

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

California is one grand, sweeping gesture, a long arm cradling the Pacific. But then there's San Francisco, that seven-by-seven-mile peninsula that looks like a forefinger pointing upwards. Take this as a hint to look up: you'll find 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 atop 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, with the most restaurants and farmers markets per capita in North America, supplied by pioneering local organic farms. In 1906 City Hall banned women from bars, effectively driving the action underground through Prohibition. Today San Francisco celebrates its speakeasies and vintage saloons – and with Wine Country providing a steady supply of America's finest hooch, the West remains wild.

Neighborhood Microclimates

Microclimates add a touch of magic realism to San Francisco: 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 breeze smelled like 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 18 years ago. I'm still here. You have been warned.

For more about our authors, see p344.