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## The Best of San Francisco

**W**e know what you're thinking: How could anyone possibly enjoy a vacation in San Francisco for as little as \$70 a day? After all, the average room rate alone is about \$170 a night, not including taxes, tipping, and taxi fare.

But if there's one thing we underpaid travel writers know how to do, it's how to live large and spend little. So my team of savings-savvy researchers and I have pooled our collective wisdom into what we believe is the best budget guide to San Francisco. We live here, we know this city, and we know how to have a *lot* of fun without spending mounds of cash—we do it every day. Some of our advice is obvious (skip the Ritz), some more comes from experience (dine off the fancy restaurant's bar menu for the best deals), and all of it is geared to making sure that you will have a fantastic stay in the city regardless of your tax bracket.

Yes, ultra-luxury \$400-per-night hotel rooms and eye-poppingly expensive restaurants are plentiful in the city, but that's not where the majority of locals (including us) hang out or dine. Traveling on a budget in San Francisco means doing what most of its denizens do every day: eating at the city's many affordable restaurants, enjoying the wonderful parks and neighborhoods, and taking advantage of its wide variety of free or inexpensive attractions. If you do this, you're far more likely to experience the real San Francisco than high-end travelers lounging in their penthouse suites.

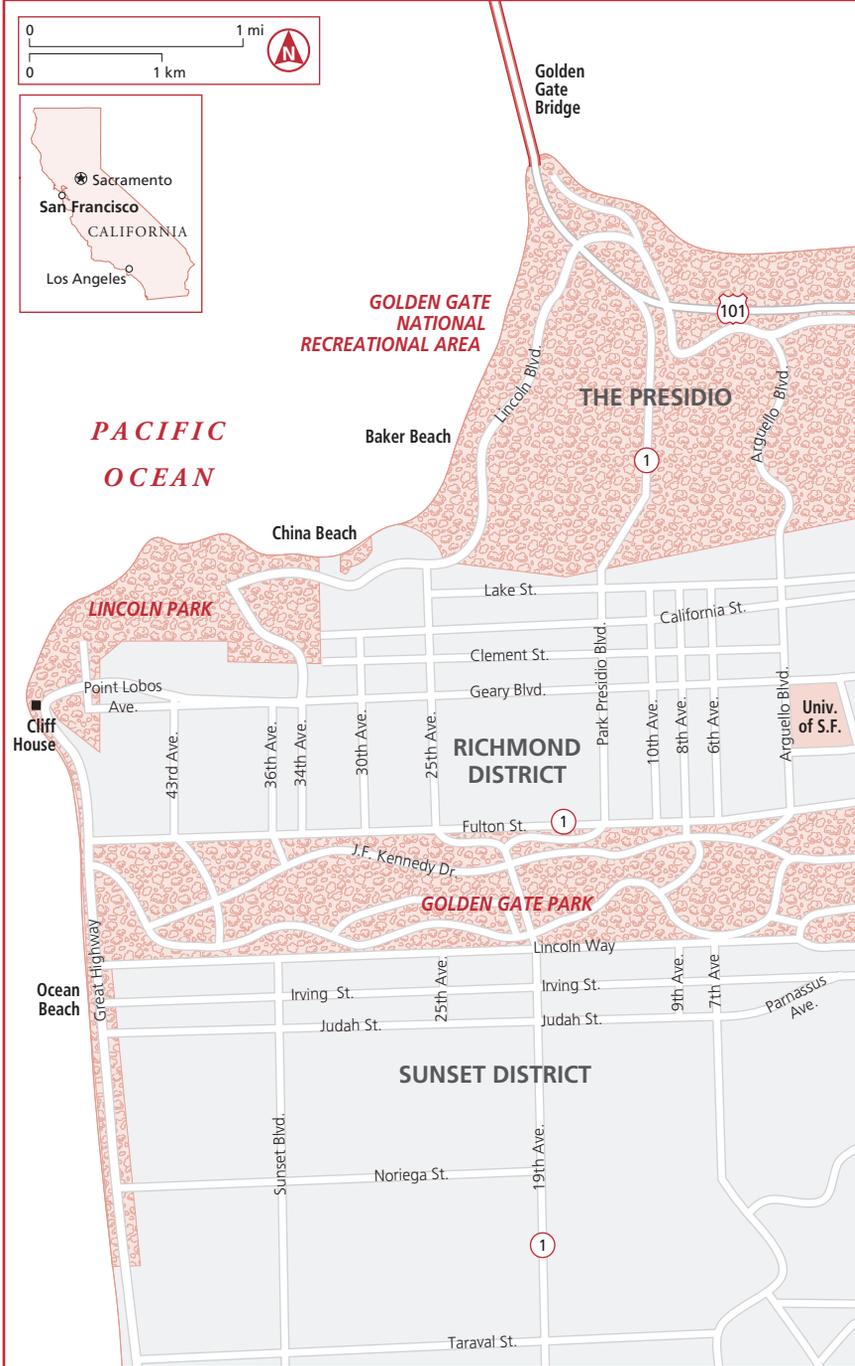
But the best advice we can give you about San Francisco is to just *go*. Enjoy the cool blast of salty air as you stroll across the Golden Gate. Stuff yourself with dim sum in Chinatown. Browse the Haight for incense and water pipes. Walk along the beach, pierce your nose, see a play, ride on a cable car—the list is endless and always affordable. It's all happening in San Francisco, and everyone, whether filthy rich or in the red, is invited. All you have to do is arrive with an open mind and a sense of adventure—the rest is waiting for you.

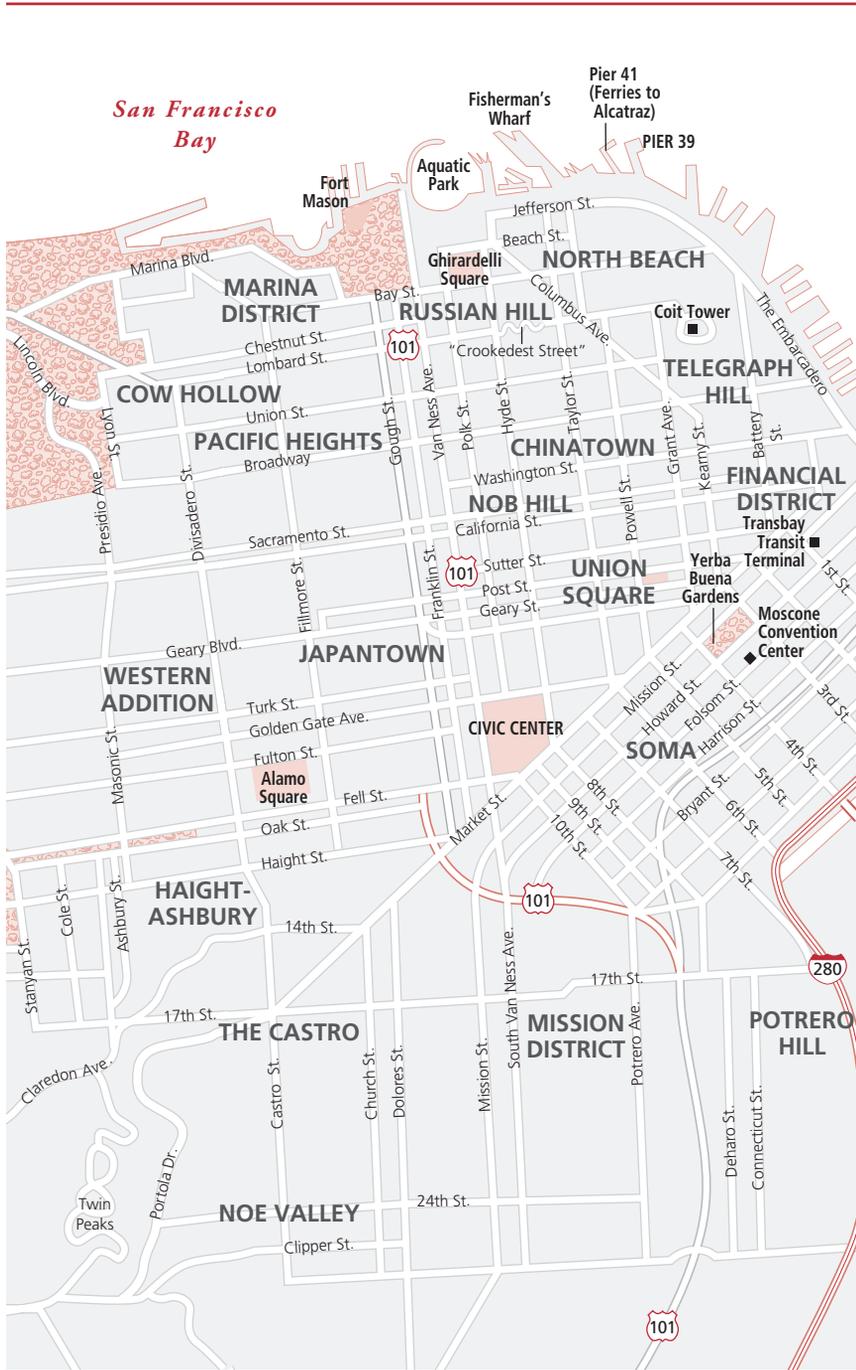
### 1 Frommer's Favorite (& Mostly Free) San Francisco Experiences

- **Walking Across the Golden Gate Bridge.** Don your windbreaker and walking shoes and prepare for a wind-blasted, exhilarating walk across San Francisco's most famous landmark. It's one of those things you have to do at least once in your life and it's free. See p. 153.
- **Touring Alcatraz.** Even if you loathe tourist attractions, you'll enjoy a tour of The Rock. The National Park Service has done a fantastic job of preserving the venerable prison—enough to give you the heebie-jeebies just looking at it—and NPS rangers and volunteers give excellent guided tours. Even the boat ride across the bay is worth the price. You shouldn't miss this one, so be sure to reserve tickets far in advance. Day trips (with audio tour) run around \$16. See p. 145.

- **Strolling Through Chinatown.** I've been through Chinatown at least 100 times and it has never failed to entertain. Skip the crummy camera and luggage stores along Grant Street and wander around the funky side streets where a cornucopia of the bizarre, unbelievable, and just plain weird is on display. (*Tip:* Go very early in the morning to watch the merchants setting up their wares before the tourist throngs show up—you'd swear you're in a Beijing marketplace.) While you're there, take one of Shirley Fong Torres's **Wok Wiz** tours of Chinatown (☎ 415/981-8989; www.wokwiz.com) for the full effect. See chapter 7.
- **Watching a Major League Baseball Game at SBC Park.** If it's baseball season, then you *must* spend an afternoon or evening watching the National League's Giants play at one of the finest ballparks in America. For only \$10 you can buy a bleacher-seat ticket on the day of a game. Even if the season's over, you can still take a guided tour of the stadium. See p. 157.
- **Waking Up with North Beach Coffee.** One of the most pleasurable smells of San Francisco is the aroma of roasted coffee beans wafting down Columbus Avenue in the early morning. Start the day with a cup of Viennese at **Caffè Trieste** (a haven for true San Francisco characters; see p. 150), followed by a walk up and down Columbus Avenue, stopping for lunch at **Mario's Bohemian Cigar Store** (great focaccia sandwiches; see p. 122) and dinner at **L'Osteria del Forno** (p. 120). Finish off the day with a brandy cappuccino nightcap accompanied by Enrico Caruso on the jukebox at **Tosca's**. We've included a walking tour of North Beach in chapter 8, "City Strolls."
- **Browsing the Haight.** Though the power of the flower has wilted, the Haight is still, more or less, the Haight: a sort of resting home for aging hippies, dazed Deadheads, skate punks, and an eclectic assortment of rather pathetic young panhandlers. Think of it as visiting a people zoo as you walk down the rows of used-clothing stores, ultra-hip boutiques, and leather shops, trying hard not to stare at that girl (at least I *think* it's a girl) with the pierced eyebrows and shaved head. End the mystery tour with a pitcher of sangria and a plate of mussels at **Cha Cha Cha** (p. 132), one of San Francisco's top ethnic restaurants that's a bargain to boot.
- **Getting Back to Nature at the Marin Headlands.** San Francisco's backyard of sorts, the Marin Headlands (located just across the Golden Gate Bridge to the west) offer not only the best views of the city, but also a wealth of outdoor activities. Bird-watching, hiking, mountain biking, horseback riding—the list goes on—are all fair game at this glorious national park. Don't miss the **Marine Mammal Center**, a ward for injured or abandoned seals and sea lions. See chapter 11, "Side Trips from San Francisco."
- **Cruising the Castro.** The most populated and festive street in the city isn't just for gays and lesbians (though you'll find the best boy-toy cruising in town here). There are some great shops and inexpensive cafes—particularly **Café Flore** (p. 137) for lunch—but it's the people-watching that makes the trip to the legendary Castro District a must. And *please* make

# San Francisco at a Glance





time to catch a flick (any flick, doesn't matter) at the **Castro Theatre** (p. 227), a beautiful 1930s Spanish colonial movie palace that puts all those ugly multiplexes to shame.

- **Soaking Up the Sun in Golden Gate Park.** A sunny day walking through Golden Gate Park is a day well spent. Its arboreal paths stretch from the Haight all the way to Ocean Beach, offering dozens of fun things to do along the way. Top sites are the **Japanese Tea Garden** and **Stow Lake**, where you can rent paddleboats and feed the ducks. The best time to go is Sunday, when portions of the park are closed to traffic (rent skates or a bike for the full effect). Toward the end of the day, head west to the beach and watch the sunset. See section 4, "Golden Gate Park," in chapter 7, "Exploring San Francisco."
- **Catching an Early-Morning Cable Car.** Skip the boring 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 in one hand and hold the camera with the other, because you're about to see a view of the bay that'll make you a believer. *Inside tip:* Don't call it a trolley or a local might beat you over the head with a loaf of stale sourdough.
- **Dining on Dungeness Crab at San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf.** Eating fresh Dungeness crabmeat straight from the seafood vendors' boiling pots at the corner of Jefferson and Taylor streets is the quintessential San Francisco experience. True crab gastronomes treasure the edible organs (crab butter) inside the carapace. See Chapter 7.

- **Visiting the Museum of Modern Art.** Ever since the SFMOMA (p. 161) opened in 1995, it has been the best place to go for a quick dose of culture. If you go on the first Tuesday of the month, admission is free. There's also no admission charge after 6pm on Thursdays. Start by touring the museum, then head for the gift shop (oftentimes more entertaining than the rotating exhibits). Have a light lunch at **Caffè Museo**, where the food is a vast improvement over most museums' mush, and then finish the trip with a stroll through the Yerba Buena Gardens across from the museum (the Martin Luther King, Jr. memorial is particularly inspiring).
- **Spending a Soul-Stirring Sunday Morning at Glide Church.** The high-spirited singers and hand-clapping worshippers at Glide (p. 172) turn churchgoing into a spiritual party that leaves you feeling elated, hopeful, and at one with mankind. All walks of life attend the service, which focuses not on any particular religion but on what we all have in common. It's great fun, with plenty of singing, whooping, and roof raising.
- **Golfing at Lincoln Park.** The only problem with playing this course is that the views are so stunning they may distract your game. For about \$30 you can tee off with the Golden Gate Bridge as a backdrop. If you want to get in a few holes before sunset, nearby is the 9-hole Golden Gate Park Course, where you can play a round for about \$15. See p. 181.
- **Walking the Coastal Trail.** Walk the forested coastal trail from the 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 chapter 7, "Exploring San Francisco."

- **Taking a Drive to Muir Woods, Stinson Beach, and Point Reyes.** If you have wheels, reserve a day for a trip across the Golden Gate. Take the Stinson Beach exit off U.S. 101, spend a few hours gawking at the monolithic redwoods at Muir Woods (this place is amazing), continue on to Stinson Beach for lunch

at the Parkside Café, and then head up the coast to the spectacular Point Reyes National Seashore. Rain or shine, it's a day trip you'll never forget. See chapter 11, "Side Trips from San Francisco."

- **Grazing at the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market.** We San Franciscans take our farmers markets very seriously. Arrive hungry at the Ferry Building (Embarcadero at Market St.) on Saturday, Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday and join the locals as they shop for America's finest organic produce and nosh on free samples from the complimentary cooking classes hosted by the city's best chefs. See Chapter 9.

## 2 Best Low-Cost Hotel Bets

- **Best Overall Value:** This is a tough choice. The **Marina Inn**, 3110 Octavia St. (☎ 800/274-1420), p. 88, is, without question, the best low-priced hotel in San Francisco, but its Marina location puts it far from the downtown scene. The **San Remo Hotel**, 2237 Mason St. (☎ 800/352-REMO), p. 86, has an ideal North Beach location, friendly staff, and low prices, but the bathrooms are all shared. The best downtown deals are the **Alisa Hotel**, 447 Bush St. (☎ 800/956-4322), p. 75, and the groovy **Mosser**, 54 Fourth St. (☎ 800/227-3804), p. 82.
- **Best Place to Stay on a Shoestring:** I'd stay at either the **San Remo Hotel**, 2237 Mason St. (☎ 800/352-REMO), p. 86, in North Beach or the **Alisa Hotel**, 447 Bush St. (☎ 800/956-4322), p. 75, near Union Square. Both hotels have rooms with shared bathrooms, and the Alisa's go for as low as \$50.
- **Best Romantic Splurge:** The hopelessly romantic **Hotel Bohème**, 444 Columbus Ave. (☎ 415/433-9111), p. 86, is the perfect mixture of art, style, class, and location—steps from the sidewalk cafes of North Beach. If Bette Davis were alive today, this is where she'd stay.
- **Best for Conventioneers:** My first choice is the **Mosser**, 54 Fourth St. (☎ 800/227-3804), p. 82, a Victorian-chic hotel right around the corner from the Moscone Convention Center. The **Stratford Hotel**, 242 Powell St. (☎ 888/504-6835), p. 81, may be a few blocks north of the Convention Center, but it's close enough. Both hotels are in the right location for heading out to the downtown happy-hour action.
- **Best for Long-Term Stays:** If you're planning to make yourself at home, you'll find all the necessary comforts—and a very affordable price tag—at the **Halcyon Hotel**, 649 Jones St. (☎ 800/627-2396). See p. 79.
- **Best Views:** One would think that a city surrounded on three sides by water would have a slew of

ocean-view hotels, but, oddly enough, it doesn't. The **Seal Rock Inn**, 545 Point Lobos Ave. (☎ 415/752-8000), p. 94, in the Richmond District, is the only budget hotel to offer a view of the ocean. You'll be lulled to sleep by the sound of the surf and distant foghorns.

- **Best for Families:** At **The Wharf Inn**, 2601 Mason St. (☎ 800/548-9918), p. 86, kids are within skipping distance of the famous Fisherman's Wharf, and mom and dad don't have to sweat parking the minivan because there's plenty of free parking here. Less expensive—but a long walk to the wharf—is the **Hotel Del Sol**, 3100 Webster St. (☎ 877/433-5765), p. 87, where kids can play in the heated courtyard pool with lots of pool toys. They even provide free kites, beach balls, and sunglasses for playing on the Marina.
- **Best for a Budget Romantic Rendezvous:** The best place to get all lovey-dovey without spending the big bucks is at the **Nob Hill Hotel**, 835 Hyde St. (☎ 877/662-4455), p. 79, a beautiful 1900s-era Victorian-style hotel with original marble flooring, high ceilings, and authentic antique furnishings—including heavy brass beds that don't squeak.
- **Best Service for a Budget Hotel:** That an easy one: Any of the four family-owned Reson hotels (☎ 800/736-3766) on Seventh Street. The entire staff makes you feel like you're a valued customer (as it should be). See p. 83.
- **Best Moderately Priced Hotel:** Ever since we've included the **Golden Gate Hotel**, 775 Bush St. (☎ 800/835-1118), in our lodging lineup, we've received nothing

but kudos from satisfied guests. Just 2 blocks from Union Square, this 1913 Edwardian hotel is a real charmer and a fantastic value. See p. 78.

- **Best Budget B&B:** It may not be the most centrally located place, but if you want a slice of old-style San Francisco, the quaint **Monte Cristo**, 600 Presidio (☎ 415/931-1875), will do the trick. Prices start at \$78 a night (including a full breakfast buffet), but the manager has been known to negotiate when his beds are empty. See p. 90.
- **Best Funky/Groovy Hotel:** Former flower children will fall in love with the 1960s-nostalgic **Red Victorian Bed, Breakfast & Art**, 1665 Haight St. (☎ 415/864-1978), p. 93. Owner Sami Sunchild has retained a piece of peace, love, and happiness that radiates throughout her colorful inn. Then there's the retro 1950s-style **Phoenix Hotel**, 601 Eddy St. (☎ 800/248-9466), p. 92, a favorite with the rock and movie set, including Sinéad O'Connor, k.d. lang, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers.
- **Best Public Space in a Historic Hotel:** You may not be staying the night, but you can certainly feel like a million bucks in the public rooms at **The Palace Hotel**, 2 New Montgomery St. (☎ 800/325-3535). The extravagant creation of banker "Bonanza King" Will Ralston in 1875, the Palace Hotel has one of the grandest rooms in the city: the **Garden Court**. Running a close second is the magnificent lobby at Nob Hill's **Fairmont Hotel & Tower**, 950 Mason St. (☎ 800/441-1414).

### 3 Best Low-Cost Dining Bets

- **Best Value:** Crepes. Yes, crepes. Cheap crepes that are bigger than your head and filled with everything from cheddar cheese and onions to spinach, ham, eggplant, pesto, tomatoes, roasted peppers, smoked salmon, mushrooms, sausage, and even scallops. **Crepes on Cole**, 100 Carl St. (☎ 415/664-1800), p. 133, in the Haight makes them for about \$7, including a side of home fries. **Ti Couz**, 3108 16th St. (☎ 415/252-7373), p. 142, in the Mission makes even better crepes, but they are a bit more expensive.
- **Best Classic San Francisco Dining Experience:** The lovable loudmouths working behind the narrow counter of the **Swan Oyster Depot**, 1517 Polk St. (☎ 415/673-1101), p. 109, have been satisfying patrons with fresh crab, shrimp, oysters, and clam chowder since 1912. My dad doesn't care much for visiting San Francisco ("Too crowded!") but he loves having lunch at this beloved seafood institution.
- **Best Moderately Priced Restaurant:** Comfortable and casual-but-upscale **Fringale**, 570 Fourth St. (☎ 415/543-0573), is one of my very favorite restaurants, even compared to the pricey big boys. It offers some of the best French food in the city in a wonderful atmosphere, and at a steal of a price. See p. 114.
- **Best Splurge Choice:** Nancy Oaks' high-energy **Boulevard**, 1 Mission St. (☎ 415/543-6084), p. 113, is a visual and gastronomic delight. For years it's been ranked as the city's most popular restaurant. Also worth the cash is a meal at **Kokkari**, 200 Jackson St. (☎ 415/981-0983), p. 108, where French chef Jean Alberti creates masterpieces of Aegean cuisine.
- **Best Grease Pit:** Anyone who's a connoisseur of funky little ethnic eateries will love **Tú Lan**, 8 Sixth St. (☎ 415/626-0927), p. 113, one of the grasiest little holes-in-the-wall in the city. But even Julia Child is a fan of their Vietnamese imperial rolls. For late-night noshing on tomato beef with noodles and house special chow mein, **Sam Wo**, 813 Washington St. (☎ 415/982-0596), is my favorite Chinatown dive. See p. 118.
- **Best Budget Dinner Show:** The gender-bending waitresses—mostly Asian men dressed *very* convincingly as hot-to-trot women—will blow your mind with their lip-synced show tunes, which take place every night at **AsiaSF**, 201 Ninth St. (☎ 415/255-2742). Bring the parents—they'll love it! See p. 109.
- **Best Dim Sum:** Downtown and Chinatown dim sum restaurants may be more centrally located, but that's all they have on the **Ton Kiang**, 5821 Geary Blvd. (☎ 415/387-8273), p. 135, which serves up the best seafood dumplings and stuffed crab claws this side of China. For downtown dim sum, the venerable **Yank Sing**, 101 Spear St. (☎ 415/957-9300), offers a pleasing dim sum surprise on every cart that's wheeled to your table. See p. 107.
- **Best Party Scene:** Throw back a few glasses of sangria with your tapas at **Cha Cha Cha**, 1801 Haight St. (☎ 415/386-5758), p. 132, and you'll start swinging with the rest of the crowd.
- **Best Pizza:** Has **Pauline's**, 260 Valencia St. (☎ 415/552-2050),

p. 140, perfected pizza? Quite possibly. At least it's the best we've ever had. Pauline's only does two things—pizzas and salads—but does them both better than any other restaurant in the city. The best by-the-slice is North Beach's **Golden Boy Pizza**, 542 Green St. (☎ 415/982-9738); everyone watches with envy as you stroll down the sidewalk while savoring the doughy square of deliciousness. See p. 122.

- **Best Burritos:** We're not foolish enough to deem one burrito the king in this town (we can do without the hate mail), but there's a reason why people come from across town to line up at **Taque-ri-ri-ri La Cumbre**, 515 Valencia St. (☎ 415/863-8205), in the Mission. See p. 143.
- **Best Place for Picnic Supplies:** If you're anywhere near North Beach, head to San Francisco's legendary **Molinari Delicatessen**, 373 Columbus Ave. (☎ 415/421-2337), p. 195, which offers an eye-popping selection of cold salads, cheeses, and sandwiches packaged and priced to go (the Italian subs are big enough for two hearty appetites). Another good sunny-day option is a picnic on Marina Green, but first stop by the **Marina Safeway**, 15 Marina Blvd. (☎ 415/563-4946), p. 125, to pick up fresh-baked breads, gourmet cheeses, and other foodstuffs (including fresh cracked crab when in season).
- **Best Coffee Shop or Cafe:** With all the wonderfully unique coffee shops throughout this cafe town, there can be no one winner. We do, however, love the authentic atmosphere at **Mario's Bohemian Cigar Store**, p. 122, 566 Columbus Ave. (☎ 415/362-0536), and **Caffè Trieste**, 601 Vallejo Ave. (☎ 415/392-6739). See p. 150. Whatever you do, stay away from the ever-trendy Starbucks.
- **Best Happy-Hour Spread:** At the top of Nob Hill inside the Fairmont Hotel is the beloved **Tonga Room**, 950 Mason St. (☎ 415/772-5278). Every weekday from 5 to 7pm both locals and tourists rub elbows while getting stuffed at the all-you-can-eat buffet (chicken wings, chow mein, pot stickers, and much more) for a mere \$6. See p. 222.
- **Best Budget Seafood:** The **Crab Cake Lounge**, 900 North Point St. (☎ 415/929-1730), located on the upper level of the glamorous McCormick and Kuleto's Seafood Restaurant, offers a huge selection of shellfish—fresh oysters on the half shell, Prince Edward mussels, Sacramento Delta crayfish, Manila clams—and light seafood dishes at very reasonable prices. See p. 123.
- **Best Desserts:** Okay, so maybe you can't afford a five-course meal here, but you can saunter into the **Grand Cafe**, 501 Geary Blvd. (☎ 415/292-0101), p. 106, near closing time for a decadent dessert, such as the devil's food chocolate pudding gâteau with coffee caramel sauce and cashew toffee ice cream. Besides, it's a good excuse to check out one of the most beautiful dining rooms you'll ever see.
- **Best Breakfast:** We have a tie: **Dottie's True Blue Café**, 522 Jones St. (☎ 415/885-2767), p. 104, has taken the classic American breakfast to a new level—maybe the best I've ever had. Crummy neighborhood, superb food. **Ella's**, 500 Presidio Ave. (☎ 415/441-5669), is far more yuppie, equally as divine, and in a much better neighborhood, but it's

so popular that the wait on weekend mornings is brutal. See p. 126.

- **Best Funky Atmosphere:** That's an easy one: **Tommy's Joynt**, 1101 Geary Blvd. (☎ 415/775-4216). The interior looks like a Buffalo Bill museum that imploded, the exterior paint job looks like a circus tent on acid, and the trays of huge trays of *hofbrau* classics will make your arteries harden just looking at them. In short, you'll love this place. See p. 131.
- **Best Family-Style Restaurant:** Giant platters of classic Italian food and carafes filled with table wine are placed on long wooden tables by motherly waitresses while Sinatra classics play to the festive crowd of contented diners. Welcome to North Beach—style family

dining at **Capp's Corner**, 1600 Powell St. (☎ 415/989-2589). See p. 118.

- **Best Burger:** That's an easy one: **Mo's Gourmet Burgers**, 1322 Grant Ave. (☎ 415/788-3779). Consider yourself warned, however—no other burger will ever taste as good. See p. 120.
- **Best Surreal Dining Experience:** Sitting cross-legged on a pillow, shoes off, smoking apricot tobacco out of a hookah, eating baba ghanouj, and drinking spiced wine in an exotic Middle Eastern setting while beautiful, sensuous belly dancers glide across the dining room. Unwind your mind at **Kan Zaman**, 1793 Haight St. (☎ 415/751-9656). See p. 133.