

Understand San Francisco

SAN FRANCISCO TODAY 252

Going green, living online, going for broke and waiting to get hitched: San Francisco has a full agenda.

HISTORY 254

Between the Gold Rush and biotech, the San Francisco Bay has come up with some historic firsts: jeans, free speech, gay rights and social media.

LOCAL CUISINE & DRINKS 267

Wait, was this grass-fed? Was this cocktail properly re-searched? The outlandish questions you'll hear at SF tables, and which ones actually matter.

LITERARY SAN FRANCISCO. 271

San Francisco has more writers than any other US city and hoards three times as many library books as the national average. Check out the novels, poetry and zines it adores.

VISUAL ARTS 273

If you think of art as simply paintings and sculpture, San Francisco will come as a visual shock: murals, graffiti and political protests flow from the streets into galleries.

SAN FRANCISCO MUSIC 276

Don't get them started singing Journey ballads, the Dead are still alive, and other things you should know about music in SF.

SAN FRANCISCO ARCHITECTURE 280

Color schemes that would make Queen Victoria faint, wild-flower roofs, copper camouflage and other SF architectural developments.

HILLS & FOG 284

Why is it chilly in the Haight but sunny in the Mission? What you need to know about SF's peculiar microclimates.

San Francisco Today

Small as it is, this seven-by-seven-mile peninsula looms large in the imagination. The greenest city in America is full of ideas, including urban farms, biotech and social media – plus a lot more that mostly serve as in-box filler. Saloons, food trucks, pop-ups and pot clubs are sprouting up all over SF's 43 hills, while same-sex couples are still on standby, waiting to get hitched. SF has its ups and downs, but as anyone who's clung onto the side of a cable car will tell you, this town provides one hell of a ride.

Best on Film

Milk (2008) Sean Penn won an Oscar for his portrayal of America's first openly gay elected official.

Tales of the City (1993) Laura Linney unravels a mystery in SF's swinging '70s disco scene.

Harold & Maude (1971) Conservatory of Flowers and Sutro Baths make metaphorically apt backdrops for May–December romance.

Chan Is Missing (1982) When Chan disappears, two cabbies realize they don't know Chan, Chinatown or themselves.

Best in Print

Howl and Other Poems (Allen Ginsberg; 1956) Mind-altering, law-changing words defined a generation of 'angel-headed hipsters.'

Time and Materials (Robert Hass; 2007) Every Pulitzer Prize-winning syllable is as essential as a rivet in the Golden Gate Bridge.

On the Road (Jack Kerouac; 1957) Banged out in a San Francisco attic, Kerouac's travelogue set post-war America free.

Slouching Towards Bethlehem (Joan Didion; 1968) Scorching truth burns through San Francisco fog during the Summer of Love.

Green City, USA

In 2011, San Francisco was named North America's Greenest City, and you'll notice that distinction when it comes to choosing what eat and drink, where to sleep, what souvenirs to buy and how to get around town. Pretty much anything you might want to do in San Francisco, you can do with a green conscience – just look for the ♻️ designation in this book.

San Francisco is tough on proof of green credentials. Businesses must compost and recycle by law here, so that alone is not enough to merit a special ♻️ designation. Practices that might be considered standard-setting elsewhere have gone mainstream here, including electric public buses, restaurants featuring California-grown ingredients or hotels encouraging guests to re-use towels to save water. Only businesses that have gone above and beyond local law and standard SF practices earn a ♻️ designation, such as San Francisco city-certified green businesses, LEED-certified green attractions, all-hybrid-car taxi services, and restaurants and bars with a verifiable commitment to using ingredients from organic local farms or foraged ingredients.

Social-Mediated SF

If you're not on Twitter, Facebook, Yelp, Google +, Yahoo Groups or LinkedIn, are you sure you still have a pulse? San Francisco will try to convince you must use one of these Bay Area-based social media platforms in order to validate your existence. After all, a lot of local jobs depend on it.

But there is already a backlash afoot in this technological hub. In a city where telecommuters have turned public spaces into satellite offices for the past decade, cafes have begun removing electrical outlets and unplugging wi-fi routers, and boutiques and restaurants are posting signs saying 'No phone calls. No excuses.'