

# Cartoons, Comics & Conventions

## A Fan Convention Survival Guide

by Kat Kaneko Avila

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There are two must-go fan conventions for me - Anime Expo and Comic-Con International. Anime Expo is an anime and manga (Japanese animation and graphic novels) convention. It just celebrated a 10-year anniversary and is hosted by the nonprofit Society for the Promotion of Japanese Animation (SPJA). Comic-Con International is a comic book and popular culture convention, which is in its 32nd year and is hosted by a nonprofit corporation of the same name. They are both the largest conventions of their type in the United States and are held in Long Beach, California, and San Diego, California, respectively during the summer.

This fan convention survival guide stresses organization because of my experiences with limited mobility. Last year my sister and I took our wheelchair-bound father to both Anime Expo 2000 (AX2000) and Comic-Con 2000. This year I did Comic-Con 2001 with a cane, though I was supposed to still be on crutches due to a work-related accident. (As a coworker said, he didn't know filing could be so dangerous!)

### TIP #1: PRE-REGISTER

The year before we didn't pre-register for either convention. We wasted a lot of time in horribly long registration lines, similar to the in-person registration lines for college classes when you don't do telephone or online registration. The only person who got a break was my father at Comic-Con 2000. The eagle-eyed volunteers in Disabled Services were watching out for people like him. He was whisked away from the outdoors line to wait in an air-conditioned lobby while another volunteer ran upstairs to grab badges and goody bags. When we finally caught up to my father, there was a big silly grin on his face from all the attention he was getting from a female volunteer.

My sister and I pre-registered for this year's conventions. If you pre-registered for Anime Expo 2001 (AX2001) before January 1, 2001, it cost only \$40 for four days instead of the \$40 at-the-door price for two days. We printed out the registration forms from Anime Expo's web site (<http://www.anime-expo.org>; Comic-Con's is <http://www.comic-con.org>). But we were able to pre-register on-site for Comic-Con 2001 at Comic-Con 2000, paying only \$35 instead of the \$60 at-the-door price for four days. Pre-registration for Comic-Con comes with mailed updates during the year and an exclusive invitation to preview the exhibitor booths and merchandise.

If you don't pre-register, all is not lost. Either get in line very, very early, or wait till the afternoon after the morning rush is over. Expect the longest lines on Saturday.

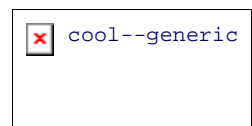
### TIP #2: WEAR SHOES YOU CAN WALK ALL DAY IN.

When you read the words "largest [fill in the blank] convention in the U.S.," figure that

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you are going to do a lot of walking between activities and while browsing the huge exhibit hall. Wear supportive footwear. I wear old running shoes with special insoles for cushioning and arch support. The inside of my shoes are sprinkled with foot powder to help them stay fresh-smelling.

Events at AX2001 were spread out among the Long Beach Convention Center, Long Beach Hyatt Hotel, Long Beach Westin Hotel, and Long Beach Renaissance Hotel. My sister and I parked at the convention center and walked a couple of blocks to the Westin Hotel where we were directed by volunteers to the rear of the hotel and up a flight of stairs to pick up our badges. (We were really glad we had pre-registered when we saw the length of the line for people who hadn't.) Then we walked back to the convention center to search for the film ballroom and the 224,000 square-foot exhibit hall. We both agreed that if my father were still alive it would have been difficult and time-consuming for him in a wheelchair.

At Comic-Con 2001, the closest and cheapest parking my sister could find was a 15-minute walk away (ruling out quick and easy merchandise drop-offs). She found the parking garage after three hours of shopping and driving around San Diego on the first day. This year's exhibit hall expanded to 300,000 square feet.

You don't want to be slowed down by sore feet and blisters caused by uncomfortable shoes. It's not simply the distance you cover that you must consider, but the length of the convention day, which at Anime Expo and Comic-Con can run from about 10:00 a.m. to midnight.

Using a wheelchair? My father used a wheelchair for AX2000. It almost brought us to tears trying to get my father through the exhibit hall on a Saturday because of the narrowness of the aisles and the tightly packed foot traffic. (Parents with baby strollers be warned!) For Comic-Con 2000, my father used his slightly larger electric scooter because the exhibit hall was more spacious. Still, some aisles would have been difficult to navigate through a crowd.

### **TIP #3: PACK YOUR DAYPACK OR KNAPSACK FOR A 14-HOUR URBAN HIKE.**

You might include the following items:

#### **a. PHOTO IDENTIFICATION**

You need photo identification for writing checks and to prove you're over 18. Additionally, at the Comic-Con 2001 art show, I had to prove who I was to set up and remove an in-memoriam collage of my father's artwork.

#### **b. PROOF OF PRE-REGISTRATION**

Paperwork gets misplaced and lost. Be ready to prove payment. If you made reservations for a hotel room and car, it's not a bad idea to bring copies of receipts.

#### **c. WATER BOTTLE**

Your water bottle can be refilled at the water fountain, unless you want to pay \$2.00 for a can of soda. I prefer to use a sport-top water bottle; you don't have to unscrew the top to drink. If you forget to bring a water bottle, you can recycle a plastic soda bottle.

#### **d. SNACKS**

You're attending back-to-back workshops on grading comics, 3-D computer animation basics, and six-panel grid storytelling. Or you're watching one must-see anime video

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**We would like to hear from you!**

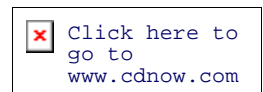
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after another (naturally you have to see the preview of the new Vampire Hunter D film). Or you're trying to get an autograph from XENA actor Ted Raimi. There's no time to eat! Or maybe you don't want to stand in line to pay \$3.50 for a hot dog. Bring bagels, potato chips, mini-pretzels, gummi bears. (If it's too nutritious, trust me you won't eat it.) Use a binder clip to reseal bags or use a resealable snack bag. If you eat a good breakfast, your snacks will hold off a growling stomach until you get home or find a suitable restaurant outside the convention center complex.

#### e. SUFFICIENT CASH

Many vendors don't accept checks or credit cards, and it'll always be the vendor who has the one-of-a-kind merchandise you want. Bring enough money so you don't have to hunt for an ATM or stand in a long line for one. The disadvantages of carrying a lot of cash is you always have to keep an eye on it and you'll be sorely tempted to spend it all on the first day of the convention. Possible solutions are to not store your cash all in the same place and to stick strictly to your shopping list.

#### f. PROGRAM SCHEDULE & GUIDE

Several days before a convention my sister and I download the workshop and anime video schedules from the related web site. We highlight promising events and compare schedules so we know where the other person will be. Daily on-site newsletters list last-minute schedule changes.

Using a binder with a clear overlay where the front and back of the cover can be customized, I slip in that day's workshop schedule in the front, the anime video schedule in the back. Inside the binder are the remainder of my daily schedules and top-loading clear sheet protectors for business cards, trading cards, flyers, and comic books and zines. I use a top-loading plastic envelope to carry my program guide and vendor catalogs.

#### g. MAILING TUBE

Protect your free promotional posters and purchased posters with a mailing tube. Tubes made for blueprints come with a handle. (Okay, this might not fit in your knapsack.)

#### h. SKETCHBOOK

Many autograph seekers at Anime Expo and Comic-Con carry a sketchbook. At Comic-Con 2001, while in the autograph line for penciler Jim Cheung who works on the series SCION published by CrossGen Comics, I met a fan who showed me his hardbound sketchbook containing artist autographs and sketches dating back to 1995.

(NOTE: Artists are occasionally limited to autographing only immediately purchased merchandise, as in the case of renowned manga artist Kia Asamiya who could only sign toy merchandise featuring his characters at one Comic-Con 2001 vendor booth, but was not similarly constrained at another booth. Also, some artists may charge for sketches.)

#### i. CAMERA AND FILM

There exist plenty of photo opportunities with cosplayers (fans dressed as their favorite characters) and other masquerade participants walking around. One man casually transformed into master thief Lupin III from Hayao Miyazaki's anime THE CASTLE OF CAGLIOSTRO while I sat next to him at a workshop. Be courteous and ask for permission to photograph.

## j. SWEATER OR JACKET

In the summer it's easy to forget to bring a sweater or jacket, but the indoor air conditioning might make it uncomfortably cool for you. Learn to layer your clothing to stay cool or warm.

### TIP #4: GET IN LINE EARLY.

If an event is important to you and popular, get in line early. Movie previews and the masquerade event are first-come, first-serve. The masquerade event, alternatively dramatic and humorous, is often the highpoint of a convention experience and is worth the hours-long wait. They are the largest attended events at Anime Expo and Comic-Con.

If you want an autograph or sketch, check the schedule to see if the celebrity actor, artist, or writer/producer will be available at a time other than Saturday when lines are longest. On a Sunday at Comic-Con 2001, I was able to walk right up to Elizabeth Watasin, creator of CHARM SCHOOL, and Tommy Kovac, creator of STITCH, both comics published by Slave Labor Graphics (SLG). They had time to answer my questions, and I didn't have to worry about holding up any of their sales. (Later, as I read Kovac's zine LIBRARY BONNET, I would find out he was THAT Tommy who had heroically challenged the censorship of a book series about notable gay men and lesbians at a junior high school library where he worked and had thus become a mini-celebrity in Orange County, California, where I live.)

For artist-only autographs and/or sketches, and if you're not too particular, you might try visiting the artist alley at both conventions where you can find less well-known artists and representatives from artist collectives who are not as busy. At AX2001, I was able to chat at length with manga artist Shirley L. Chang, and I bought a copy of her CORONATION SAGA doujinshi (self-published graphic novel) which came with promotional stationery.

### TIP #5: TAKE A BREAK.

Breathe, eat, sleep. Anime Expo and Comic-Con are both by the ocean. No excuse not to kick off your shoes, enjoy the sun, and stare out at the ocean at least once a day. Reapply sunscreen and lip ointment. Get out the refresh drops for your contact lenses. Brush your teeth.

Try to get a good night's sleep despite all the wonderful distractions. Resist turning into a convention zombie.

### TIP #6: WATCH OUT FOR PICKPOCKETS.

Don't make yourself an obvious or easy target. Avoid flashing wads of cash. Keep your hands free of merchandise as much as possible. (That's what your knapsack is for.) Stay alert to what's going on and who's around you. Be prepared that the deliberate lean and bump into you by a pickpocket can temporarily stun you. If an item is easily accessible, it can be stolen.

Put away your convention badge after you leave the convention center complex. Don't advertise your visitor status.

### TIP #7: TALK TO PEOPLE.

It's very easy to silently glide through a convention. Screw in your courage to talk to

the person sitting next to you in a workshop or waiting in line with you. You might start off with something as simple as asking where the nearest restroom is or complimenting a catwoman on her sexy dance routine at the masquerade the night before. Contact with another human being will make the size of the convention less intimidating and make it more personal for you. Your fellow conventioners can be very enthusiastic about sharing their interests and knowledge.

Hopefully these tips will contribute toward a more enjoyable and comfortable convention experience. You may even have a few tips of your own to add. See you at AX2002 and Comic-Con 2002 next summer!

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Kat Avila has an M.A. in Communication from University of California, San Diego, and is of Japanese and Mexican-Indian ethnicity. She has a website devoted to Chicano/Latino theater and Asian-American theater at <http://www.geocities.com/buscandocalifornia/>. Feel free to drop her a line at [kavila0@sm.ivc.cc.ca.us](mailto:kavila0@sm.ivc.cc.ca.us).

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