

## The Best of San Francisco

In a city where parade themes include “Weapons of Ass Destruction” and starting your holiday with an Irish coffee at the Buena Vista Café is de rigueur, it’s pretty much guaranteed that you’ll have a fun time vacationing in San Francisco. Where else in the world will you find a restaurant whose servers are all gorgeous transvestites? Where it’s considered good, clean fun to get airborne in your car? Or where locals don’t even pause for earthquakes under 5.0 on the Richter scale?

And it’s always been this way: San Francisco’s reputation as a rollicking city where almost anything goes dates back to the boom-or-bust days of the California Gold Rush. The result is a wee bit o’ heaven for everyone: In a city that is so beautiful, exciting, and cosmopolitan there’s always something enjoyable to see and do no matter how long you’re staying. I’ve lived here for 14 years and I’m still discovering new things about this city almost every day.

There are, however, three things you should know before coming to San Francisco that will help you blend in with the locals. First, don’t call it ‘Frisco. (You wouldn’t call New York just “York,” would you?) Second, please don’t call our beloved cable cars “trolleys.” A trolley is a British shopping cart. Third, always dress warmly. Bob Hope once remarked that San Francisco is the city of four seasons—every day. Temperatures can drop darn quick when the fog rolls in, so be prepared.

But the best advice I 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 secondhand shops along Haight Street. Recite poetry in a North Beach coffeehouse. Walk along the beach, skate through Golden Gate Park, ride the cable cars, tour a Victorian mansion, explore Alcatraz Island, go to a Giants ballgame: Like an eternal world’s fair, it’s all happening in San Francisco, and everyone’s invited. All you have to do is arrive with an open mind, this guidebook, and a sense of adventure—the rest is waiting for you.

Right then. Let’s get this vacation started.

### 1 The Best Only-in-San Francisco Experiences

- **A Powell-Hyde 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 all weepy. See p. 152.
- **An Adventure at Alcatraz:** Even if you loathe tourist attractions, you’ll dig Alcatraz. Just looking at The Rock from across the bay is enough to give you the heebie-jeebies—and the park rangers have put together an

excellent audio tour. Heck, even the boat ride across the bay is worth the price. See p. 148.

- **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. 158.
- **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 ersatz camera and luggage stores and head straight for the food markets, where a

cornucopia of critters that you'll never see at Safeway sit in boxes waiting for the wok. (Is that an armadillo?) Better yet, take one of Shirley Fong-Torres's Wok Wiz Tours of Chinatown (p. 186).

- **Watching the San Francisco Giants play at AT&T Park:** If it's baseball season, then you *must* spend an afternoon or evening watching the National League's Giants lose 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. 149.

## 2 The Best Splurge Hotels

- **The Ritz-Carlton**, 600 Stockton St., Nob Hill (☎ 800/241-3333 or 415/296-7465; [www.ritzcarlton.com](http://www.ritzcarlton.com)), is the sine qua non of luxury hotels, offering near-perfect service and every possible amenity. Even if you can't afford a guest room, come for the mind-blowing Sunday brunch. See p. 76.
- **Four Seasons Hotel San Francisco**, 757 Market St., SoMa (☎ 800/819-5053 or 415/633-3000; [www.fourseasons.com](http://www.fourseasons.com)), is the perfect combination of opulence, hipness, and class. I can't afford it either, but I sure love to hang out at the bar and pretend. See p. 78.
- **The Mandarin Oriental**, 222 Sansome St., Financial District (☎ 800/622-0404 or 415/276-9888; [www.mandarinoriental.com/sanfrancisco](http://www.mandarinoriental.com/sanfrancisco)), is perched so high above the city that the fog rolls in *below* you. It's surreal. Maybe I really did die and go to heaven? See p. 85.
- **The St. Regis Hotel**, 125 Third St., SoMa (☎ 877/787-3447 or 415/284-4000; [www.stregis.com/sanfrancisco](http://www.stregis.com/sanfrancisco)), has these touch-screen remote controls that let you operate everything in your room—without leaving your bed. Add a destination restaurant and a fabulous two-floor spa, and why would you ever want to leave? See p. 79.

## 3 The Best Moderately Priced Hotels

- **Laurel Inn**, 444 Presidio Ave., Pacific Heights (☎ 800/552-8735 or 415/567-8467; [www.thelaurelinn.com](http://www.thelaurelinn.com)), may be off the beaten track, but it's one of the best affordable, fashionable hotels in the city. 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.
- **Hotel Bohème**, 444 Columbus Ave. (☎ 415/433-9111; [www.hotelboheme.com](http://www.hotelboheme.com)), is the perfect mixture of art, style, class, romance, and location—just steps from the sidewalk

cafes of North Beach. If Bette Davis were alive today, this is where she'd stay. See p. 88.

- **The Warwick Regis**, 490 Geary St., Union Square (☎ 800/203-3232 or 415/928-7900; [www.warwickssf.com](http://www.warwickssf.com)), is for travelers who prefer stately old-world style over floral fun. Extremely well cared for and beautifully decorated, it's one of my favorite midrange picks. See p. 70.
- **Hotel Adagio**, 550 Geary St., Union Square (☎ 800/228-8830 or 415/775-5000; [www.thehoteladagio.com](http://www.thehoteladagio.com)),

is far more chic and hip than its category counterparts. The 1929 Spanish Revival building has sexy streamlined rooms swathed in rich shades of brown, and a very chic restaurant and bar on the ground level. See p. 65.

- **The Golden Gate Hotel**, 775 Bush St. (☎ 800/835-1118; [www.goldengatehotel.com](http://www.goldengatehotel.com)), receives 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. 72.

## 4 The Best 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 for Union Square fine dining. Dozens of fancifully presented small portions add up to a delightfully long, lavish meal. And then there's **Restaurant Gary Danko**, 800 North Point St., Fisherman's Wharf (☎ 415/749-2060), always a sure bet for a perfect contemporary French meal complete with polished service and flambéed finales. See p. 102 and p. 127, respectively.
- **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), 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. See p. 117.
- **Best Dining on Dungeness Crab:** Eating fresh Dungeness crabmeat straight from Fisherman's Wharf seafood vendors' boiling pots at the corner of Jefferson and Taylor streets

is the quintessential San Francisco experience. See p. 155.

- **Best Dim Sum Feast:** If you like Chinese food and the current small-plates craze, you'll love to "do dim sum." At the city's best dim sum house, **Ton Kiang**, 5821 Geary Blvd., the Richmond (☎ 415/387-8273), p. 147, you'll be wowed by the variety of dumplings and mysterious dishes. For downtown dim sum, the venerable **Yank Sing**, 101 Spear St. (☎ 415/957-9300), p. 110, offers an exotic edible surprise on every cart that's wheeled to your table.
- **Best Breakfast:** We have a tie: **Dot-tie's True Blue Café**, 522 Jones St. (☎ 415/885-2767), p. 106, 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. 132.
- **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 huge trays of *hofbrau* classics will make your arteries harden just by looking at them. See p. 140.

- **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. 123.
- **Best Surreal Dining Experience:** This has to be 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. 145.

- **Best 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), p. 301, 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. A more relaxed 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. 305.

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

- **Meander along the Marina's Golden Gate Promenade and Crissy Field.** There's something about strolling the promenade that just feels right. The combination of beach, bay, boats, Golden Gate views, and clean cool breezes is good for the soul. See p. 178.
- **Wake 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 on a sidewalk table at **Caffè Grecco** (423 Columbus Ave.; ☎ 415/397-6261), followed by a walk down Columbus Avenue to the bay.
- **Browse 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, ex-Deadheads, skate punks, and an eclectic assortment of

young panhandlers. Think of it as a people zoo as you walk down the rows of used-clothing stores, 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. 144), one of my favorite restaurants that's a bargain to boot.

- **Pretend to be a guest at the Palace or Fairmont hotels.** You may not be staying the night, but you can certainly feel like a million bucks in the public spaces at **The Palace Hotel** (p. 79). 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** (p. 74).

- **Sip 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. 234), the Grand Hyatt San Francisco (p. 240), and The Mark Hopkins InterContinental, Nob

Hill (p. 240). 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 is a bargain.

## 6 The Best Outdoor Activities

- **A Day in Golden Gate Park:** Exploring Golden Gate Park is a crucial 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, the 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. 173.

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### 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.

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- **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 cool, salty air (dress warmly). See “The Presidio & Golden Gate

National Recreation Area,” beginning on p. 176, 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. And consider this: When the city is fogged in and cold, Napa and Sonoma are almost always sunny and warm. See chapter 12 for more information.
- **A Climb up or down the Filbert Street Steps:** San Francisco is a city of stairs, and the crème de la crème of steps is on Filbert Street between Sansome Street and the east side of Telegraph Hill. The terrain is so steep here that Filbert Street becomes Filbert Steps, a 377-step descent that wends its way through flower gardens and some of the city's oldest and most varied housing. It's a beautiful walk down, and great exercise going up.
- **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. 266 and p. 267, respectively.

## 7 The Best Places to Hang with the Locals

- **A Feast at the Ferry Building:** During Farmers' Market days, this bay-front 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. 155.
- **Cafe-Hopping in North Beach:** It's a classic San Francisco experience: lingering at a sidewalk cafe on Columbus Avenue, watching people from all over the world walk by. Start the day with a latte at Café Greco, then wander over to Caffè Trieste, a haven for true San Francisco characters. See "Walking Tour 2: Getting to Know North Beach," beginning on p. 198, for a walking tour of the area.

## 8 The Best Offbeat Travel Experiences

- **A Soul-Stirring Sunday Morning Service at Glide Memorial Church:** Every city has churches, but only San Francisco has the Glide. An hour or so with Reverend Cecil Williams and his exuberant gospel choir will surely shake your soul and let the glory out, no matter what your religious beliefs may be—everybody leaves this Tenderloin church spiritually uplifted and slightly misty-eyed. See p. 180.
- **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). Although 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. 244). See "Neighborhoods Worth a Visit," beginning on p. 168, for more on the Castro.
- **Skating through Golden Gate Park on a Weekend:** C'mon! When's the last time you've been skating? And if you've never tried skating before, there's no better place to learn than on the wide, flat main street through Golden Gate Park, which is closed to vehicles on weekends.
- **Catching Big Air in Your Car:** Relive *Bullitt* or *The Streets of San Francisco* as you careen down the center lane of Gough Street between Ellis and Eddy streets, screaming out "Woooooeee!" as you feel the pull of gravity leave you momentarily, followed by the thump of the car suspension bottoming out. Wimpier folk can settle for driving down the steepest street in San Francisco: Filbert Street, between Leavenworth and Hyde streets.
- **AsiaSF:** The gender-bending waitresses—mostly Asian men dressed *very* convincingly as hot-to-trot women—will blow your mind with their lip-synched show tunes, which take place every night. Bring the parents—they'll love it. See p. 115.