

KCET Schedule [Donate](#)

Shows Arts & Culture News & Community Food & Discovery

SoCal Wanderer Food & Discovery

All Aboard! 8 Must-See Vintage Train Stations in SoCal

By Sandi Hemmerlein
December 3, 2021



Up Next

Six Great Vintage Train Attractions



Where to Ride the Tiniest Trains of SoCal



Shows Arts & Culture News & Community Food & Discovery

All Aboard! 8 Must-See Vintage Train Stations in SoCal

SoCal Wanderer Food & Discovery



Whenever travel season comes around, it can get a little stressful trying to plan your trip around the traffic.

But hitting the road — and braving bottlenecked freeways — isn't your only option for travel within Southern California.

So next time you're putting together a day trip, a weekend getaway, or a holiday visit to family, why not ride the trails — and take a train from and/or to one of SoCal's most magnificent train stations?

The arrival of the railroad revolutionized access to Southern California — and between the communities within it. And train travel remains one of the most scenic and stress-free ways to explore the major transportation hubs of this diverse region.

From coastal cities to desert gateways and wine country weekenders, here are the most historic depots where you can take the train — and what to do once you arrive or before the conductor calls out, "All aboard!"

1. Union Station, Los Angeles



1/5 The Spanish Colonial Revival architectural design notable on the exterior of Union Station in L.A. | Sandi Hemmerlein



Built in 1939, Downtown L.A.'s Union Station is the last of the great railway stations of the early 20th century — in the days before car culture took over the post-World War II American West. At the same time both modern and Moorish, Union Station — one of many "union stations" throughout the country — is a triumph in both its details and its major features, like sandstone-colored travertine, mosaic tilework, Islamic crosses and

Shows Arts & Culture News & Community Food & Discovery



A Los Angeles Primer: Union Station

The former ticketing area features elaborately-tiled floors, dark wood counters, and high, ornate ceilings; and **the former Harvey House restaurant** (one of the last remaining, now operating as **Homebound Brewhaus**) features a huge counter/bar and a colorful tile floor that resembles the pattern from a Navajo rug. Look for **artwork** — including murals, sculptures, and mosaics — throughout the historic part of the station as well as in the Patsaouras Bus Plaza (where you'll even find a huge **aquarium**).

Arrive on foot, by **Amtrak** or **Metrolink**, or via **Metro** bus, subway, or lightrail. (Station tours are also conducted by **Metro** and by **Los Angeles Conservancy**.) When you walk into the station, it feels as though you're stepping into another time — into an era when travelers dressed dapper, doffed their hats indoors, and swept glamorously down the concourse, illuminated by the sun streaming through huge bay windows and the art deco chandeliers glowing from above. Stay awhile and have a vintage-inspired lunch or cocktails at **Traxx**, which is located inside the train station and is open daily.

2. Santa Fe Depot, San Diego



1/3 San Diego's historic Santa Fe Depot features the same Spanish Colonial Revival architecture found in the extant structures from the Expo in Balboa Park, just a couple of miles northeast. | Sandi Hemmerlein



Built by the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway to welcome visitors to the Panama-California Exposition of 1915-1917, San Diego's historic **Santa Fe Depot** features the same Spanish Colonial Revival architecture and tile work found in the extant structures from the Expo in Balboa Park, just a couple of miles northeast. The blue and white sign was added to the terra-cotta, red-tiled roof in the 1950s.

Shows Arts & Culture News & Community Food & Discovery



Where to Explore San Diego Outdoors (And Even Cool Off A Bit)

As it's still an active transportation center, you can get there by taking the **COASTER** regional commuter line from North San Diego County or Amtrak's **Pacific Surfliner** rail line or the from points farther north. Upon your arrival, it's an easy walk to San Diego's harbor neighborhood, downtown, Gaslamp District, and even the Coronado ferry. You can also hop on the **San Diego Trolley** to reach popular destinations like Old Town and the Mexican border crossing at San Ysidro.

3. Santa Fe Depot, San Bernardino, Inland Empire



1/3 Reflective of high-class train travel of days of yore, the Santa Fe Depot in San Bernardino features Moorish domes, Mission Revival architecture and red Mexican floor tiles. | Sandi Hemmerlein



With its Moorish domes and Mission Revival architecture, the "San Berdoo" train station is lovely — reflective of high-class train travel of days of yore, with its original ceiling light fixtures, wall tiles, and red Mexican floor tiles. There's even an elegant lounge outside the ladies' powder room. The historic Harvey House restaurant may have closed in the 1950s, but you can see it through the slats of some window blinds. (There are hopes to reopen it someday.)

The **San Bernardino History & Railroad Museum** inside the station is open on Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., when you can take a depot and museum tour. (For tours on other days or for special groups, call 951-544-4449.) There's lots of stuff to look at in the museum there, which is located in the former baggage room with its great rolling garage doors and original brick floors. From precision-accurate clocks and watches to signals, **bells and whistles**, maps, wagons, and ephemera, it's a train fan's dream — and a historic visit for train travelers of all ages.

Shows Arts & Culture News & Community Food & Discovery

The first passenger train ever to arrive in San Bernardino did so on the California Southern Railroad line (a subsidiary of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway) in 1883 — but the current concrete-and-steel station, a national landmark, wasn't built until 1918. (Its predecessor, a wooden structure built in 1886, burned down in a fire in 1916.) One of the oldest train stations in California, it was designed by architect W.A. Mohr and built at the cost of \$800,000 — and at the time, it was the largest train station west of the Mississippi, with roundhouses and repair shops (long since demolished). Today, you can reach it via [Amtrak's Southwest Chief](#) line or [Metrolink](#) — or, of course, by just driving right up to it and parking your car.

4. Harvey House Railroad Depot, Barstow, Mojave Desert



1/4 The side of the Harvey House in Barstow. The Harvey House became a registered landmark on the state and national level in 1976. | Sandi Hemmerlein



Barstow's still-operating, 100+ year old train depot along the old **Route 66** was formerly known as the Casa del Desierto ("House of the Desert") — and it really is a crown jewel of the Mojave Desert. Designed by the same architect as Union Station's Harvey House (see #1 above), [Mary E. J. Coulter](#), it closed in 1971 and fell into severe disrepair throughout the 1980s as scavengers stripped it and squatters trashed it. It was nearly lost until the city of Barstow purchased it in 1990, restored it after damage sustained in the 1992 Landers earthquake, and reopened it in 1999. Now, the station once again welcomes passengers into the heart of the Mojave Desert, just as it did when it **opened in 1911**.

The Harvey House Railroad Depot gets its name from entrepreneur Fred Harvey, who opened a series of restaurants, bars, luncheonettes, etc. in the major train stations across the country — including Barstow, as well as several others in California (San Diego, L.A., Bakersfield, etc.) — to serve passengers on long train rides who would disembark to get something to eat in the days before dining cars. (Some would even spend the night in hotel rooms upstairs.)

Shows Arts & Culture News & Community Food & Discovery

The Harvey House depot-hotel that stands in Barstow today — a landmark on the **state** and national level — is actually the fourth Harvey House in that location, the prior one having been built out of wood in 1885 and subsequently burned down in 1908. Now made entirely out of brick masonry with very little wood, its rich history includes having housed troops for World War II. Nowadays, it's also home to the **Route 66 Mother Road Museum** and the **Western America Railroad Museum**, both of which are free to visit and have fascinating exhibits about travel through the American Southwest (including an outdoor display of antique rolling stock at the railroad museum). Passenger rail service is provided by **Amtrak's Southwest Chief line**.

5. San Luis Obispo Train Station, San Luis Obispo, Central Coast



1/5 San Luis Obispo had been isolated from California's railways up until the late 19th century. It wasn't until the Southern Pacific Railroad arrived from Northern California in 1894 that SLO was connected to the rest of the Golden State. | Sandi Hemmerlein



Until the late 19th century, San Luis Obispo was kind of an isolated island located midway between Los Angeles and San Francisco. For decades after the line from SF to L.A. was completed in 1876, the trains still bypassed San Luis Obispo. With lines extending east into Arizona and Texas, the Second Transcontinental Railroad (the country's "southern" one) was officially completed in 1883 — still 11 years before it would make its way to SLO. It wasn't until the Southern Pacific Railroad arrived from Northern California in 1894 — and conquered a seemingly impassible stretch of terrain known as the Cuesta Grade — that SLO was connected to the rest of the Golden State.

The historic freight house of the Southern Pacific Railroad, which was built in 1894 alongside the original train depot (since demolished to make way for a parking lot) — houses the San Luis Obispo Railroad Museum, which celebrated its grand opening in 2013, after spending more than a dozen years restoring its new home. Inside the museum is like a time capsule of 19th- and 20th-century railroading — whether passenger or

Shows Arts & Culture News & Community Food & Discovery



The types of rolling stock in the museum's outdoor exhibit really run the gamut and come from all over — including a circa 1972 Southern Pacific Railroad caboose, boxcars, pushcars, and Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway's café observation car No. 1512 — one of five such cars built by Pullman Car Company in 1926. If you're ready to ride an actual train, hop on a northbound Amtrak to Paso Robles to experience the engineering marvel of several tunnels that cut through the Cuesta Grade. And at Paso's **historic depot**, stop for a winetasting at **Cypher Winery**.

6. Glendale Transportation Center, Glendale, L.A. County



1/3 Tucked away on Cerritos Avenue, just about at the border of Glendale and the Los Angeles neighborhood of Atwater Village, stands the Glendale Transportation Center. | Sandi Hemmerlein



Driving through the City of Glendale, about 6 miles north of Downtown Los Angeles, you might completely miss the fact that there's a gorgeous train station that serves this community — because it's tucked away on Cerritos Avenue, just about at the border of Glendale and the Los Angeles neighborhood of Atwater Village.

Formerly known as "Tropico Station," the **Glendale Transportation Center** opened in 1924, replacing the Atwater Tract Office from 1883. This nationally landmarked, Spanish Colonial Revival Style depot by the architecture team of MacDonald and Couchot (the last remaining example of their station work) features Churrigueresque cast stone entry portals, plasterwork that mimics an adobe finish, and swirling wrought iron window grills and railings. The waiting room doors still bear the Southern Pacific seal, even though Southern Pacific sold the station to the City of Glendale in 1989.

This train station is accessible via **Metro and Greyhound bus**, Glendale's **Beeline Bus**, and Amtrak's Pacific Surfliner line and Metrolink lines to Ventura County and Antelope

Shows Arts & Culture News & Community Food & Discovery

7. San Juan Capistrano Historic Train Depot, San Juan Capistrano, Orange County



1/5 The San Juan Capistrano Historic Train Depot is the oldest Mission Revival style train depot in Southern California, erected in 1894. | Sandi Hemmerlein



One of the most relaxing, worry-free ways of taking a day trip to San Juan Capistrano — whether you're visiting [its mission](#) or exploring its Mission District — is by taking a train to its [historic depot](#) from 1894, the oldest Mission Revival style train depot in SoCal. When you arrive, you're right next to the oldest neighborhood in California, the [Los Rios Historic District](#), where you can have [afternoon tea](#), grab [a cup of coffee](#), or visit the local butterfly garden on a residential street that contains over 30 landmarked structures (including a few adobes) dating back to 1794.



Five Ways to Explore Mission San Juan Capistrano, 'The Jewel of the Missions'

At the station itself, your trackside dining options include [Trevor's at the Tracks](#) (below the historic 40-foot brick tower and dome) and [Paddy's Station](#) (where you can dine inside a 1927 Pullman rail car). And once your belly is full, you'll be just a block away from [Mission San Juan Capistrano](#), too.

Your options for getting there include [Amtrak's Pacific Surfliner line](#) and [Metrolink's Orange County and Inland Empire-Orange County lines](#). Take a moment to explore the "new" station — with offices and ticket windows located inside actual boxcars.

Shows Arts & Culture News & Community Food & Discovery



1/4 At the far end of the loading dock, there are the five vintage railcars permanently on display as part of the Fullerton Train Museum. | Sandi Hemmerlein



The circa 1930 Santa Fe Depot at Fullerton Transportation Center still stands — and has been designated by **Fullerton Heritage** as Local Landmark No. 34. You'll find it across from the old Union Pacific Depot — relocated from West Truslow Avenue, just a couple of blocks away, and now occupied by **The Old Spaghetti Factory** restaurant (Local Landmark No. 7). And they're both just a couple of blocks away from Downtown Fullerton and its **Art Walk**, **Lost Levels Arcade** and **Hopscotch Tavern**, which is located in an **Mission Revival-style depot from Pacific Electric's Fullerton Line** (built in 1918, designated Local Landmark No. 5). As an added bonus, the tavern's back patio faces the station for a bit of trainspotting.

http://www.sanjuancapistrano.net/los_r

At the train station itself, you can also grab a snack at the **Santa Fe Express Café**. And at the far end of the loading dock, there are the **five vintage railcars** permanently on display as part of the **Fullerton Train Museum**, which is open the first and third Saturday of the month from 9 a.m. to noon. The museum is maintained by the **Southern California Railway Plaza Association**, a non-profit whose mission is to help educate about and create awareness for the region's railroad heritage.

A highlight is the annual **Fullerton Railroad Days** festival, which takes over the depot parking lot with visiting rolling stock (including from the Disneyland Railroad), train tours, model railroad displays, and more. It usually happens the first weekend of May (although 2020 and 2021 were **canceled for the COVID-19 pandemic**) — and in the past, Amtrak has offered free rides for kids on its **Pacific Surfliner line** to the festival. The Fullerton station is also served by **Metrolink's Perris Valley and Orange County** lines.

Up Next

Six Great Vintage Train Attractions

Shows Arts & Culture News & Community Food & Discovery

All Aboard! 8 Must-See Vintage Train Stations in SoCal

SoCal Wanderer

Food & Discovery



6 Best Garden Adventures in Santa Barbara for Spring

Whether you're seeking a wonderland of succulents, an explosion of fragrance and color or simply a serene setting to live your best garden life, Santa Barbara and its surrounding communities offer fascinating flora. Here's how to prepare for your visit, what you'll find and how to make the most of your time there



9 Desert Oddities to Explore While You're Visiting the Coachella Valley

Here are nine oddities worth a desert detour for a closer look — because no matter how odd they may seem, your eyes aren't deceiving you!



Shows Arts & Culture News & Community Food & Discovery



8 Amazing SoCal Gas Stations to Soften the Blow of Fuel Prices

Here are 8 of the best SoCal gas stations for bringing some magnificence to the mundane — whether you're on your daily commute or using up your savings to reach a farther flung locale.

Subscribe to our newsletter

Sign Up

Explore

- Arts & Culture
- News & Community
- Food & Discovery
- Shows

About

- About KCET
- Cinema Series
- Press Room
- Events
- Careers
- Contact Us

Support KCET

- Donate
- Membership
- Other Ways to Give
- Corporate Support
- Connect with Our Team

Our Channels



Follow Us



Shows Arts & Culture News & Community Food & Discovery

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#)

© 2022 - Public Media Group of Southern California