

THE UNAUTHORIZED

# San Diego



# Comic-Con Survival Guide

MONEY  
SAVING  
SECRETS  
INSIDE

BY DOUG KLINE



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# The Unauthorized San Diego Comic-Con Survival Guide

by Doug Kline

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# PANELS

Whether you want to catch a sneak peek at a giant Hollywood blockbuster a whole year in advance or you feel like sitting down in a more intimate setting and discussing comic books that address issues of race, politics, sexuality, religion, and more, San Diego Comic-Con has something for everyone.

## LINING UP

I wish there was a standard time that I could give you to guarantee your entry into any panel, but there just isn't. You just have to be observant and be ready at any time to join that line, even if means waking up way before any hour in the morning you would ever consider sane. Until the daily panel room lineup is announced, allowing you figure out the conflicting draws the rooms may have against each other (let's say there's a *True Blood* panel at the same time as a *Twilight* panel... what's a vampire obsessed fan to do?). I guarantee you that almost every major pop culture phenomenon panel room will never big enough. When that's the case, having completely different pop culture genre panels scheduled in the same room can lead to even bigger headaches. Some people have never heard of the Venture Bros series on Adult Swim. Yet they have the most devoted fans and the line for that panel in one of

the smallest rooms is nearly a day long with only a fraction of the real fans getting in, usually because a show from a completely different genre is scheduled immediately (or many hours) afterward. Why? Because the people in the conflicting panel many hours later know that they need to be in that room hours ahead of time, sitting through panels they have no interest in, thereby preventing the fans of those interim panels from getting in. It has become a frustrating and confusing endeavor for many. Comic-Con does their best to schedule the panels to minimize conflicts like that, but it's nearly impossible to do so.

Getting into the panels you want to see is where making that "Schedule That Conflicts With Itself" comes in handy. You have to make a lot of Sophie's Choice types of decisions throughout the week. *Batman 3* or *Glee*? *Spider-Man* or *Smallville*?

It's never fun to make these decisions, but here's what you should consider to make things easier on you:

## **WHERE SHOULD I GO FOR MOVIES, TELEVISION, COMICS, ETC?**

Note that Hall H is almost always populated with movie panels, with the exceptions of *Lost* and *Heroes* taking early Saturday slots in recent years. Since both are no longer on the air and nothing else seems to have risen to their level of popularity, Hall H will likely revert back to all movie panels for the foreseeable future (don't quote me on that). Ballroom 20 has often been the primary domain of the big TV panels (although I do remember seeing a sneak peek at *The Incredibles* in Ballroom 20 way back when). Every other panel that isn't lucky enough to snag a spot in either location gets pushed out into the other panel rooms, with 6A, 6BCF, and 6DE on the other side of the Sails Pavilion being the

next biggest set of rooms. These rooms are usually populated with niche and cult hits (or at least they appear to be at the time they are scheduled). The *Dr Horrible's Sing Along Blog* screening had to be broken out into a half dozen additional rooms in 2009 due to the high demand for access to the afterhours uncut screening, having only debuted online in separate chapters in the 3 weeks leading up to Comic-Con. They never know when something is going to become the hottest thing at the show. If you have that figured out before they do, plan accordingly.

## **THEY DON'T CLEAR ROOMS BETWEEN PANELS**

If you really want to see something like *Avatar* and it follows something like *Twilight*, you're going to have to get in line early with the Twi-hards or get in line later in the morning, taking a chance that they'll clear out as soon as Edward and

Bella leave the stage, giving you access without having to suffer through the high pitched squeals every time Robert Pattinson touches his hair. But it's a big risk. Even with 6500 seats in Hall H, people line up the night before for the hottest panels, even if they take place late in the afternoon. Ballroom 20 has about 4000 seats and is no less packed. I remember having to sit through the Bionic Woman pilot and a few other celeb-packed but forgettable panels in order to see the panel I really wanted to see many hours later. I know I essentially stole a seat from that fan in the hallway who really wanted to see that Bionic Woman pilot screening, but it's what has to be done in order to see what you want to see.

## **HALL H LINE CONFIGURATION**

The great thing about the most recent Hall H line configuration is that rather than being a mile and a half long,

stretching the length of the convention center and down to Seaport Village, they have created a broad queue that packs people in at least 4-6 people across. In my experience with that line (before the doors open), as long as you are in that queue before it breaks and continues across the street on the new Hilton Bayfront property, you are going to make it into Hall H first thing in the morning. Even if you're sitting in the back, it's better than standing outside waiting and hoping that enough people will leave in time for you to replace them in the panel you really want to see (don't count on it). It seemed to work well in 2009, but it could be completely different this year.

## **BALLROOM 20 LINE CONFIGURATION**

This line starts inside by the main doors and snakes down the hall, parallel with the exhibition hall line and then outside all along the back patio area with a

number of confusing breaks, but it works. It's hard to tell where the cut-off point is, but if you're there early enough to trace it without losing sight of the line inside, you might be good. Since the entirety of the Ballroom 20 line isn't always as visible as the bulk of the Hall H line is, it's hard to tell where person 4001 might be. Just know that the room is smaller and if whatever is in there is more important to you than what's in Hall H or the exhibition hall, then you need to get in line early.

## **C'MON, REALLY, WHEN SHOULD I GET IN LINE?**

This relies completely on what's most important to you. There is absolutely no reason to line up in the middle of the night or the day before for ANY panel if all you want is a seat. Even most of the Twi-hards didn't get in line until after 7am the morning of the panel (*Twilight New Moon* was at 1:45pm). Only those

who absolutely **MUST** be within the shortest possible distance between the seats and the stage should get in line the night before. I got in line with the Twihards in 2009 around 7:30pm and had an excellent seat in the middle of the room. I was probably among the first 2500 in Hall H and was perfectly positioned in front of one of the many large high definition screens to see the first 3D glimpses of *Avatar*, *Tron: Legacy*, and *Alice in Wonderland* (and *Twilight* grumblegrumble). The same applies for Ballroom 20, although due to its fewer seats, don't expect as prime seating if you arrive after 7am.

## **WHAT IF I HAVE TO GET OUT OF LINE TO, Y'KNOW...**

The call of nature won't suddenly leave you just because you're in a massive line of 1000 people outside of Hall H in the middle of the night. I suggest making sure you're as empty as can be before you

get in line, but that obviously won't do the trick if you're there all night. If you're in line for Hall H, you have the option of walking toward the Hilton Bayfront. The closest bathroom is underneath the main entry ramp on the left as you walk toward the hotel. No need to skulk about the lobby hoping no one will notice you. However, I cannot guarantee it's availability or its readiness to accept human cargo. If you really must use completely indoor facilities, enter the hotel on the bottom floor on the North side. Stay to the left and walk past the escalators all the way to the other end of the hotel. There should be large, multi-user facilities available along the left wall. Try to leave it exactly as you found it and they won't mind your nightly 3am visits.

## SETTLING INTO YOUR SEAT

Once you've successfully made it through the line and found your seat, what's next? Are you stuck in one spot for the rest of the day? What if I'm hungry or I have to go to the bathroom (again)?

## ONCE I'M IN, CAN I SWITCH SEATS BETWEEN PANELS?

Yes. But do so with caution. When a panel ends, the entire room often shifts like a massive flock of birds in a constantly morphing pattern. When some people leave after seeing the panel they came to see, their vacated seat is fair game for anyone with quick enough reflexes to snatch it up. Once you get up from YOUR seat to chase that oasis in the third row, beware that it could be a mirage. Hesitate for a second in either direction and you could lose both seats. There is no going back and re-claiming an abandoned seat, because the person who

just sat down in it decided that you had something much better than what they had. If you're sitting with at least one other friend, have them save your existing seat while you dash to claim the new ones. However, grabbing more than one new seat is much harder than snagging just one. Work out a signal system that will bring your companion to their new seat as quickly as possible or just call them on the cell phone. You often have less than 15 minutes between panels to make this shift. In reality, you have only seconds after the previous panel ends to find supposedly better seating in any of the rooms. If you're in Hall H or Ballroom 20 and you're at a good angle to view a video screen, I wouldn't move a muscle until I was done with that room for the day. The smaller rooms have only one or two video screens at the front of the room and unless you have really bad eyesight or you really, really must be breathing the same exact air molecules as

the people on stage, it isn't worth trying to get closer with each consecutive panel. It's not impossible to start the day at the back of the room and end up in row 3 by the end of the day, but you really have to be on the ball and work as a team to succeed.

## **CAN I SAVE SEATS?**

Yes, with some conditions. If your friend or the person you just met when you sat down trusts you enough to hold their seat for them while they go to the bathroom or grab a quick bite in the adjacent Hall H-specific food vendor in the lobby, then yes, you can save their seat and someone can save a seat for you. However, it is not recommended that you save seats for your friend who is still way back in line and you see that the room is nearly at capacity. People still attempt to save a seat for their friend who is 3000 people back at 1pm, but unless the room clears considerably (rare as many of the hottest

panels are kept until last intentionally), there is very little chance that they'll make it to you. And even if they do, it turns into the most astoundingly lame version of cell phone marco polo you can imagine.

## **WAIT. I CAN LEAVE THE PANEL TO USE THE BATHROOM OR GET LUNCH?**

Yes and no. There are bathrooms within Hall H, but the lines are instantly long the moment people start piling into the room. Ballroom 20 has bathrooms directly outside of the hall, but you'll need a "hall pass" to use it and return. They're not too keen on people moving around in the dark when a panel is in progress, so it's best to jump to the bathroom at a time when the lights are up, mostly everyone has settled in, and you have someone saving your seat. That's usually between panels when the lines are longest, but if you don't mind missing a bit of the

upcoming panel and your friend is especially hard-nosed about not giving up your seat no matter how many times the hall usher asks them, you're good to go. As for getting food, Hall H has a food vendor right outside the hall, which you can get to with a "hall pass" like Ballroom 20. It is only good for that food vendor (you can't miss it as you'll have to pass it on the way into Hall H). Do not try to leave that area or you will have to get back in the massive line to get back in. Ballroom 20 does not offer a food area hall pass option that I know of. You could use your bathroom pass, I suppose, but I wouldn't risk it unless you can find a really short line at the pretzel / cookie vendor across the hall. If you're gone too long and return with 4 footlong Subway sandwiches and 2 huge bags of swag from the exhibition hall floor, security might decide to rightfully deny you re-entry for taking advantage of the system. Plus, there's no guarantee your seat

would still be available when you returned. They're big on making use of all available space. Your friend can only protest that you're in the bathroom for so long.

## **CAN I TAKE PICTURES OR SHOOT VIDEO IN THE PANEL?**

Yes. But also no. Well, sometimes. While the official press has a little photog clutch in the front of the room up against the stage, nearly everyone else in Hall H (or any other room) has at least one camera on their person at all times, whether it be a pricey DSLR with a massive telephoto lens or a cheap 3 year old cell phone. The second somebody famous steps onto the stage, the devices whip into the air and the flashes pulse erratically for five straight minutes like bad anime. The moment Hugh Jackman stepped on stage to promote his *Wolverine* movie, surprising everyone, was something meant to be saved on everyone's digital

memory card in stills and on video. However, shooting the exclusive, rough, 10 months in advance footage from the film is NOT meant to be captured. You can't go to a panel without hearing repeated announcements over the PA system, asking you to not take pictures of or film the footage the studios share with us at the event. I may sound like I'm sucking up to the Man, but I go out of my way to follow this edict to a T. Of course, everything else is fair game. I'll shoot pictures and video of the screens if they're closer to me than the real people sitting on stage that they're showing. But the moment pre-recorded footage appears on screen, the camera goes off. I enjoy the exclusive Comic-Con footage too much to worry about being kicked out or, at the very least, getting pulled from my seat and forced to erase my memory card. Every year, I watch incredulously as a burly security guy shoulder taps a slouching fanboy two rows in front of me

and grimly says, "come with me."  
Whether you hold the camera up in plain sight, like so many who get dragged out and never seen again, or you hide it away in your jacket or an oversized foam novelty cowboy hat, they will usually find you and remove you. If the studio wanted the footage posted to the internet, they would put it there themselves in HD. No one needs to see blurry, tinny sounding *Thor* footage. It doesn't provide an accurate depiction of the quality of the movie for the person checking it out on YouTube or elsewhere. Besides, you likely spent hundreds of dollars to get to Comic-Con and the last 7 hours in line just to see this footage. Not the kid in Poughkeepsie who spends Comic-Con weekend at home searching "green lantern comic-con" every 5 minutes on YouTube. What did he ever do for you? Just remember, when the lights go down and you hear them say "please don't film the footage on screen" for the umpteenth

time, just do everyone a favor and turn the camera off.

## **CAN I ASK QUESTIONS OF THE PEOPLE ON STAGE?**

Yes, in fact, it's encouraged... to a point. Hall H has a line that immediately forms to the left of the stage as soon as they let people in the door. You have a choice: find a seat or get in that line. However, the people in these lines are usually the people who slept in line overnight. If you're the 4000th person into either panel room, don't count on ever reaching the mic. Plus, it is rare for many panels to allow more than a half dozen to a dozen questions per panel, so you need to move fast if you want your chance. Ballroom 20 often has an instant line as well. Choose wisely as you might end up sitting on the floor for the entire panel with no hope of reaching the front of the line until 5 panels after the one for which you

originally lined up.

If you are going to make the effort to ask some questions, here are a few things you need to know:

- The audience shows no mercy and takes no prisoners. You better bring your A game. If you start to wander from your point or try to remember what you came up there for, you will be burned at the stake by the first few people who can reach you and bring you under their control.
- You love them ("them" meaning the people on stage, probably Samuel L Jackson or Joss Whedon in most cases). We know. Otherwise you wouldn't have stood in line for 9 hours to stand at this microphone. Nobody wants to hear you state the obvious. It's not about you. It's about the people on

stage or the stuff they created. Ask a QUESTION! Don't make comments. Don't spend 3 minutes thanking them for a great show until someone asks if you have a question and then not produce one. Don't ask for hugs or autographs. Don't make marriage proposals. It's cute when a 5 year old does it. The first time. The second 5 year old will get booed and run from the room in tears, never mind the 35 year old who tries it.

- Let me make this clear: No one cares about you. Seriously. I know it sounds mean, but nobody in the audience wants to hear the incredibly long story about how Iron Man 2 changed your religious views or how the 3rd season of Burn Notice got your mom to give up crack. We. Don't. Care. But if you make it through your story without getting bum rushed from the microphone, you better have a valid

question by the end of it.

- Ask one question. One. No 4 part questions. If you can't get the question out in one or two full sentences, it is a bad question. And once again, a few thousand people will share their disapproval of your actions with Night at the Apollo-level verbal disdain.
- If someone before you asked your question, you better come up with another good one quick or just get out of line and admit defeat. Even worse, if you haven't been paying attention and you still ask a question that has already been asked mere moments before you got to the mic, expect relentless derision until we see you cry.
- There are many different types of questions to ask. Try not to go all TMZ on them and asking personal questions

about their divorce or recently deceased child. Things get dizzyingly uncomfortable really fast. Try to keep your questions fun. If not, it's okay to be insightful and genuinely curious. Those are the best kinds of questions, unless your question can make the guest laugh (not the nervous, uncomfortable "you've been looking through my garbage, haven't you" type of laugh). Even better, dare to make everyone laugh. It's not as easy as it sounds. It usually involves a form of ironic self-humiliation. That's always a winner. Unfortunately, more often than not, when someone steps to the mic, all common sense leaves their mind and they either gush or try to be cute. Neither is appealing or interesting. Think before you ever step into that room. You've been in line for 8 hours. You had plenty of time to come up with a good question... or at

least a passable one.

- Avoid obscure minutiae-filled questions that only the decades dead script supervisor and key grip would even come close to commenting on. There's nothing more aggravating than the "remember that scene in season 1, episode 1AF28 where you blah blah blah..." No, I can definitively say that they don't remember. It was probably 1967. They were already 40 years old back then. You're lucky they're still able to show up to Comic-Con to hear you fumble your way blindly through that stupid question. Go ask your action figures. Surely, they'll know.
- Don't plug your website. It's crass. And again, nobody cares. If you represent a barely known media outlet from the far reaches of your mother's basement, you don't have to spell out the URL in order to ask your question.

It might be considered a savvy business practice in some circles, but the actual question that follows the plug is rarely clever enough to make me want to seek out more of your witticisms online.

- The usual selection of horrible questions often leads some studios to throw in hired scabs or ringers to ask studio-written and approved questions that often prompt a scripted response (usually hilarious, thoughtful, or a way too obvious set up to a video clip) from the celebrity. It's a sad state of affairs when the summer intern at Warner Bros with the earnestly retro Mr T shirt asks the producer (that no one is interested in hearing from) the best question of the day. "Well, I'm glad you asked that, Kenny, because I think we have a clip. Roll it, Steve! Woo!"

## DO THEY GIVE OUT GOODIES AT THE PANELS?

Yes, many panels do, but depending on the panel and the time it starts, they may have different ways of distributing the swag. The lead panel of the day might have attendants just inside the door to hand you a bag loaded with stuff, but it's often limited to the first 6000 or so. Don't linger and verify if the t-shirts inside are your size. They rarely make a variety of sizes available. Just take your bag and go. There are a couple thousand eager fans flowing in behind you.

The other goodie distribution option is through tickets. This usually happens during the Q&A portion of a panel that takes place later in the day. Attendants will walk through the room and hand a clutch of tickets to the person at the end of the row. When it comes to you, tear off one ticket and pass the rest along. They often count the people in a row and provide a set amount before handing

them off. If you decide to be clever and take more than one ticket, the person at the far end of the row might get screwed out of their chance at swag. Be considerate of others unless you happen to be the guy at the end of the row holding onto a clutch of 4 tickets no one claimed. Pocket them and deal with it later. Once the panel is over, you can take those tickets to the fulfillment room upstairs. If you go immediately, you will be stuck in an unnecessarily long line of every other impatient fan, wondering what this little slip of paper will bring them. You can redeem your ticket anytime that day and in the days following (unless it's Sunday. Note that Hall H doesn't have panels on Sunday... at least in the past they haven't). So if you get a ticket on Friday afternoon, you can redeem it that day, Saturday, or Sunday. There are times that the fulfillment room is devoid of people except for the ticket takers behind the tables stacked with

various types of swag from any number of panels. Your ticket is only good for the panel in which you received it.

Everything is color coded and monitored closely. You can try to beg for something you like, but unless it's late in the day on Sunday, it's unlikely that they'll give it to you. They tend to make only as many items as tickets they distribute.

## **WHEN CAN I GET OUT OF THERE?**

It's preferred that you wait until the current panel is completed. Walk quickly and as quietly as possible to the clearly marked exits. **DON'T** try to exit through the door where you entered! There will be new bodies to replace you entering from that direction. Just know that once you're out, it's unlikely that you'll be able to get back in that same day, unless there isn't much demand for whatever comes later in the day.