact, I think the chances of rain from now until Thanksgiving are pretty minimal, so I'm pretty sure the only umbrella you're gonna need is this Mai Tai umbrella."

Marc pulls a tiny orange paper umbrella from his flowered-shirt pocket, opening and closing it with a laugh. Darlynne laughs, too, a little nervously, though. She's not sure if everyone appreciates Marc's sense of humor just yet.

"He likes his corny jokes," she explains. "We just have to amuse him and laugh."

Darlynne immediately jumps into her professional role and explains that their Rent-a-Local Tour is all about the individual. She says everyone should relax, turn off cell phones and get ready to have a great time.

A few feet outside the cafe doors, the tour is already at its first stop, a Victorian house on Upas Street built in 1901.

Marc and Darlynne talk about the house's history and inhabitants, then ask if anyone can find a fish somewhere on the house.

"I did this tour for a year and never noticed," Marc says. "Look at the end of the gutter there. See, there's a fish coming off of it."

"You can't get that on a regular bus tour," says Darlynnne, "all the little details."

Little details are what make Marc and Darlynnne's tours so different. They won't take you to all the San Diego hot spots they figure everyone already knows about the zoo, SeaWorld and Coronado. Marc and Darlynnne are more interested in San Diego's old uptown neighborhoods, the historical houses and the canyons weaving through. They're all about what they call "secret San Diego," the places not mentioned in guide books or tourist websites.

Since Marc started the business in July of 2003 and Darlynnne gave up her career in broadcast journalism to help a few years ago, the two have been researching via bike rides and power walks various offbeat places to take their clients. Somewhere along the way, corporate clients caught on, and now the bread and butter of the business is actually the team-building tours, which are more like scavenger hunts for the burnt-out corporate class. But even for the bigger, bus-guided adventures, the focal points of all Marc and Darlynnne's tours are still the little things.

Things like the old, ornate wooden door in front of a house near Second Avenue and Thorn Street.

"For some reason or another," says Darlynnne, squinting against the unusually hot and glaring spring sun, "people are always mesmerized by this door. Some people say they're going to go home and recreate it."

Marc and Darlynnne continue through Bankers Hill, pointing out little gargoyles and weird foliage there's a giant Bird of Paradise taking over a front lawn on Spruce Street while offering up quirky anecdotes along the way, like the one about the house on Second Avenue that used to be a big hippie commune in the '60s.



"Stop right here," Marc says. "Look down the hill. You see what looks like an electrical structure at the bottom there; that's actually a suspension bridge. Cars driving about 30 to 60 miles an hour on First Avenue, they're oblivious to the fact that there's a suspension bridge there, and it's been there since 1912."

Marc and Darlynnne cross the 377-foot bridge. Marc talks about Kate Sessions, the famous horticulturalist and the namesake of the lush canyon below.

Marc's good at reciting historical facts, and his enthusiasm for the tour and the zeal he puts into telling his stories make him a great guide. He says he's always been that way, even before he turned his

biking and walking hobbies into a career. Back when Marc was still in sales, he says his friends used to call him "Captain San Diego" for his knack for finding secret spots.

"I'd say, Hey, do you know about the mermaid statue in La Jolla? Do you know about the sea caves? Do you know about the pirate statues in Pacific Beach?" Marc recalls. "And they'd say, No, show us.' So, I'd show them around. Next thing you know, I'd be taking them on an hour tour."

After the bridge, the next big highlight is a place where, Marc says, "something may or may not have happened." In front of a house on Thorn and Curlew, Marc points to a plaque that reads, "On this site in 1897, nothing happened" an obvious jest at the more serious plaques posted on surrounding houses in the 'hood.

"We like it," Marc says, "because it makes our tours part historical and part hysterical."

He waits for the laughter, which eventually trickles in.

Next it's to Marc's car, a cherry-red convertible, where he's got "Surfin' USA" by the Beach Boys cued up. Marc cruises slowly through Bankers Hill, pointing out more houses and foliage and telling more strange tales.

Before too long, the car's parked and Marc and Darlyne are headed toward Maple Canyon off First Avenue.

"It's not a suspension bridge," says Darlyne, "but it's still hidden."

Halfway across the old wooden bridge, Marc and Darlyne say it's time for the pebble-throwing contest. They point toward a v-shaped gap between two trees about 30 feet away.

"You have to make it through there," says Marc.

No one even gets close, but everyone wins a prize anyway - a snack-sized plastic baggie filled with homemade trail mix.

After Marc points out the trail entrance to Maple Canyon, the beautiful, bamboo-filled ravine below, it's back to the car and The Beach Boys. The soft harmonies of "Surfer Girl" play as we cruise, convertible top dropped, heading west on Pacific Highway what Marc calls the secret clog-free road even locals don't know about.

The last stop, and perhaps the climax of the tour, is what Darlyne and Marc call "Point Loma's Field of Dreams and the Secret Beach," a softball field on the campus of Point Loma Nazarene University and a tiny strip of beach hidden by cliffs right below.

"Imagine being an outfielder and being out here," says Marc, standing in center field. "I mean, it's something in a daydream," he pauses, "even better than a daydream."

Marc leads the way through a path cut into the sandstone to the beach below.

The trail opens up and there's a young couple frolicking in the water with their kid. Marc and Darlyne engage the couple in conversation and find out that the dad grew up in San Diego (that's how he

knew about the secret beach; Marc is relieved).

"What do you think?" Marc asks the dad. "Do you think this place ranks as San Diego's top beach?"

"Oh yeah," the dad answers. "Definitely."

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05-23-07

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