

THE OUTING

Visions and Vignettes



JEWEL of the MISSIONS

By Barbara DeMarco-Barrett

YOU DON'T HAVE TO be a history buff to appreciate San Juan Capistrano, Orange County's first permanent European settlement and, as some claim, the true home of Orange County. The Mission of San Juan Capistrano, with its resplendent Spanish architecture, lush gardens, religious lore and famous swallows, offers broad appeal to the half million tourists who visit each year.

But learning a bit about its rich history ahead of time only enhances the experience. In 1776, while the Founding Fathers were making history on the East Coast by signing the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia, Father Serra was putting down roots at Mission San Juan.

Thirty years later, Mission San Juan—seventh in the chain of 21 missions in California—had over a thousand residents, over ten thousand head of cattle and

the architectural gem called The Great Stone Church. The community thrived until the earthquake of 1812, when the church collapsed, and the population declined. When the U.S. won the Mexican-American War in 1848, California became the property of the U.S., and 17 years later, in 1865, President Lincoln signed the Patent Title, returning the Mission to the Catholic Church which was in great disrepair.

From the late 1870s through early 1900s, artists, photographers and visionaries, with the help of wealthy benefactors, restored the Mission. Its restoration is continual; although the Mission is still owned by the Catholic Church, it's non-profit, and depends upon contributions to keep it thriving.

Visitors can easily spend an entire day wandering the grounds viewing artifacts from the early mission days, including the living quarters where the padres slept. The Serra Chapel, dating back to the 1780s, is the oldest operating church in California and, with its red votive candles and spiritual atmosphere, one of the most charming. Audio tours are available in six different languages.

Visitors love to meander around the 10 acres of gardens, a koi pond and fountains. A visit to the gift store offers a variety of religious-themed jewelry and accessories. Throughout the year, the Mission hosts exhibits, mariachis and, during the summer, outdoor concerts.

Those who time it just right—visiting around the end of March—can catch the world-famous Return of the Swallows. Every spring, the Mission hosts a celebration honoring the tiny little birds' return on St. Joseph's Day, March 19th.

The Saturday following St. Joseph's Day, the City of San Juan Capistrano in collaboration with the Fiesta Association hosts the annual Swallows' Day Parade. In 2012, the parade will take place on March 24th, along with a day-long street fair. The swallows remain until late October, when they take off for Argentina, their winter home. 🌸

To learn more about the Mission of San Juan Capistrano or to inquire about upcoming events, please call 949.234.1300 or visit missionsjc.com.

