

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!”

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. 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.

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
- 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
- Tickets for convention or special events
- Track

Some notes on that 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 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, or any number of other titles.

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.

Do your research ahead of time and when you arrive.

- Make a checklist of the things you're bringing, so you don't leave anything at home.
- Make a checklist of the things you're taking home, so you don't leave anything behind in the hotel.
- Get the check in/out times of the hotel and resources so there is no confusion later on.
- 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.
- Look into whether the event has a special direct bus organized.
- 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?
- 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.
- 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.

Let's discuss some of these points.

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** or **chazbaden.com**.

Some convention, roommate, and hotel etiquette.

- 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/
- 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'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.
- 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.
- 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 should plan to 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 get a replacement key all the old keys stop working. It's not because they're "de-magnetized."
- Room curfew. People have to sleep, and they have to get up in the morning and get out of the room so 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. 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.

Some miscellaneous notes.

- 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.
- Stay hydrated. If you haven't had to visit the restroom in an hour or two, you need more water.
- **Hotel air condition will dry you out** and you won't realize it's happening.
- 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.
- 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.
- If it's illegal outside of the hotel, don't do it inside the hotel.
- 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.
- **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.

Communications and 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.

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, 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.

Badges. Who are you, what shall we call you?

Figure out what you want your badge to say. You might want your regular name, or you might want the online handle or alias all of your friends know you by. 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 that's what you wrote down! *Protip: calling yourself "Raven" isn't nearly as unique as you think it is.* I also suggest being consistent from one convention to the next. If your badge has something different than your "government name," that's called a **badge name**, nickname, or fan name.

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.

Working the angles.

- Membership caps. Gallifrey One & San Diego Comic-Con vs. Animé Los Angeles.
- Staffing, volunteering, and comps vs. pass-ons.
- Press & Industry.
- Panels, program participants, and "Guest of Guest."
- Working for a dealer.
- Student, military, family and group discounts.
- Upgrading a one-day badge to a full-weekend membership.

There are some conventions with membership caps, that sell out within a day (or an hour) of going on sale. This is why Gallifrey One and (San Diego) Comic-Con aren't listed in my rundown on the last page. On the other hand, some conventions like Animé Los Angeles have a membership cap that takes most of the year to sell out.

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.

Stay on site vs. commute?

- Costs.
- Sleeping in your own bed vs. a hotel room and roommates.
- There's usually more to a convention than just Saturday's events.
- The convention doesn't end at 6 o'clock.
- Note that booking in the official convention room block at the hotel helps the convention, and is usually cheaper overall; but the room block may fill up early.

What to bring?

- 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.
- Protein bars, or something else with more nutrition than just sugar and caffeine.
- 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, as you'll always need more.
- Bring extra supplies, socks, underthings, and medication. There will always be someone who forgot something.
- 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 (such as the Target a block south of here) 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.

Here are some other conventions and events in Southern California (Los Angeles, Orange County, San Diego), and in the Bay Area (*shown in italics*). This is not a complete list! See also **animecons.com/events** and talk to your friends and acquaintances. Note that most of these will have anime & gaming tracks, and tend to be appreciative of costumes. A lot of the science fiction cons will be smaller but just as lively as the larger conventions.

Animé Los Angeles, January (anime)
AOD, Jan./February (anime, general animation)
Strategicon: Orccon, February (gaming)
DunDraCon, February (gaming)
Hanadoki Con, March (anime)
ConDor, March (s.f.)
Wondercon, April (comics, pop culture)
Anime Conji, April (anime)
Girl Gamer Gathering Zero, April (gaming) new for 2015
Kingdom-Con, April (gaming)
Gaslight Gathering, May (steampunk)
BABScon: Bay Area Brony Spectacular, May (MLP:FIM)
FanimeCon/Clockwork Alchemy, May (anime, steampunk)
Strategicon: Gamex, May (gaming)
KublaCon, May (gaming)
Baycon, May (s.f.)
Ninja-Con, June (anime)
Westercon*, July 2015 (s.f.)
Anime Expo, July (anime)
Costume College, August, free to see dealers & costume exhibit (costuming)
Nisei Week, August, free (Japanese culture)
Costume Camp, Aug./September, sleepover camp (cosplay)
TouhouCon, September (anime)
Wyrddcon**, September 2015 (LARPs, storytelling)
Fandom Verse Expo**, Fall 2015 (all sorts of fandoms) new for 2015
Strategicon: Gateway, Aug./September (gaming)
Cosplay Sewing Circle, monthly, free (working on projects)
Mermaid Picnic, monthly, potluck at the beach (mermaids, pirates)
Long Beach Comic Con, September (comics etc.)
Yaoi-Con, September (yaoi anime, 18-plus)
Convolution, September (s.f.)
Conjecture, October (s.f.)
Comikaze Expo, Oct./November (comics etc.)
Pacific Media Expo, November (anime, asian culture)
Bent-con, November (pop culture, geekdom, GBLTQ)
Loscon, November (s.f.)
Smofcon*, December 2014 (convention-running)
Various picnics, free or potluck

*Smofcon and Westercon move around every year, and the next one happens to be in SoCal.

**Wyrddcon and Fandomverse Expo will be in 2015, not 2014.