

Mission: Very Possible

By: CAROL HORTON



Built in 1779, the "Serra Chapel" at Mission San Juan Capistrano is the oldest church building in California.

The swallows are on a mission. And soon that means they'll be at The Mission. Like your uncle to his timeshare in the Poconos, the enigmatic swallows return to Mission San Juan Capistrano each spring. And that means so do the tourists who enjoy the fiesta celebrating this magical, mystical event.

After a 7,500-mile journey from Argentina commencing on February 18, the tiny birds will reappear in California on March 19 to the delight of wide-eyed onlookers and inquiring scientists. No one really knows why the migration occurs, but it was first observed in the early 1900s. Scientists theorize that this phenomenon has been occurring since before the Mission San Juan Capistrano was founded in 1776, but has been documented only since the area became more populated.

Mission San Juan Capistrano was named for 14th century Italian theologian St. John of Capistrano. It is the seventh California mission and was founded in November of 1776, during the Feast of All Saints, by Friar Junipero Serra. Construction on the Mission's main stone church began in 1796 and was completed in 1806. An earthquake destroyed the church just four years later. The Mission was secularized in 1833, sold in 1845, and was returned to the Church a year later. Self-guided, docent and group tours of the Mission are available.

Fascinating legends of the swallows are discussed on the tours, including a tale of a shopkeeper in town who was annoyed by the tiny birds' mud nests and shooed them away. A sympathetic friar offered the birds shelter at the Mission, and thus set their patterns for life.

Another such story is attributed to the Juañeno Indians who first occupied the region and still take part in the annual bird festival. The Mission's bell ringer in the early 1900s, Jose de Garcia Cruz ("Acu"), was sure that the swallows migrated every spring from the Holy Land, thousands of miles away. The swallows flew with little twigs in their beaks so that when they got tired, they could glide onto the ocean and rest on the little wooden floats until strong enough to resume their journey halfway around the world.

This year's Swallows' Day Parade will be held on March 24 in downtown San Juan Capistrano. It is the nation's largest non-motorized parade. The streets are closed by 10 a.m., so arrive early. If you miss the parade, the swallows will be around until October before they return to South America, completing their 15,000-mile round-trip journey.

With that many frequent flyer miles, you can be sure they are already planning next spring's visit. Mark your calendar and take note: The swallows are trying to tell us, sometimes, we all need to get up and go!

ADMISSION PRICES \$7 for adults, \$6 for seniors 60+, \$5 for children 4-11, free for children 3 and younger. For group rates, call 949-234-1300, ext. 318 CELEBRATIONS Family Day: March 18, 10 a.m. - 4 p.m. • St. Joseph's Day: March 19, 9:30 a.m. - 3 p.m. Swallows' Day Parade: March 24, 10 a.m. PHONE 949-234-1300 • 760-723-9633 WEB SITES www.missionsjc.com, www.sanjuancapistrano.net



HOW TO GET THERE Take I-10 West and merge to CA 60 toward Riverside. Take exit #58 onto I-215 South. Take the 91 West to the 55 South to the 5 South. Take the second San Juan Capistrano exit, which is Ortega Highway. Go right on Ortega Highway. The Mission is 2.5 miles ahead on the right at 26801 Ortega Highway. Driving Time: Approximately 2 hours and 10 minutes.