

## Chapter 1

# Discovering the Best of San Francisco

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Walking the streets of San Francisco
  - ▶ Bedding down in the city's best hotels
  - ▶ Chowing down at the most interesting restaurants
  - ▶ Nurturing a love-Haight shopping relationship
  - ▶ Partying around the City by the Bay
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**W**ith a wink and a wave to the past, San Francisco continues to reinvent herself like a determined matron plotting the next round of cosmetic surgery. In her starring role as the heartbeat of the Internet economy, this gracious city sashayed toward the 21st century with an energy and style that caused even the old guard to gasp in admiration. Then, before there was time to dump all the stock options, the bubble burst, the old-timers scrambled to diversify their portfolios, and young commercial real-estate brokers and Web designers seriously considered dental school. Fortunately, some things remain the same: The beautiful scenery continues to dazzle, the top-flight dining continues to garner raves, and the entertainment possibilities continue to grow in sophistication and imagination.

No matter how the economy fares, San Francisco consistently rates as one of the top tourist destinations in the world, and the reason is no secret. The city's treasured cable cars provide both thrills and great views as they whiz down and around our hills; a majestic golden bridge suspends travelers over the deep blue of the bay; hidden staircases lead to lovely gardens and eye-catching homes. And where else can you savor freshly made miniature chocolate truffles, meander down the most crooked street in the world, and escape from Alcatraz — all in one action-packed day?

Summarizing San Francisco is not easy. When it comes to culture, the city delivers everything from grand opera to leather-clad, fire-dancing performance artists. As for dining, we can down a burrito for lunch and polish off a multicourse designer meal for dinner — and critique both

with equal passion. Our neighborhoods are more like *villages*, each with its own retail corridor, park, and distinct personality. For in the face of rampant cultural homogeneity — the malling of America, so to speak — San Francisco holds tight to its individualism and enthusiastically applauds, or quietly salutes, those who do the same. What is consistent about the city, from the top of Telegraph Hill to sunny China Basin, is constant surprise. As you round a bend in the road, a lovely vista unexpectedly pops into your line of sight. As you savor a glass of chardonnay, a Chinese funeral cortege may suddenly glide past your cafe table, the band playing a pop classic. Or the smell of roasting coffee beans may waft down the street and completely erase thoughts of anything but where to find an espresso. Give your senses free rein to guide you through your days here, and you'll have a vacation like no other.

Because I consider the following to be the best San Francisco experiences, I've marked them with a Best of the Best icon when they appear elsewhere in the book.

## *Best San Francisco Travel Experiences*

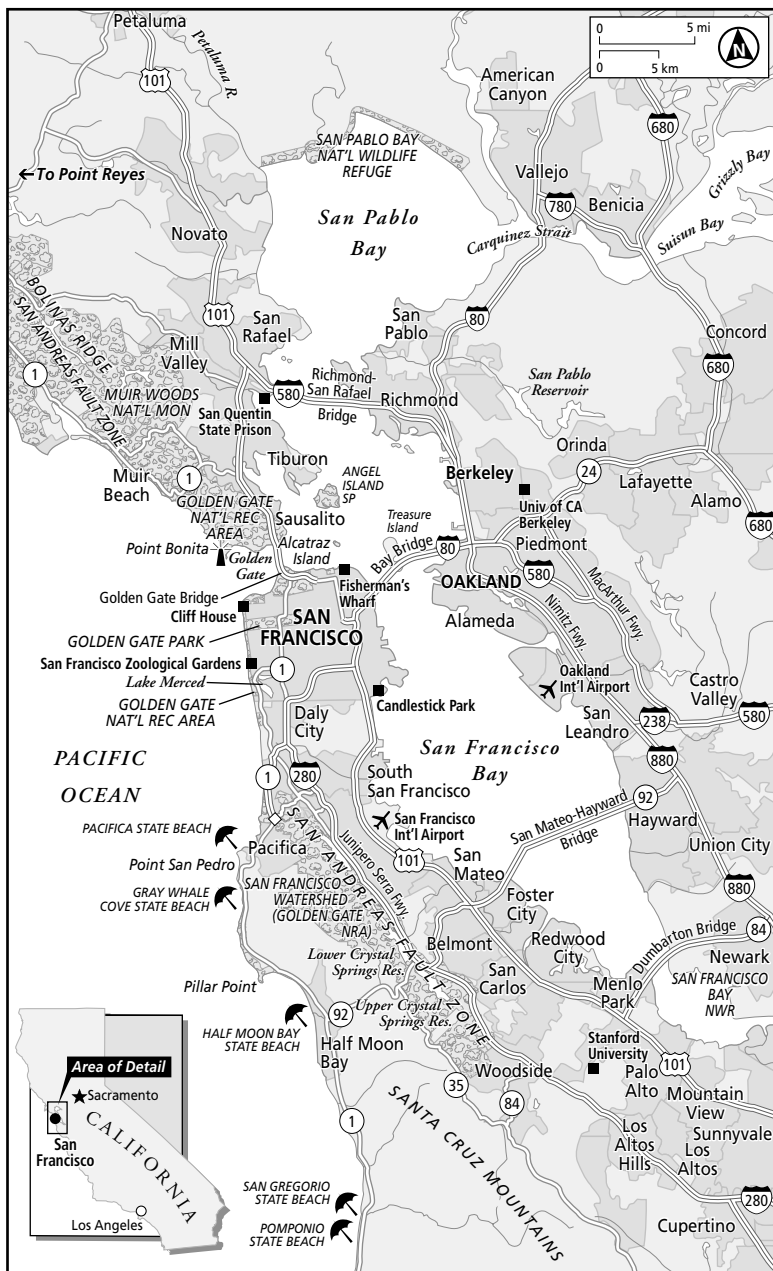
**Strolling along the Embarcadero to Aquatic Park:** This walk is a quintessential San Francisco activity, ideally experienced on a sunny day. I prefer to start across from the baseball stadium on Third Street, although exiting Muni at the **Embarcadero** (see Chapter 8) and beginning there is more convenient. With the water on one side and city landmarks on the other, a leisurely walk past the piers, through **Fisherman's Wharf** (see Chapter 8), leads to **Aquatic Park** and the **Municipal Pier**. Be sure to hike all the way to the end of the pier, stopping to see what, if anything, the anglers have caught. Your reward will be million-dollar bay vistas.

**Shopping at the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market:** Saturday morning finds home cooks and food lovers of all ages crowding the stalls in front of and behind the **Ferry Building**. You can sample stellar organic fruits, homemade preserves, and goat cheeses, or you can chow down on the freshest morning pastries, bread, and heartier dishes from some of the city's well-known restaurants. This is a ritual for lots of local chefs who chat up their favorite vendors and bag the choicest morsels. See Chapter 10.

**Rooting for the Giants at AT&T Park:** You don't have to be a baseball fan to enjoy an afternoon or evening at this diamond of a ballpark with the ever-changing corporate name. Bleacher seats go on sale on game days, but if you prefer something with more cachet, you can usually buy seats online from season-ticket holders. You'll find the best food, including amazing hot dogs, at the concession stands — load up on the sauerkraut and mustard, and then maybe scramble for a fly ball. See Chapter 11.

**Biking in Golden Gate Park:** Rentals are easy to arrange along Stanyon Street and around Stow Lake. John F. Kennedy Drive, which closes to automobile traffic on Sunday, holidays, and summer Saturdays, will take

*The Bay Area*



you on a meandering route through this lovely slice of green. At the end of the road you'll be near the newly restored **Murphy's Windmill**. From there, head north toward Fulton Street to see the **Dutch Windmill**. In early spring, the tulips here are in full, glorious bloom. See Chapter 11.

**Sipping a cappuccino in North Beach:** On a weekday morning when everyone else is at work, sitting with a newspaper and an espresso defines contentment — but it's a great idea anytime. You'll have your pick of cafes in North Beach, and I'm happy to recommend bright, roomy **Caffe Roma** (see Chapter 10), which has a fine selection of high-carb goodies. Plus, the staff roasts the coffee beans on-site.

## The Best Hotels

**Best All-Around Family Hotels:** The playful and warm **Serrano Hotel**, 405 Taylor St. (☎ 866-289-6561 or 415-885-2500), can provide young families with complimentary cribs, strollers, and even booster seats; older children will be delighted to find games scattered around the public areas and extras that include mini Etch-a-Sketches in the minibar. The moderately priced **Hotel Del Sol**, 3100 Webster St. (☎ 877-433-5765 or 415-921-5520), has goodies for the kids plus a fab outdoor pool. The **Hotel Monaco**, 501 Geary St. (☎ 866-622-5284 or 415-292-0100), combines style with all the practicalities you want in an upscale hotel, such as an excellent restaurant, top-quality staff, and a spa. Although I'd never suggest that you abandon the children (for too long), you could have a massage downstairs while they hang out in the room watching a movie and enjoying room service.

**Best Hotels for a Romantic Weekend:** The outdoor soaking tubs at the **Hotel Vitale**, 8 Mission St. (☎ 888-890-8688 or 415-278-3700), seem to me a good place to start the fun. Then, reserve a deluxe waterfront room and hang out the DO NOT DISTURB sign. If you're out to impress, the spacious Bolero penthouse suite in the **Hotel Adagio**, 550 Geary St. (☎ 800-228-8830 or 415-775-5000), boasts a lovely outdoor terrace, and the hotel itself is lively.

**Best View:** You can be assured of a breathtaking view from the bay rooms at the cozy **Harbor Court Hotel**, 165 Steuart St. (☎ 866-792-6283 or 415-882-1300). Cityscapes from the windows of the **W San Francisco**, 181 Third St. ☎ (877-946-8357 or 415-777-5300) look even more magnificent from the hotel's newly redesigned rooms. Request a "spectacular" bay view room above the 14th floor.

**Best Hotel Pool:** Children under 16 aren't allowed in the pool at the **Huntington Hotel**, 1075 California St. (☎ 800-227-4683 or 415-474-5400), so you'll be the one to blame for the splashing and noise.

**Best Hotel If You Have a Car:** For stays around Union Square, the **Galleria Park Hotel**, 191 Sutter St. (☎ 800-792-9639 or 415-781-3060), sits over a parking garage, so the valet shouldn't take too long to

retrieve your car. All the downtown hotels charge at least \$30 per day (plus tax); if you really can't live without the car, be sure to inquire about parking packages when you book your room. Parking is free at the **Cow Hollow Motor Inn & Suites**, 2190 Lombard St. (☎ 415-921-5800), and Lombard Street takes you to the Golden Gate Bridge. Japantown's **Hotel Kabuki**, 1625 Post St. (☎ 800-553-4567 or 415-922-3200), gets my commendation for having soothingly attractive rooms and relatively reasonable parking fees (\$25/day).

## *The Best Restaurants*

**Best for a Romantic Meal:** I like **Absinthe**, 398 Hayes St. (☎ 415-551-1590), for the food and décor, and **Quince**, 1701 Octavia St. (☎ 415-775-8500), which is so personable and delicious that eating there will make you quite fond of whomever you're with.

**Best with Kids:** You can't go wrong with **Chow**, 215 Church St. (☎ 415-552-2469), or **Park Chow**, 1240 Ninth Ave. (☎ 415-665-9912), which have identical menus. The price is right; the food is nonthreatening, recognizable, and tasty; and the casual atmosphere is relaxing.

**Best for a Splurge:** This category is not an easy one, because there are lots of amazing kitchens to choose from, but I have no qualms about directing you to **Restaurant Gary Danko**, 800 North Point St. (☎ 415-749-2060). This place is inviting yet sophisticated, completely professional on every level, and the food is superb. For splurging in a more formal atmosphere, the Michelin-starred **Dining Room** at the Ritz-Carlton, 600 Stockton St. (☎ 415-773-6168), illustrates the meaning of "to die for."

**Best Neighborhood Spots:** In the Mission District, **Range**, 842 Valencia St. (☎ 415-282-8283), is all the rage — and deservedly so — while the **Blue Plate**, 3218 Mission St. (☎ 415-282-6777), feels like one of those secret finds that you want to visit again and again. Around Cow Hollow (or anywhere in the city, really), **Isa**, 3324 Steiner St. (☎ 415-567-9588), is plainly a winner, with absolutely delicious food and delightful service.

**Best Views:** Forget about the overpriced tourist traps around PIER 39 — you can't see much at night, anyway. For the best views at bargain prices, have lunch at the **San Francisco Art Institute cafe**, 800 Chestnut St. (☎ 415-771-7020). For a gourmet vegetarian dinner and great scenery, **Greens Restaurant**, Fort Mason, Building A, off Marina Boulevard at Buchanan Street (☎ 415-771-6222), sets the standard.

## *The Best Shopping*

**Best for Generalists:** Kids, men, brides, your mother — there's something for everyone who has excellent taste at **Dandelion**, 55 Potrero Ave. (☎ 415-436-9500).

**Best for Books:** This is more than a bookstore: **City Lights**, 261 Columbus Ave. (☎ 415-362-8193), is representative of an era and a movement. Owner-poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti was one of the founders of the Beat movement. That it's also a terrific place to browse and buy is not completely incidental.

**Best for People Who Consider Themselves Cool:** Naturally, if you fall into this category, you wouldn't advertise it (that wouldn't be cool, now would it?), but of course even cool people have to shop. You'll find clothing, gifts, and skateboards on **Haight Street** (best if you are shopping with your kids), and clothing, gifts, and oddities on even hipper **Valencia Street**.

**Best for People Who Love Brand Names: Union Square.** The labels you want are all within a 2- or 3-block radius.

## *The Best Bars and Clubs*

**Best for American Idol Fans:** You won't find better entertainment for the price of a cocktail than at the **Mint Karaoke Lounge**, 1942 Market St. (☎ 415-626-4726), and the patrons are pretty friendly. Given that it's in the Castro, you may want to take extra care with your appearance, especially if you plan to take the stage!

**Best for Lost Fans:** The exotic décor at trendy **Bambuddha Lounge**, at the Phoenix Hotel, 601 Eddy St. (☎ 415-885-5088), complements the sultry, sulky clientele stirring apple martinis while awaiting small plates of Southeast Asian goodies. Word is the service is uppity, but no one will ask you to discuss your past.

**Best for How To Look Good Naked Fans:** It's really tacky, but if you want to see what plastic surgeons can accomplish these days, reserve seats at the bar at **AsiaSF**, 201 Ninth St. (☎ 415-255-2742; see Chapter 10), where "gender illusionists" strut their implants for 10 minutes each hour.

**Best for Dancing with the Stars Fans:** Friday and Saturday nights at the **Top of the Mark** in the InterContinental Mark Hopkins hotel, 1 Nob Hill (☎ 415-616-6916), the Black Market Jazz Orchestra performs for your dancing pleasure. Dress up and practice your dipping technique.

**Best for Dr. John Fans: Yoshi's Jazz Club**, 1330 Fillmore St. (☎ 415-665-5600), is a spin-off of the famous East Bay music venue. The swanky restaurant and club, in a revitalized section of the Fillmore, has become an exciting destination for jazz enthusiasts. Plan ahead if you want tickets, because shows sell out.