What to do in San Francisco

San Francisco is often called “Everybody’s Favorite City,” a title earned by its scenic beauty, cultural attractions, diverse communities and world-class cuisine. Measuring 49 square miles, this very walkable city is dotted with landmarks such as the Golden Gate Bridge, cable cars, Alcatraz and the largest Chinatown in the United States.

A stroll of the city’s streets can lead from Union Square, the Italian-flavored North Beach, Fisherman’s Wharf, the Castro, Japantown and the Mission District, with intriguing neighborhoods to explore at every turn.

Panoramic Views of the Pacific Ocean and San Francisco Bay are often laced with fog, creating a romantic mood in this most European of American cities. The city has a colorful past, growing from a small village to a major city nearly overnight as a result of the 1849 Gold Rush. The writers of the “beat” generation, the hippies of the summer of love in the late 1960s and the large gay and lesbian population have all contributed to making San Francisco the place it is today.

The city is home to world-class theater, opera, symphony and ballet companies and often boasts premiers of Broadway-bound plays and culture-changing performing arts. San Francisco is also one of America’s greatest dining cities. The diverse cultural influences, proximity of the freshest ingredients and competitive creativity of the chefs result in unforgettable dining experiences throughout the city.

Golden Gate Bridge
Crossing the strait of the Golden Gate from San Francisco to the Marin headlands for 1.7 miles is the world-renowned Golden Gate Bridge, easily identified the world over by its orange color.

Opened in 1937, the bridge was built at a cost of $55 million in principal and $50 million in interest and 11 workers’ lives. The single-suspension span is anchored by twin towers that reach skyward 746 feet, and was once taller than any building in San Francisco.

To support the suspended roadway, two cables, each more than 7,000 feet in length and both containing 80,000 miles of wire, stretch over the top of the towers and are rooted in concrete anchorages on shore. More than 10 years in planning due to formidable opposition, but only four years in actual construction, the Golden Gate Bridge brought the communities of San Francisco and Marin counties closer together.

Pedestrians — including wheelchair users and bicyclists — can go on the sidewalks of the bridge during daylight hours, but roller blades, skateboards and roller skates are not permitted. There are vista points on both north and south sides of the bridge with parking lots.

Alcatraz
Alcatraz and history go hand in hand. Once home to some of America’s most notorious criminals, the federal penitentiary that operated here from 1934 to 1963 brought a dark mystique to the Rock. The presence of infamous inmates, such as Al “Scarface” Capone and the “Birdman” Robert Stroud, helped to establish the island’s notoriety. To this day, Alcatraz is best known as one of the world’s most legendary prisons.

Many people, though, are unaware of the wealth of other stories to be learned on the island. Alcatraz is now home to rare flowers and plants, marine wildlife and thousands of roosting and nesting seabirds. Civil War-era buildings dotting the island give insight into the 19th century, when the island served as both a harbor defense fort and a military prison.

You can also see visible reminders of the American Indian Occupation that started in 1969 after the prison closed, highlighting an important milestone in the American Indian rights movement.

Fisherman’s Wharf
As San Francisco’s No. 1 visitor destination, Fisherman’s Wharf has a lot to offer out-of-towners and local Bay Area residents alike. The tangerine salt air and fabulous views are just the beginning.

You’ll find the city’s freshest seafood at the wharf’s world-class restaurants. Cruises and tours also begin here.

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