

Welcome to San Francisco

Grab your coat and a handful of glitter, and enter the land of fog and fabulousness. So long, inhibitions; hello, San Francisco.

Natural Highs

If California is one grand, sweeping gesture, a long arm cradling the Pacific, then San Francisco, that seven-by-seven-mile peninsula, is a forefinger pointing upwards. Take this as a hint to look up: you'll notice San Francisco's crooked Victorian rooflines, wind-sculpted treetops and fog tumbling over the Golden Gate Bridge. Heads are perpetually in the clouds atop San Francisco's 43 hills. Cable cars provide easy access to Russian and Nob Hills, and splendid panoramas reward the slog up to Coit Tower – but the most exhilarating highs are earned on Telegraph Hill's garden-lined stairway walks and windswept hikes around Land's End.

Food & Drink

Every available Bay Area-invented technology is needed to make dinner decisions in this city, which has the most restaurants and farmers markets per capita in North America, supplied by pioneering local organic farms. San Francisco set the gold standard for Wild West saloons, but drinking was driven underground in the 1930s with Prohibition. Today San Francisco celebrates its speakeasies and vintage saloons – and with Wine Country and local distillers providing a steady supply of America's finest hooch, the West remains wild.

Neighborhood Microclimates

Microclimates add magic realism to San Francisco days: when it's drizzling in the outer reaches of Golden Gate Park, it may be sunny in the Mission. A few degrees' difference between neighborhoods grants permission for salted caramel ice cream in Dolores Park, or a hasty retreat to tropical heat inside California Academy of Sciences' rainforest dome. This town will give you goose bumps one minute, and warm you to the core the next.

Outlandish Notions

Consider permission permanently granted to be outlandish: other towns may surprise you, but in San Francisco you will surprise yourself. Good times and social revolutions tend to start here, from manic gold rushes to blissful hippie be-ins. If there's a skateboard move yet to be busted, a technology still unimagined, a poem left unspoken or a green scheme untested, chances are it's about to happen here. Yes, right now. This town has lost almost everything in earthquakes and dot-com gambles, but never its nerve.



Why I Love San Francisco

By Alison Bing, Author

On my way from Hong Kong to New York, I stopped in San Francisco for a day. I walked from the Geary St art galleries up Grant Ave to Waverly Place, just as temple services were starting. The fog was scented with incense and roast duck. In the basement of City Lights bookstore, near the Muckraking section, I noticed a sign painted by a 1920s cult: 'I am the door.' It's true. San Francisco is the threshold between East and West, body and soul, fact and fiction. That was 20 years ago. I'm still here. You have been warned.

For more about our authors, see p328.