

# Con-Going 101: Your First Con

by Chaz Boston Baden with a little help from various friends and relations.

*“Are you new to conventions? Do you ever feel like you’re not sure where to go or what to do? Come to Con Going 101, the convention survival guide panel filled with tips, tricks, and helpful advice!”*

**What to expect.** You’ll find dealers, and artists, and various exhibits and booths. There will be panels and program items and events, with professionals and talented & knowledgeable fans; autograph sessions, gatherings and meet-ups, dances and game shows; and more!

**Every convention is different.** It’s not just a matter of size and focus, either. The small and medium-sized conventions can do things the larger conventions can’t do. The larger megaconvention may have more industry involvement and bigger stars in the field.

Every con makes different choices about what to emphasize and what not to, and finds their own balance of different elements and styles. They all feel different. If this is your first convention, welcome. The next one you attend will help you appreciate the similarities and differences. (Some local conventions are listed on the last page.)

**Preparation and planning.** Research the convention before you leave home. Look for their website. Often they’ll publish a schedule ahead of time, this is worth studying, as well as prices, hours, and rules for things. Knowing what is going to be there helps you to have a good time! If you have a smart phone, they may have an app made for you to use on it.

Reasons to Stay on site	Reasons to Commute
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sleeping in a hotel room, possibly with roommates.</li><li>• Note that booking in the official convention room block at the hotel helps the convention, and is usually cheaper overall.</li><li>• The room block may fill up early. Reserve a room as soon as possible.</li><li>• The con doesn’t end at 6 o’clock.</li><li>• There’s usually more than just Saturday’s events.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sleeping in your own bed is cheaper.</li><li>• You were too late trying to reserve a room.</li><li>• You can’t stay up late, or have something else you want to do off-site.</li><li>• You only plan to attend for one day.</li></ul>

- Get the check in/out times of the hotel so there is no confusion later on.
- Some hotel chains allow you to check-in via their smart-phone app. For example, with Hilton-family properties you can check in the day before.
- Find out about luggage hold services in the hotel. Do they have one, how long in advance of check-in, how long after check-out?
- Find out about car park, valet, and car rental in hotel, as well as driving/taxi and public transport in the local area.
- Find out about hotel transport to the airport / train depot / bus terminal.

## **You need a badge.**

Seriously, buy a membership (or a ticket, if that's how they handle things) and support the convention. If you can't afford to pay for every convention, then don't go to all of them. Find something else to do. Don't be "that guy" who shows up and crashes the party, trying to see how long it takes to get kicked out. It's rude, dishonest, and slimy. It's not a coincidence all these people are in the hotel this weekend. You can organize your own free picnic in the park any weekend you like. *Find the serenity in your heart to accept that you can't go to all of the conventions.*

## **Payments, transfers and rollovers vs. refunds.**

*It doesn't get cheaper if you wait.* If you know you want to go to a particular convention, you'll save money if you plan ahead. Often the "early bird" price is **50%** of what the final price will be, and even if you only end up going for one day you'll have saved money.

*Pay attention to how payments are processed.* If you get a mysterious charge on your credit card statement for "Member Solutions" or "Eventbrite" or something, it might just be the payment processor for a convention you just joined. Check your e-mail and call them before starting a "charge back" as those are expensive and rude.

Many conventions don't give refunds, but instead they allow transfers, rollovers, or both. A **transfer** is where you assign the membership to someone else, either giving it away or selling it. The con changes its database to show their name instead of yours, and everyone's happy.

More conventions these days are allowing you to **roll over** your membership to the following year. You let their Registration department know, they take you out of this year's database and put you on the list for next year.

## **Membership caps.**

There are some conventions with membership caps, that sell out within a day or an hour of going on sale. Notable examples include Gallifrey One and (San Diego) Comic-Con International. On the other hand, some conventions have a membership cap that takes most of the year to sell out.

## **Working the angles.**

- Upgrading a one-day badge to a full-weekend membership.
- Student, military, family/child/parent and group discounts.
- Staffing, volunteering, and comps vs. pass-ons.
- Press & Industry.
- Panels, program participants, and "Guest of Guest."
- Working for a dealer.

Don't be a flake! If you're committing to doing something with your badge, follow through; or, let them know you won't be attending at all.

**Who are you, what shall we call you?** You might want your regular name, or the online handle or alias all of your friends know you by. If your badge has something other than your “real name,” that’s called a **badge name**, nickname, or fan name.

I suggest being consistent from one convention to the next. Pick a name you’ll answer to. **This is what your badge is for.** It’s your introduction to everyone else at the con. If someone’s calling you “Raven” because that’s on your badge, it’s rude to ignore them just because you forgot what you wrote down!

*Protip: calling yourself Raven without a last name isn’t nearly as unique as you think it is.* Some names I’ve seen used, recently, at least three times at the same convention include Ace, Bunny, The Doctor, Dragon Rider, Haku, Hana, Kai, Kat, Kirito, Kitsune, Kitty, Mari, Michi, Momo, Panda, Princess, Rei/Rei-chan, Rin, Ryu, Sabo, Senpai, Shadow, Sora, Tama, Totoro, Yui, Yuki, and Ziggy.

### **What to bring?**

- Make a checklist of the things you’re bringing, so you don’t leave anything at home. I use a “panic list,” keep it in my shirt pocket, crossing things off as I deal with them.
- Make a checklist of the things you’re taking home, so you don’t leave anything behind in the hotel.
- Business cards or some other way to tell new friends how to find you.
- Clean clothes, including layers for when the A/C gets cold or the sun goes down. **Here in SoCal, the temperature can drop 30 degrees by the time the fireworks are over.** At the very least, bring a lightweight sweatshirt, windbreaker, or long sleeve shirt just in case.
- Pack enough clean clothes, plus an extra set. If you plan to wear costumes all weekend, you’ll still want to have street clothes to change into. **At most cons, costumes are not required** (although clothes are), even though it may look that way from the photos people post. You can just wear your ordinary day-to-day clothes. Consider packing a “nice” outfit in case there’s a formal dance or the like.
- Charger device for your electronics. If you have a charger or charging cable you can plug into a USB jack, bring that one, too; many hotel TVs have a USB port.
- Spare batteries and memory card for your camera.
- Plastic zip bags and safety pins. Bobby pins, if you use them.
- Bring extra supplies, socks, underthings, and medication.
- Personal hygiene products. Women can experience strange changes in their cycles at conventions. Be prepared.
- You can get a tiny to-go med kit at some of the department stores and refill what you use before every con.
- Non-drowsy antihistamines for dusty hotel rooms. Bring lozenges, hard candies, or mints, for your dry mouth. Aspirin or other pain relievers, in case of headache.
- Deodorant. Bring it. The hotel will generally provide soap and shampoo. Use them.
- Protein bars, or something else with more nutrition than just sugar and caffeine.
- Bring food to share. Or if your food is just for your own use, make sure your roommates know. And be mindful of others’ food.
- An ice chest and an electric teakettle can be very handy. So can a pitcher, if you want to make some (iced) tea.

**Orienting yourself at the con.** Read the program book. Acquaint yourself with what sort of amenities the convention offers, such as Con Suite and Costume Repair Station. The Information Desk is your friend, find out where it is so you have a place to ask questions.

- Get oriented in the convention space(s) as early as possible. Where the rooms are, where the ramps/stairs/elevators are, how far you'll be walking, where food and restrooms are, where your sleeping room is in relation to the Dealer's room and other places you'll need to go.
- Note that at some conventions, things may be spread out over more than one floor, or in multiple buildings. Find out how far it sprawls.
- Look at the *whole* schedule, preferably a day or two in advance, and at the start of each day. You don't want to find out about that killer panel or event *after* it happens.
- Be sure to check the more passive events and exhibits, like Art Show, Gaming, etc.
- Volunteering is the quickest way to be on the "in" team. It gives you a home base and somewhere to go when you feel a little lost or overwhelmed.

### **Roommate and hotel etiquette**

- If you're sharing a room with friends and acquaintances, be a good roommate. Pay your share up front. **Don't let your stuff sprawl all over the room.** This is especially important if you've brought more than two costumes.
- The goal I keep in mind is to strive to be ready at any time for visitors to come by. I'll unpack one bag at a time, rather than cover the bed with a bunch of stuff.
- If you have a lot of luggage, please be ready to tip the bellhop. "A buck a bag" is a good place to start. If you can't spare \$12 for your twelve bags, try to at least give them a fiver.
- If you're in charge of the room, then take charge. Talk about who gets to use the drawers and hang things in the closet, or if everyone will live out of their suitcases.
- Don't ask the hotel for more than four keys for the room.
- Note that **Replacement Keys are not the same as Duplicate Keys.** The hotel might not give you any duplicate keys, which means every time you ask for a new key you get a replacement key and all the old keys stop working. It's not because they're "de-magnetized."
- Room curfew, and "get up and out of the room time." People have to sleep, and you should let the housekeeping staff can make the beds and such.
- Tip the housekeepers. At least \$1/day per person staying in the room. Leave it on a pillow, every morning. (Rather than a lump sum at the end of the trip.) Trust me, if the maid finds \$9 on the pillow, she or he won't complain about how it looks like nine people are sleeping in the room.
- Don't steal the housekeeping tip. If you're starving because you have no money, swallow your pride and tell someone you're broke instead.
- "Don't break the hotel." But if you do damage something, 'fess up as soon as possible.
- For example, if the sheets end up getting stained, don't wad them up and hide them in the closet! Just put some more tip money on the pillow in the morning.
- Pour out your drink before you throw away the cup. "Carefully putting a half-full cup in the wastebasket rightside-up" doesn't help the janitorial staff when they pick up the entire trash can to dump all of the contents.

**Take care of yourself.** Your health is your first priority.

- Make sure you get at least five hours of sleep and two solid meals every day. Don't get those numbers backwards, either. Know when you are ready to collapse and get to bed before then.
- Shower and put on clean clothes every day. Hygiene is important. (Your hotel room comes with a shower and soap, so use them.)
- Stay hydrated. If you haven't had to visit the restroom in an hour or two, you need more water.
- **Hotel/convention center air condition will dry you out** and you won't realize it's happening.

**Some basic convention etiquette.**

- **At every convention it's someone's first time there**, and for some people it's their first convention ever. And for everyone you meet who's been here before, it was their first time once too. We've all had that feeling of being overwhelmed with all the new experiences you're having now.
- Don't be a creeper. Be polite. There's plenty of help available if you don't get this. For example: [www.doctornerdlove.com/2011/12/dont-be-a-creeper/](http://www.doctornerdlove.com/2011/12/dont-be-a-creeper/)
- Be polite to people wearing costumes. They may not have time to stop and pose for a photo, and if they do, you shouldn't be blocking traffic to do so.
- Be kind to big propped cosplayers and handicapped con-goers. Nothing sucks more than having things break or getting stuck somewhere because people won't be kind and move out of your way. Respect goes a long way.
- Try to remember to spend about as much time listening to other people geeking out about *their* interests, as you do geeking out about *your* interests.
- If you find someone who wants to get extra friendly with you, consider taking your "public displays of affection" somewhere more private. And this doesn't mean the back bedroom of your friend's suite while he or she's using the front parlor, either.
- If it's illegal outside of the hotel, don't do it inside the hotel.
- Party responsibly. If you're having alcohol, don't give it to the under-21 crowd. Pace yourself, for example by alternating drinks and water so you can function the next day in polite society. If you're the host, you should give more to the housekeepers in tips. I suggest at least \$1 per bottle or six-pack consumed.
- Please don't take your tactical gear and Airsoft assault props with you when you walk down the street to the hamburger stand. Even if you're walking *away* from the international airport.

## **Orienting yourself in town.**

- Availability of food: affordable options often exist such as grocery shopping, Con Suite (more common at sci-fi conventions than anime cons), and walking to the fast food places.
- Find out other hotel services, like dry cleaning, shoe shine, copy center, mail drop/pickup, etc.
- Find out about local news and events away from the convention, both good and bad. Parades and Celebrations? Protests and Demonstrations? Museums? Terrorists? Concerts and sports games?

**Communications and contingency planning.** Hotels and convention centers can be terrible for cellular reception. Even if you have “five bars” your friends may not. And if you have no reception, your phone will keep trying anyway and drain the battery. Or you may have reception, but everyone is trying to use the same service at the same time and your calls keep getting dropped.

*Protip: when your phone battery gets very low, such as 15%, switch to Airplane Mode. You’ll still be able to use the alarm clock features and refer back to messages and numbers already received, even though you can’t send or receive any new ones.*

My recommendation is to use text messaging if you can, and to establish plans and backup plans ahead of time. Not everyone can check Facebook or e-mail away from home, and if they don’t have reliable voice service they won’t be able to phone in for their voice messages either. Obviously this will vary depending on what you already know works reliably with your friends, but in general you should not assume someone received any message you sent via any means until they tell you they have.

So it’s not going to be as easy to stay in touch as (for example) at a school campus. From time to time, you might want to step outside to let your phone catch up on your text messages. I have sporadic service myself, so when I send a text message I’ll often include the time I’m sending it. (The timestamp that the cell service puts on it can’t be trusted.)

*Two people wanted to meet at Disneyland. They agreed to meet at a particular place and time. One of them waited for half an hour, and then gave up. The other one arrived half an hour late, waited for an hour, and then gave up. They never met that night.*

Coping strategies you can use and things you might say:

- We agree we’ll stay in this general area, and meet up before going somewhere else.
- I’ll be in the lobby at 7:00, and we’ll leave by 7:30. If you miss me, look for me later at \_\_\_\_\_.
- I’ll send you a text message when I go to \_\_\_\_\_.
- Send me a text to find out where we went.
- So-and-so is going to be in one place all day. Let’s let him or her know where we go.

It’s important to remember that you probably weren’t “ditched,” you just missed your connection. So consider setting up a Plan B, Plan C, and so forth. Be flexible both in how you make your arrangements, and how you react to things changing on the fly.

**Learn the words and abbreviations.** *This is not a complete list. No convention will use all of these terms, or use them the same way. We'll spend a little time talking about different ways these terms are used.*

- Access Control, Con Ops, Line Control, Rovers, Safety, Security
- Access Services, ADA Compliance, Handicapped Access, Special Needs
- AMV, CMV, PMV
- Artists' Alley, Dealers Room/Hall, Exhibits
- Assistant vs. Second
- Club tables/fan tables
- Committee, ConCom, Staff, Area/Department, Division, DH, Chair
- Con Suite, Hospitality Suite
- Cosplay
- Crash space
- Costume/Cosplay Repair Station
- Guest, Guest of Honor/GoH, Industry, Professional, Program Participant
- Dance (vs. Rave), Formal Dance
- Day Zero
- Dead Dog Party
- Foyer, Lobby
- Function Space
- Gatherings
- Goodie bag/reg bag/swag bag
- Hall Costume/Cosplay Awards
- Kid in Tow
- LARP
- Live Program (as opposed to recorded)
- Live Program Check-In
- LP1, LP2, V1, V2, Main Stage, etc.
- Maid Cafe
- Manga Library/Lounge
- Masquerade; Masquerade Green Room
- Media/Press
- Members, Membership, Pre-Registration, Registration/Reg
- MIMO
- Minions, volunteering
- Noisy/Party Floor vs. Quiet Floor
- Operations/Ops, Office
- Panel
- Parent in Tow; Parent's Lounge
- Pocket Program, Program Book/Guide
- Presentation vs. Workmanship award
- Program Operations (not the same as regular Ops)
- Restaurant Guide
- Ribbons
- Room Block
- Swap Meet
- Tabletop Games
- Tech
- Tickets for convention or special events
- Track
- Trash Barrel, Trash Can, Wastebasket

### **Some notes on some of those vocabulary terms.**

A "Second" is an assistant that should be able to take over if the head person is not available. If they're just listed as an "Assistant," they might be able to step in, they might not.

"Exhibits" sometimes refers to where they sell stuff, and sometimes it's a place to go see stuff on display (like at a museum or county fair).

"DH" could mean Department or Division. Some conventions use Department and Division as synonyms, more usually a Division is a collection of Departments, and occasionally it's the other way around where the Division is a subset of a Department.

Conventions don't usually call the late night dance a "Rave" because it makes the venue nervous.

LP1 and so forth are designations for rooms picked by the convention. Usually (*but not always*) they're numbered in decreasing order by size, or if they're all the same size they'll be in order as you walk down the hall. "Main Events" or "Main Stage" is the biggest room available, and sometimes is the same room as LP1.

MIMO is Move-In/Move-Out, the period of set-up before and after the convention officially begins and ends.

At some conventions, "Minions" is a specific department, rather than just another name for people who help.

Program Operations or Prog Ops are the people who set up the rooms for the panels, or the room they're headquartered. Operations is the headquarters control room for the convention as a whole, and also can mean the people with the radios that try to talk people out of doing stupid things. That department could be named Access Control, Safety, Security, or any number of other titles. At some conventions, Program Operations and Tech are all combined under Operations.

Ribbons can be things the convention puts onto badges for official purposes. They also can be things people hand out for unofficial or non-convention things. (In my case, "Shot by a Bear .com" is the ribbon I give people when I shoot their picture.)

"Ticket" is sometimes used to mean your admission to the convention as a whole, where other cons may say badge or membership. Or, at some conventions, individual events within the convention may require tickets.

At many hotels and convention centers, if you ask for a "trash can" they will bring you a small office-size wastebasket. You may want to ask for a "trash barrel" instead.

Let's discuss some of these points.

Who has a story or anecdote that relates to any of these?

*This panel is just the start of our conversations this weekend.*

Conventions are all about conversations:  
we convene so that we may converse.

*We won't get to everything in this handout in one hour.  
We can meet up later and talk some more.*

What did I miss?

Look me up on **[facebook.com/hazelchaz](https://www.facebook.com/hazelchaz)** or **[chazbaden.com](http://chazbaden.com)**.