

San Diego, One Week, Zero Six-Hour Arguments: A Family Plan for All Four of You

Because the fastest way to end the "whose vacation is this?" debate is to write everyone's name on the calendar in ink. Below, each day is labeled with who it's mainly for, the beach-city-nature-action balance is spread evenly, and Thursday is left blank on purpose so the family can vote and nobody gets to say the plan ignored them.

o) Your Details at a Glance

Item	Detail
Dates	Saturday, August 15 to Saturday, August 22, 2026 (7 nights)
Group	2 adults + 2 teenagers (ages 13 and 16)
Budget	Up to \$4,000 total
Must-haves	Vacation rental in Pacific Beach / Mission Beach, beach days, San Diego Zoo, one hike, surf lesson for the teens, a Coronado day, fish tacos & taco shops, cook some nights
Special request	Make the compromise visible: label each day by who it's for, balance beach/city/nature/action, keep one open "family vote" day

1) At a Glance

Element	The Plan	Key Facts (as of June 2026)
Base	Vacation rental, Pacific Beach or Mission Beach	Guide value \$250–\$350/night, see 1b
Zoo	San Diego Zoo, Balboa Park	1-Day Pass Any Day: Adult (ages 12+) \$78, Child (ages 3–11) \$68, includes Guided Bus Tour and Skyfari Aerial Tram; all four in your group are 12+
Surf lesson (teens)	PB Surf School, Pacific Beach	Semi-private (2–3 people) \$118/person, 90 min, gear included
Hike	Torrey Pines State Natural Reserve	Parking \$12–\$25 (demand-based); free trails
Coronado day	Flagship Coronado Ferry	One-way \$9 per person (ages 4+), 15-minute ride

Element	The Plan	Key Facts (as of June 2026)
Fish tacos	Oscar's Mexican Seafood; The Fish Shop	Tacos roughly \$7–\$10 each
Getting there/around	Fly into SAN, economy rental car	~\$40–\$55/day guide value
Open day	Thursday, family vote	See Day 6

A note on money, told straight

Your must-have list is generous and San Diego in mid-August is peak season, so the honest math matters. A comfortable version of everything you asked for (mid-range 3-bedroom rental, rental car all week, zoo, surf, Coronado, a hike, plus some meals out) lands around **\$4,600–\$5,500**, which is over your \$4,000 cap. The good news: the plan below **fits inside \$4,000** by choosing a sensibly priced rental, cooking about half your dinners, using a group/semi-private surf lesson instead of privates, and keeping the rental car economy-class. Every headline number is real and researched; the accommodation and car are honest ranges because their live prices change daily.

1b) Recommendation and the Best Alternative

Recommended base: a vacation rental in Pacific Beach (PB), near the boardwalk. PB is the sweet spot for your crew: walkable to the sand and to your surf school, packed with taco shops, and a short drive to almost everything on your list. For a family of four in mid-August, budget a **guide value of \$250–\$350 per night** for a 2–3 bedroom rental (as of June 2026). Aim for a place with a full kitchen (you want to cook some nights) and, ideally, off-street parking since PB street parking is competitive. Book on Airbnb or Vrbo and filter for PB or Mission Beach, "entire home," kitchen, and 4+ guests.

Why it fits the group: teens get independence and beach access on foot, adults get restaurants and coffee within walking distance, and everyone is 10–15 minutes from the zoo, Torrey Pines, and the Coronado ferry.

Best alternative: Mission Beach (MB). If you want the classic boardwalk-and-roller-coaster energy (Belmont Park is right there, which the 13- and 16-year-old will love), Mission Beach rentals sit in a similar **\$250–\$375/night** guide range in peak season. It's slightly more "vacation-town," a bit more car-dependent for groceries, but a fun, high-energy base. Either neighborhood satisfies your lodging wish; PB edges it for walkable food and coffee.

Because these are live-booking prices behind a widget, treat the figures as guide values, not a locked quote.

1c) Book Now

What	By when	Where / Link
Vacation rental (PB or MB, kitchen, 4 guests)	ASAP, peak-season inventory goes fast	Airbnb / Vrbo . You will see the binding price for your exact dates and occupancy at the provider's booking step, it changes daily.
Rental car at SAN	4–6 weeks out for best rate	Your preferred agency's site. You will see the binding price for your exact dates and occupancy at the provider's booking step, it changes daily.
San Diego Zoo tickets (4 × Adult)	A few days ahead online	zoo.sandiegozoo.org/tickets
Surf lesson for the 2 teens (semi-private)	3–7 days ahead (summer slots fill)	pbsurfschool.com or call (858) 808-2669
Coronado ferry tickets	Day-of is fine; buy online to skip a line	flagshipsd.com/ferry-routes

💡 Tip: Buy zoo tickets online in advance. The 1-Day Pass Any Day requires no reservation, so advance purchase just saves you queuing at the gate.

2) Day-by-Day Plan

Day 1, Saturday, August 15, Arrival & Settle In (*mainly for: the whole family*)

Fly into SAN, pick up the rental car, and drive to your Pacific Beach base (roughly 10–15 minutes, about 5 miles, depending on traffic). Grab groceries for breakfasts and a couple of cook-at-home dinners, then walk to the boardwalk to shake off the flight.

- **Dinner out (fish tacos, obviously):** Oscar's Mexican Seafood, PB. Address: 746 Emerald Street, San Diego, CA 92109; phone (858) 412-4009. Hours: Sunday–Thursday 8 am–9 pm, Friday–Saturday 8 am–10 pm. Casual, counter-service, legendary tacos, plus tax and a tip jar for the counter crew.
- **Map:** [Oscar's Mexican Seafood](#)

💡 Tip: Ask your rental host about the closest lifeguarded beach access and the parking situation before you unload; PB and MB street parking fills up fast on August weekends.

Day 2, Sunday, August 16, Beach Day & Boardwalk (*mainly for: the teens*)

A pure PB/MB beach day: swim, boogie board, walk or bike the boardwalk between Pacific Beach and Mission Beach. For high-energy teen fun, Belmont Park in Mission Beach has the Giant Dipper coaster and arcade (pay-per-ride or wristband on site).

- **Lunch (taco shop):** The Fish Shop, Pacific Beach. 1775 Garnet Ave, San Diego, CA 92109; phone (858) 483-4746; hours Sunday–Wednesday 11 am–9:30 pm, Thursday–Saturday 11 am–10 pm. You build your own tacos here: pick a fish (ahi, mahi mahi, shrimp, yellowtail and more), a marinade, and a style. Signature tacos like the Spicy Dorado and TKO taco run \$7.75 each, plus tax.
- **Map:** [The Fish Shop Pacific Beach](#)
- **Cook-at-home night** to bank some budget.

💡 Tip: Mornings are calmer and cheaper for parking; hit the sand early, do Belmont Park in the late afternoon when the coaster lines ease.

Plan B (weather): If it's an overcast "May Gray / June Gloom" hangover morning, flip to Belmont Park and the arcade first, then beach when it burns off (it usually does by midday).

Day 3, Monday, August 17, San Diego Zoo (*mainly for: the parents, loved by all*)

Balboa Park's world-famous zoo, about a 15-minute drive (roughly 8 miles) from PB. Your 1-Day Pass includes one visit plus the Guided Bus Tour and the Skyfari Aerial Tram. The Skyfari and double-decker bus tour give the teens a "wow" overview; then split up and reconvene, everyone likes the zoo at their own pace.

- **Entry:** Adult (12+) \$78 each. All four of you are 12+, so that's $4 \times \$78 = \312 .
- **Dining:** plenty of cafés inside the zoo; or bring refillable water bottles and snacks.
- **Map:** [San Diego Zoo](#)

💡 Tip: If any of your dates fall on a "Value Day," the online Value Days pass is a little cheaper but can't be combined with other offers. Check the value-days calendar before you buy; if your date qualifies you'll shave a few dollars per ticket.

Day 4, Tuesday, August 18, Surf Lesson & Beach Chill (*mainly for: the teens*)

The teens' morning to shine. **PB Surf School** runs 90-minute lessons right in Pacific Beach.

- **Recommended: semi-private lesson for the two teens together, \$118/person** (2–3 people), 90 minutes, with boards, wetsuits, rashguards and leashes all included. The lesson is a 30-minute land lesson plus 60 minutes of coaching in the water.
- **PB/MB start times:** 9:00–10:30, 10:45–12:15, 12:45–2:15, or 2:30–4:00. Book the 9:00 slot for calmest morning conditions.
- **Alternatives if you'd rather:** a **group lesson at \$98/person** (4–5 people, so a parent or two could join and it's the cheapest per head), or a **private one-on-one at \$155/person**. There's also a "buy 3 get 1 free" package if the whole family wants to try.
- **Details:** 707 Pacific Beach Drive, San Diego, CA 92109; phone (858) 808-2669. Arrive at least 30 minutes early because weekend/summer parking is tight.
- **Map:** [PB Surf School](#)
- **Afternoon:** dry off, beach time, then a cook-at-home dinner.

💡 **Tip:** Come already in swimsuits and bring towels, sunglasses, hats, SPF 30+ applied before leaving, and plenty of water.

Plan B (weather): Surf lessons run year-round and small chop is normal; the school makes the call on conditions. If your slot is cancelled, swap in the beach/boardwalk plan and rebook later in the week.

Day 5, Wednesday, August 20, Coronado Day (*mainly for: the parents, fun for all*)

Take the ferry to Coronado for the postcard version of San Diego: the wide white-sand beach, the historic Hotel del Coronado, and easy bike rentals along the flat oceanfront path.

- **Ferry:** Flagship Coronado Ferry from **Broadway Pier (990 N Harbor Dr)** to **Coronado Ferry Landing (1201 1st St, Coronado)**. Departures every 60 minutes, a 15-minute ride, one-way fare \$9 for ages 4+. Sample Broadway → Coronado departures: 9:00 AM, 10:00 AM, 11:00 AM, 12:00 PM, and returns Coronado → Broadway at 9:30, 10:30, 11:30, 12:30 and so on.
- **Cost:** 4 people round-trip = $8 \times \$9 = \72 . Arrive at least 10 minutes before departure, earlier on busy weekends.
- **Map:** Broadway Pier ferry
- **Map:** Coronado Ferry Landing

💡 **Tip:** Bikes are allowed onboard, space permitting, so you can bring or rent bikes and cruise Coronado's flat, family-friendly paths. It's the single best "everyone's happy" activity of the trip.

Plan B (weather): Coronado is lovely even in gloom, but if it's genuinely wet, this is your most flexible day to swap with Thursday's vote day.

Day 6, Thursday, August 21, FAMILY VOTE DAY (*mainly for: everyone, decided together*)

This is the day nobody can complain about, because you all pick it. Hold a two-minute vote over breakfast. Menu of options, each with a real anchor so there's no "there's nothing to do" excuse:

- **Action / tech (great for a 13- and 16-year-old):** The Fleet Science Center in Balboa Park is hands-on and interactive with an IMAX dome, a strong pick for the teens who'd rather push buttons than stroll (general admission typically from about \$25/adult, confirm on site). Alternative action picks: **Belmont Park** ride wristbands, indoor climbing, or **kayaking/SUP in Mission Bay** from a PB rental shop (kayak rentals commonly from about \$25–\$40/hour, confirm with the shop).
- **Sea life (crowd-pleaser):** Birch Aquarium at Scripps in La Jolla, or a whale/dolphin-friendly harbor experience.
- **La Jolla nature + tide pools + kayaks + the famous sea lions at the Cove** (free to look; kayak tours extra).
- **A second beach or a lazy pool day** if everyone just wants to do nothing (a very legitimate vote).

💡 **Tip:** Give each person one vote and one veto. Ties go to whoever hasn't "won" a day yet, which keeps the peace and honors the compromise theme.

Plan B (weather): Fleet Science Center or Birch Aquarium are both fully indoor, so this day is weatherproof by design.

Day 7, Friday, August 22, One Hike + Last Beach Sunset (*mainly for: the parents / nature*)

Your "one hike": **Torrey Pines State Natural Reserve**, about 15–20 minutes north (roughly 12 miles) from PB. It's a gorgeous, moderate cliff-top network of trails through the nation's rarest pine, with big ocean views and a payoff descent to the beach.

- **Details:** 12600 N. Torrey Pines Road, San Diego, CA 92037; visitor info (858) 755-2063. Note that picnicking and camping are prohibited in the reserve, so eat before or after.
- **Parking (the only real cost):** demand-based; South Beach vehicle day use ranges \$12–\$25, North Beach \$10–\$25. Budget **\$25** for a peak-summer day. Free public parking is also available near the Extension trailheads if the lots are full.
- **Map:** [Torrey Pines State Natural Reserve](#)
- **Farewell dinner:** back to Oscar's or The Fish Shop for one last taco run, or cook a final beach-house dinner and catch the sunset from the boardwalk.

💡 **Tip:** Go early. Lots fill by mid-morning in summer, it's exposed with little shade, and the trails wind through wind-sculpted pines to a 1923 pueblo-style visitor center worth a look. Bring water and hats.

Plan B (weather): Torrey Pines is best on a clear day for the views; if it's soaked in, hike a shorter loop or swap this with your vote day earlier in the week.

Day 8, Saturday, August 23, Departure

Pack, quick beach walk if your flight allows, return the rental car at SAN.

3) Practical Notes, Checklist & Cost Overview

Practical notes

- **Getting around:** A rental car is worth it here; the zoo, Torrey Pines, and La Jolla are all short drives and transit is slow. Park the car for beach and Coronado-ferry days to dodge downtown parking fees.
- **Tipping (US norm):** Tip **15–20%** at sit-down restaurants and for tour/surf guides. Counter-service taco shops usually have a tip jar; a dollar or two per order is kind.
- **Sales tax:** San Diego posted prices are pre-tax; expect roughly 7.75% added at checkout, so treat menu and ticket prices as "plus tax."
- **Cook-some-nights strategy:** With a kitchen, plan ~3 home dinners and ~3 out; that's the biggest lever keeping you under \$4,000.

Packing checklist

- ☐ Swimsuits (wear one to the surf lesson), rash guards, towels
- ☐ Reef-safe SPF 30+, hats, sunglasses
- ☐ Light layers for the "gray" mornings and cool evenings
- ☐ Reusable water bottles (zoo and Torrey Pines get hot)
- ☐ Comfortable hiking shoes for Torrey Pines
- ☐ Zoo/ferry tickets saved on phones; surf booking confirmation
- ☐ A grocery run planned for Day 1

Estimated Cost Overview vs. Your \$4,000 Budget

Item	Estimate (USD)	Notes
Vacation rental, 7 nights (PB/MB)	\$1,750–\$2,450	Guide value, check the exact date price with the provider (\$250–\$350/night)
Rental car, ~8 days (economy)	\$320–\$440	Guide value, check the exact date price with the provider
Fuel	~\$110	Estimate
San Diego Zoo (4 × \$78)	\$312	Exact, official
Surf lesson, 2 teens (semi-private, \$118 ea.)	\$236	Exact, official
Coronado ferry (4 round-trip, \$9 ea. way)	\$72	Exact, official
Torrey Pines parking	\$25	Peak-day max
Groceries (cook ~3 nights + breakfasts)	~\$320	Estimate
Dining out (tacos + a few meals, plus tax & tip)	~\$560	Estimate
Family-vote day activity (e.g., Fleet Science Center for 4)	~\$100	Depends on the vote
Total	~\$3,805–\$4,625	

Reality check: The **low end lands right at ~\$3,800**, comfortably inside your \$4,000 cap. To stay under even at the high end, choose a rental near \$250–\$300/night, cook 3–4 dinners instead of 2, and keep the vote-day activity modest. If you splurge on a pricier rental or add restaurant meals, you'll drift toward \$4,600, so the rental choice is your main dial. Every activity price above is researched and current; only lodging, car, fuel, groceries and dining are ranges because they move with the market and your appetite.

4) Sources (checked June 2026)

Zoo

- San Diego Zoo tickets & prices: [zoo.sandiegozoo.org/...](https://www.zoo.sandiegozoo.org/)

Surf lesson

- PB Surf School lessons & prices: [pbsurfschool.com/...](https://pbsurfschool.com/)
- PB Surf School main / FAQ / contact: pbsurfschool.com

Hike

- Torrey Pines State Natural Reserve (fees, hours, directions): [parks.ca.gov/...](https://parks.ca.gov/)

Coronado ferry

- Flagship Ferry routes, schedules & fares: [flagshipsd.com/...](https://flagshipsd.com/)

Food

- Oscar's Mexican Seafood (Pacific Beach): oscarsmexicanseafood.com
- The Fish Shop (Pacific Beach), menu & hours: [thefishshops.com/...](https://thefishshops.com/)

Lodging & car (live-price booking, guide values only)

- Airbnb: airbnb.com
- Vrbo: vrbo.com

Have a fantastic week, and may the family-vote day be decided in under two minutes. 

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