




*San Francisco awaits . . . and it doesn't have to cost a fortune for you to have the time of your life.*



# THE BEST OF FREE & DIRT-CHEAP SAN FRANCISCO

ure, you can pay through the nose for dinner at our finest restaurants, or stay at world-class hotels, and get an “only in San Francisco” experience. But some of the moments, and the sights, sounds, and smells, are free as the air, or won’t set you back more than a few bucks. Here are our favorite things to see, do, taste, and experience, and the experience is worth a million bucks (pretax).

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

- **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. 78.
- **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?) See p. 79.
- **Spending a Soul-Stirring Sunday Morning at Glide Church.** The high-spirited singers and hand-clapping worshipers at Glide 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. See p. 82.
- **Hangin' in 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 ex-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, 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.
- **Cruising the Castro.** The most populated and festive street in the city isn't just for gays and lesbians. There are some great shops and inexpensive cafes—particularly **Café Flore** (p. 64) for lunch—but it's the abundance of positive energy that makes the trip to the legendary Castro District a must. And *please* make time to catch a flick (any flick, doesn't matter) at the **Castro Theatre** (p. 157), a beautiful 1930s Spanish colonial movie palace that puts all those ugly multiplexes to shame.
- **Soaking Up the Sun 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 sites are the **Conservancy of Flowers, Japanese Tea Garden**, and **Stow Lake**, where you can rent romantic paddle boats and feed the ducks. The best time to go is on Sunday, when portions of the park are closed to traffic (bring skates or a bike for the full effect). Toward the end of the day, head west to the beach and watch the sunset. See p. 115.

- **Hiking 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 foggy 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 p. 133.
- **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 friendly vendors and complimentary cooking classes hosted by the city's top chefs. See p. 71.
- **Pretending 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 when you sit awhile to people-watch in the public spaces at the **Palace Hotel** (2 New Montgomery St.). 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.; p. 247)—it's so over-the-top ornate it will blow your mind.
- **Meandering along the Marina's Golden Gate Promenade.** There's something about walking along 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. 122.
- **Climbing 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. See p. 80.

## 2 The Best Dirt-Cheap Only-in-San Francisco Experiences

- **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 cheaper (like *free!*), you can always join the "knot-hole gang" at the Portwalk (located behind right field) to catch a free glimpse of the game through cut-out portholes into the ballpark. Even if the season's over, you can still take a guided tour of the stadium. See p. 102.

- **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. It's \$5 a ride . . . but if no one collects your fare, count it as a freebie.

- **Visiting the Museum of Modern Art.** Ever since the SFMOMA 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). See p. 99.

### Best Sort-Of Splurge That's Completely Worth It

**Alcatraz Island:** 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. Actual admission to the park is free . . . the catch is that you have to pay to ride the boat there. But it's a very cool ride. You'll spend about \$26 for the trip, unless you're a senior or in a family group (two adults, two children). See p. 105.

- **Starting the Day 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.

- **Sipping a Cocktail in the Clouds.** Some of the best ways to view the city are from top-floor lounges in the high-end hotels such as the **Sir Francis Drake** (450 Powell St.; ☎ 415/392-7755), the **Grand Hyatt San Francisco** (345 Stockton St.; ☎ 415/398-1234), and the **Mark Hopkins InterContinental** (1 Nob Hill; ☎ 415/392-3434). Drinks aren't cheap, but it beats paying for a dinner. Besides, if you nurse your drink (or order a soda), the combo of atmosphere, surroundings, and view is a bargain.
- **Skating through Golden Gate Park on a Weekend.** C'mon! When's the last time you went 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. You can rent skates for cheap at **Golden Gate Park Skate & Bike**. See p. 132.

## 3 The Best Dirt-Cheap Dining in San Francisco

- **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. 67), in the Haight, makes them for about \$7, including a side of home fries. **Ti Couz** (3108 16th St.; ☎ 415/252-7373; p. 63), in the Mission, makes even better crepes, but they are a bit more expensive.

- **Best Grease Pit.** Anyone who's a connoisseur of funky little ethnic eateries will love **Tú Lan** (8 Sixth St.; ☎ 415/626-0927; p. 45), one of the greasiest little holes-in-the-wall in the city. But even Julia Child was 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; p. 47) is my favorite Chinatown dive.

- **Best Pizza by the Slice.** It's a tie: The best by-the-slice experience in North Beach is **Golden Boy Pizza** (542 Green St.; ☎ 415/982-9738; p. 48), where everyone watches with envy as you stroll down the sidewalk while savoring the doughy square of deliciousness. Equally good is **ZA Pizza** (1919 Hyde St.; ☎ 415/771-3100; p. 52), in Russian Hill, a hugely popular by-the-slice neighborhood pizza joint.

- **Best Burritos.** It's impossible to deem one burrito the king in this town, but there's a reason people come from across town to line up at **Taquerias La Cumbre** (515 Valencia St.; ☎ 415/863-8205), in the Mission. See p. 62.

- **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. 73), 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) 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. I do, however, love the authentic atmosphere at **Mario's Bohemian Cigar Store** (566 Columbus Ave.; ☎ 415/362-0536; p. 50) and **Caffe Trieste** (601 Vallejo Ave.; ☎ 415/392-6739; p. 173).

- **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 \$9.50. See p. 40.
- **Best Burger.** For the price, **Mo's Gourmet Burgers** (1322 Grant Ave.; ☎ 415/788-3779) in North Beach is hard to beat, but everyone has a different opinion on this subject. See p. 50.
- **Best Dim Sum.** You could dine on dim sum for hours at **Lichee Garden** (1416 Powell St.; ☎ 415/397-2290) and not rack up a bill over \$20 per person. You'll be wowed by the variety of dumplings and mysterious dishes. It's a favorite even among Chinatown residents. See p. 46.

## 4 The Best Low-Cost Lodging in San Francisco

- **Best Overall Value.** This is a tough choice. The **Marina Inn** (3110 Octavia St.; ☎ 800/274-1420; p. 29) is one of the best low-priced hotels in San Francisco, but its Marina location puts it far from the downtown scene. The **San Remo Hotel** (2237 Mason St.; ☎ 800/352-REMO [352-7366]; p. 26) has an ideal North Beach location, friendly staff, and low prices, but the bathrooms are all shared. The best downtown deals are the **Hotel des Arts** (447 Bush St.; ☎ 800/956-4322; p. 23) and the groovy **Mosser** (54 Fourth St.; ☎ 800/227-3804; p. 25).
- **Best Cheap Hotel with Free Parking.** The peach-colored, Spanish-style stucco **Marina Motel** (2576 Lombard St.; ☎ 800/346-6118) has far more old-fashioned character than the other Marina District motels. See p. 30.
- **Best View.** Hard to believe but true: You can get bay views in San Francisco for a mere \$20-and-change nightly at the **Hostelling International San Francisco—Fisherman's Wharf** (Fort Mason, Bldg. 240; ☎ 415/771-7277). See p. 28.
- **Best for Families.** **Cow Hollow Motor Inn & Suites'** (2190 Lombard St.; ☎ 415/921-5800) one- and two-bedroom suites have full kitchens and dining areas, as well as antique furnishings and surprisingly tasteful decor. See p. 29.



## San Francisco Top 10 Best-Kept Free & Cheap Secrets

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- 1 Tickets to the de Young Museum ain't cheap (unless you go on the first Tues of each month, which is a free day), but you can always climb to the top of the museum's 144-foot tower for free. The panoramic views from the observation floor span much of the Bay Area.
- 2 The Boudin Demonstration Bakery at the Wharf has a nifty little free museum hidden upstairs that explains the symbiotic relationship between San Francisco and its unique sourdough loaf. The story and science behind the "mother dough" is fascinating, as is their demonstration—bakery visitors can watch the entire baking process from a 30-foot observation window along Jefferson Street.
- 3 Hard to find, but worth the effort, is a funky little bar in North Beach called Specs'. It looks like a maritime museum that imploded, with walls covered with historically eclectic seafaring oddities brought back by long-dead sailors who dropped in between voyages (dried whale penis, anyone?).
- 4 If you log onto [www.calacademy.org/webcams/penguins](http://www.calacademy.org/webcams/penguins), you can see what the California Academy of Sciences' penguins are up to via their PenguinCams, which offer three real-time views of the new penguin exhibit. It's mesmerizing.
- 5 If you want to watch a Giants game for free, you can join the "knothole gang" at the Portwalk (located behind right field) to catch a free glimpse of the game through cut-out portholes

- **Best for a Budget Romantic Rendezvous.** If the mini-penthouse at the **San Remo Hotel** (2237 Mason St.; ☎ 800/352-7366) is available, book it: You won't find a more romantic

place to stay in San Francisco for so little money. See p. 26.

- **Best Moderately Priced Hotel.** I've received nothing but kudos from satisfied guests who stayed at the **Golden Gate**

into the ballpark. In the spirit of sharing, Portwalk peekers are encouraged to take in only an inning or two before giving way to fellow fans.

- 6 Free steak sandwiches! Well, kinda. You have to buy at least one drink at Morton's Steakhouse (400 Post St. at Powell St.; ☎ 415/986-5830). Every Monday through Friday from 5-7pm they host a Carnivore Happy Hour, where you can stuff yourself on all-you-can-eat filet mignon sandwiches at the bar. Ask any local in-the-know—it's the best happy hour deal in the city.
- 7 Every second Thursday of the month you can watch free movies at Dolores Park, located at 20th and Dolores streets. Bring a blanket and even your dog if you'd like, as well as a little cash to buy the world's best tamales from the Tamale Lady.
- 8 The Good Vibrations sex-toy shop is worth visiting just to see their Antique Vibrator Museum. Who knew that vibrators have been around since 1869 and were prescribed by physicians to treat "hysteria?" Fascinating.
- 9 If you're looking for a buddy to ride bikes with, the 511 Bike Buddy Ridematch Service will pair you up with someone at your skill level at no cost. Log onto [www.ridematch.511.org](http://www.ridematch.511.org), click on "Bicycling," and then click on Bike Buddy Matching.
- 10 If city life is stressing you out, take some free tai chi lessons. Log onto [www.sfnpc.org/taichi](http://www.sfnpc.org/taichi) for a list of places and times that the free lessons are offered. There's no need to register; just dress comfortably and show up.

**Hotel** (775 Bush St.; ☎ 800/835-1118). Just 2 blocks from Union Square, this 1913 Edwardian hotel is a real charmer and a fantastic value. See p. 19.

● **Best Budget B&B.** The 28-room **Hayes Valley Inn** (417 Gough St.; ☎ 800/930-7999), an Edwardian-style B&B, is a find. Okay, so you'll have to share the very clean toilets and showers, but the price is right. See p. 30.