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The Best of San Francisco

Even if you've never been to San Francisco, you probably already have an image of it in your mind. Perhaps you envision cable cars cresting monstrous hills with the glistening bay as a picture-perfect backdrop, neighborhoods of colorfully painted Victorians, small streets lined with swank boutiques, killer restaurants packed with fans of the region's exceptional food and wine, ferry rides across the bay or walks across the Golden Gate Bridge, hippies celebrating free love, or even gay and lesbian couples celebrating a briefly legal union on the steps of City Hall. Regardless of what you expect or imagine, The City by the Bay is all that and more. As the country's most romantic European-style city, which was founded on—and still revels in—the pioneers' boom-or-bust lifestyle and diversity in all things, it really does have a little bit of everything tucked into only 7 square miles. So, what can you expect with a visit? Whatever your heart desires! Like an eternal world's fair, it's all happening in San Francisco, and everyone's invited.

1 The Most Unforgettable Travel Experiences

- **An Early Morning Cable-Car Ride:** Skip the less-scenic California line and take the Powell-Hyde cable car down to Fisherman's Wharf—the ride is worth the wait. When you reach the top of Nob Hill, grab the rail with one hand and hold your camera with the other, because you're about to see a view of the bay that'll make you a believer. Oh, and don't call it a trolley. See p. 151.
- **An Adventure at Alcatraz:** Even if you loathe tourist spots, you'll like Alcatraz. The rangers have done a fantastic job of preserving The Rock—just looking at it is enough to give you the heebie-jeebies—and they give excellent guided tours (highly recommended). Heck, even the boat ride across the bay is worth the price, so don't miss this attraction. See p. 150.
- **A Walk across the Golden Gate Bridge:** Don your windbreaker and walking shoes and prepare for a wind-blasted, exhilarating journey across San Francisco's most famous landmark. It's simply one of those things you have to do at least once in your life. See p. 156.
- **A Stroll through Chinatown:** Chinatown is a trip. I've been through it at least 100 times, and it has never failed to entertain me. Skip the crummy camera and luggage stores and head straight for the markets, where a cornucopia of sights that you just don't see very often in America sits in boxes for you to scrutinize (one day we saw an armadillo for sale, and it wasn't meant to be a pet). Better yet, take one of Shirley Fong-Torres's Wok Wiz tours of Chinatown (p. 185). See "Walking Tour 1: Chinatown,"

beginning on p. 191, for our walking tour of Chinatown.

- **A Shopping Spree:** Up your credit card limit and bring an extra suitcase, because you're sure to find hundreds of must-haves in the department stores and boutiques surrounding San

Francisco's retail epicenter, Union Square. Boutique hounds should head to North Beach's Grant Avenue, upper Fillmore, and Hayes Valley for the best selections of chic women's wear. See chapter 9 for more on San Francisco's shopping.

2 The Best Splurge Hotels

- **The Ritz-Carlton**, 600 Stockton St., Nob Hill (☎ 800/241-3333 or 415/296-7465; www.ritzcarlton.com), is the granddaddy of luxury, with all the traditional bells and whistles and every possible amenity. From afternoon tea to the city's best Sunday brunch to the best lobby restrooms to traditional abodes, your wish is their command. See p. 75.
- **Four Seasons Hotel San Francisco**, 757 Market St., SoMa (☎ 800/332-3442 or 415/633-3000; www.fourseasons.com), opened in 2001 after being built from the ground up. A perfect combination of opulence, hipness, and class, this is one of my favorite modern luxury hotels. It doesn't share the grandeur or sheer number of perks found at the Ritz, but it's pretty darned chic regardless and has a great bar and the very best gym. See p. 78.
- **The Mandarin Oriental**, 222 Sansome St., Financial District

(☎ 800/622-0404 or 415/276-9888; www.mandarinoriental.com/sanfrancisco), doesn't have the common-area perks of the two mentioned above, but perched high above the Financial District it does have rooms with the best city views and fantastic contemporary Asian-inspired decor. The only problem: Once you check in, you won't want to leave your ultrachic nest. See p. 85.

- The new **St. Regis Hotel**, 125 Third St., SoMa (☎ 877/787-3447 or 415/284-4000; www.stregis.com/sanfrancisco) is giving the city's luxury contenders runs for their money with supersleek abodes blessed with a touch-screen control panel that orchestrates everything you could possibly want to do in the room—without ever leaving your bed. Add a destination restaurant, Ame, and a fabulous two-floor spa and you've got the city's newest VIP favorite. See p. 82.

3 The Best Moderately Priced Hotels

- **Laurel Inn**, 444 Presidio Ave., Pacific Heights (☎ 800/552-8735 or 415/567-8467; www.jdvhospitality.com), may be off the beaten track, but it's one of the best affordable, fashionable hotels in the city—and it has free parking. Just outside of the southern entrance to the Presidio in the midst of residential Presidio Heights, it's a chic motel with soothing,

contemporary decor and equally calming prices. See p. 91.

- **White Swan Inn**, 845 Bush St., Union Square (☎ 800/999-9570 or 415/775-1755; www.jdvhospitality.com), is where to go if you prefer to be downtown and immersed in more classically San Francisco surroundings. Small, ridiculously charming rooms (complete with antiques) that

feel more like apartments combined with afternoon cookies make your stay here sweet and homey. See p. 63.

- **The Warwick Regis**, 490 Geary St., Union Square (☎ 800/827-3447 or 415/928-7900; www.warwickssf.com), is even closer to Union Square than the White Swan, and for travelers who prefer stately old-world style over floral fun, a better choice. Extremely well cared for and beautifully decorated, it's my favorite midrange pick. See p. 68.
- **Hotel Adagio**, 550 Geary St., Union Square (☎ 800/228-8830 or 415/775-5000; www.jdvhospitality.com), is far more chic and hip than its category counterparts. Part of its allure is due to its relative newness—the 1929 Spanish Revival building was renovated in 2003. The other part is that it was done very well—with sexy streamlined rooms swathed in rich shades of brown and a very chic restaurant and bar on the ground level. See p. 64.

4 The Most Unforgettable Dining Experiences

- **The Best of the City's Fine Dining:** Restaurant **Michael Mina**, 335 Powell St., Union Square (☎ 415/397-9222), is the place to go if you want to have a totally different California-cuisine, fine-dining experience where dozens of fancifully presented small portions make up a long, lavish meal. And then there's **Restaurant Gary Danko**, 800 North Point St., Fisherman's Wharf (☎ 415/749-2060), which is always a sure bet for a perfect contemporary French meal complete with polished service and flambéed finales. See p. 106 and 131 respectively.
- **The Best of Wine Country Dining:** If you're a foodie, you already know that one of the top restaurants in *the world*, **French Laundry**, 6640 Washington St. (☎ 707/944-2380), is about 1½ hours north of the city in Wine Country's tiny town of Yountville. Only die-hard diners need apply: You'll need to fight for a reservation 2 months in advance, and dinner is more about the drama of the sights and tastes than it is about fun with friends around the table. See p. 297. A more relaxed, but absolutely outstanding alternative is **Terra**, 1345 Railroad Ave., St. Helena (☎ 707/963-8931), where award-winning chef Hiro Sone shows his culinary creativity and mastery of French, Italian, and Japanese cuisine within a historic fieldstone split dining room. See p. 301.
- **Dungeness Crab and Sourdough Bread** are two of San Francisco's most famous edible delights. You'll be able to sample the Sourdough virtually everywhere—grocery stores, restaurants, and sandwich shops for the most part have exceptional bread. For a good selection, drop into any local grocer and browse the bread aisle and look for brands such as Acme and Grace. What makes it different from French bread is its notable tang or sourness. (The area's other breads tend to be some of the country's best as well.) Dungeness crab is a favorite seasonal delicacy. The season usually runs from November to April (with plenty of fluctuation over the years), and you can sample the fresh cracked crustaceans at most local restaurants that feature seasonal ingredients (practically every restaurant serving California cuisine or a seasonally changing menu), at stalls

along Fisherman's Wharf, and, least expensive, at grocery stores—especially those along Stockton Street in Chinatown. Ask the seafood purveyor to crack it for you, grab some cocktail sauce or mayo or whatever you'd like to dip it in, load up on napkins, and you've got a heck of a San Francisco treat.

- **A Dim Sum Feast:** If you like Chinese food and the current small-plates

craze, you'll love to "do dim sum." Whether you duck into one of the casual storefronts with steaming baskets in the window or head to the city's best dim sum house, **Ton Kiang**, 5821 Geary Blvd., the Richmond (☎ 415/387-8273), you'll be delighted by the variety of dumplings and savory and sweet dishes that are offered for a few bucks each and meant to be shared. See p. 149.

5 The Best Things to Do for Free (or Almost)

- **Meander along the Marina's Golden Gate Promenade and Crissy Field:** Join the joggers, windsurfers, dog-walkers, and frolickers in one of the city's favorite pastimes—strolling the bayfront Marina in the Marina District. You won't find more fabulous views of the Golden Gate, Marin Headlands, beach, bay, and native flora and fauna anywhere else. See p. 178.
- **Stair Climb:** Forget the gym. Get great exercise and catch some of the coolest city and neighborhood views by hoofing it up (or down) the Filbert Street Steps on Telegraph Hill or Lyon Street Steps in Pacific Heights. See p. 187.
- **Explore the Neighborhoods:** The best way to experience San Francisco is to walk through it and its vibrant neighborhoods. Take one of the walking tours in this book (see chapter 8) or just chart your own path. Try the

Mission around 16th Street and Valencia for a mix of Latin culture and hip shops and restaurants; North Beach for shopping, cafe culture, and Italian restaurants; and Pacific Heights for stunning mansions and bay views. See the "Neighborhoods Worth a Visit" section beginning on p. 166 for more information on these neighborhoods.

- **A Cocktail in the Clouds:** Some of the greatest ways to view the city are from top-floor lounges in fine hotels such as the Sir Francis Drake, Union Square (p. 62), the Grand Hyatt San Francisco (p. 58), and The Inter-Continental Mark Hopkins, Nob Hill (p. 75). Drinks aren't cheap, but it beats paying for a dinner. Besides, if you nurse your drink (or order something like tea or coffee), the combo of atmosphere, surroundings, and view are a bargain.

6 The Best Outdoor Activities

- **A Day in Golden Gate Park:** Golden Gate Park is a crucial—and relaxing—part of the San Francisco experience. Its arboreal paths stretch from the Haight all the way to Ocean Beach, offering dozens of fun things to do along the way. Top sights are the Conservatory of

Flowers, Japanese Tea Garden, and the fabulous new de Young Museum (p. 161). The best time to go is Sunday, when portions of the park are closed to traffic (rent a bike for the full effect). Toward the end of the day, head west to the beach and watch the sunset. See p. 172.

The Best Activities for Families

For a list of San Francisco attractions that appeal to kids of all ages, see the “Especially for Kids” box on p. 182 of chapter 7.

- **A Walk along the Coastal Trail:** Stroll the forested Coastal Trail from Cliff House to the Golden Gate Bridge, and you'll see why San Franciscans put up with living on a fault line. Start at the parking lot just above Cliff House and head north. On a clear day, you'll have incredible views of the Marin Headlands, but even on foggy days, it's worth the trek to scamper over old bunkers and relish the crisp, cool air (dress warmly). See “The Presidio & Golden Gate National Recreation Area,” beginning on p. 174, for more on this area.
- **A Wine Country Excursion:** It'll take you about an hour to get there, but once you arrive you'll want to hopscotch from one winery to the next, perhaps picnic in the vineyards, or have an alfresco lunch at someplace atmospheric like Tra Vigne. Besides, consider this: When the city is fogged in and cold, Napa and Sonoma are up to 20 degrees warmer. See chapter 12 for more information.
- **A Visit to Muir Woods, Stinson Beach, and Point Reyes:** If you have wheels, reserve a day for a trip across the Golden Gate Bridge. Take the Stinson Beach exit off Highway 101, and spend a few hours gawking at the monolithic redwoods at Muir Woods (this place is amazing). Next, head up the coast to the spectacular Point Reyes National Seashore. Rain or shine, it's a day trip you'll never forget. See “Muir Woods & Mount Tamalpais” and “Point Reyes National Seashore,” beginning on p. 262 and 263, respectively.

7 Best Places to Hang with the Locals

- **Feasting at the Ferry Building:** During Farmers Market days, this bayfront alfresco market is packed with local shoppers vying for the freshest in local produce, breads, and flowers—or just mingling during their lunch breaks. But the building itself has become a mecca for food lovers who browse the outstanding artisan food shops and restaurants daily and then linger over glasses of wine at the festive wine bar. See p. 154.
- **Cafe-Hopping in North Beach:** Join residents by lingering at a cafe as the aroma of roasted coffee beans wafts down Columbus Avenue. Start the day with a cup of Viennese at Caffè Trieste (a haven for true San Francisco characters) and follow it with a walk in and around Washington Square. Continue with lunch at Mario's Bohemian Cigar Store (a la focaccia sandwiches), book browsing at City Lights, and dinner at L'Osteria del Forno or Moose's. Finish the day with a nightcap as Enrico Caruso plays on the jukebox at Tosca. See “Walking Tour 2: Getting to Know North Beach,” beginning on p. 197, for a walking tour of the area.

8 The Best Offbeat Travel Experiences

- **A Soul-Stirring Sunday Morning Service at Glide Memorial United Methodist Church:** Senior Pastor Douglas Fitch turns churchgoing into a spiritual party here that leaves you feeling elated, hopeful, and unified with the world. All walks of life attend the service at this Tenderloin church just west of Union Square, which focuses not on any particular religion, but on what we have in common as people. It's great fun, with plenty of singing and hand clapping. See p. 179.
- **A Cruise through the Castro:** The most populated and festive street in the city is not just for gays and lesbians (although the best cruising in town *is* right here). While there are some great shops and cafes, it's the people-watching here that makes the trip a must. If you have time, catch a flick at the beautiful 1930s Spanish colonial movie palace, the Castro Theatre (p. 170). See "Neighborhoods Worth a Visit," beginning on p. 166, for more on the Castro.
- **A Date in the Haight:** It's not quite as groovy as it was during the Summer of Love, but the stretch of shops, restaurants, and bars along the strip between Masonic and Stanyan streets do make for good browsing, and the vibe underscores the city's counter-culture, including a good deal of homeless folks, contemporary hippies, and funky-clad urban kids. See p. 170.
- **AsiaSF:** Rather than simply having dinner, this SoMa spot serves up great entertainment with gorgeous Asian transvestites serving baby back ribs and performing lip-synch ensembles throughout the evening. Trust me, it's pure fun. See p. 121.