

USA TODAY

June 18, 2008



San Francisco itineraries: One day, weekend or week

By Bonnie Wach, Special for USA TODAY

While it's certainly true that San Francisco is a city best savored slowly and not slurped down in one big gulp, it's also true that no amount of time spent in the City by the Bay is wasted time. The following itineraries will help you make the most of your stay, whether you've got a day, a weekend or a week to spare.

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One day

Your plane has landed, you've collected your bags, and you've got only 24 hours to soak up the sights. Ditch the luggage and hop a BART train from the airport straight to downtown. Get off at Powell Street and you can check off your first authentic San Francisco treat from the to-do list: the world-famous cable cars. Powell Street station is the terminus for the Fisherman's Wharf lines, but don't ride the running boards just yet.

If shopping's your thing, you're now at retail Ground Zero. Directly behind you is the Westfield San Francisco Centre, a fashionista's fantasy with Bloomingdale's, Nordstrom, H&M, Abercrombie & Fitch, Lucky Brand Jeans, Juicy Couture, and more than 170 other retail outlets. Two blocks up the street is Union Square, home to Big Name designer boutiques and department stores ranging from Saks Fifth Avenue and Macy's to Barney's, Neiman Marcus, Prada, and Marc Jacobs. Rest your feet and your credit cards at the historic plaza while you grab a panini and espresso and people-watch at the Emporio Rulli café.

On the West side of Union Square is the legendary Westin St. Francis Hotel, steeped in the cigar smoke and white gloves of the city's boom years. Built by the Charles Crocker family (of railroad fame) in 1904, it was the first hotel to be resurrected after the earthquake and fires of 1906. It's definitely worth a detour if not for a twirl around the grand lobby and a longing look at celeb chef Michael Mina's five-star restaurant, then for a ride to the top of the hotel in its outdoor glass elevators, where you can get a bird's-eye view of the downtown skyline (acrophobes need not apply).

From here, catch a cable car at any one of the stops along Powell Street and take it to the end of the line at Fisherman's Wharf. Fortify yourself with an original Irish Coffee at the Buena Vista Café before exploring the waterfront. The frothy blend of hot coffee, whiskey, sugar and whipped cream was not actually invented here, but it was the late San Francisco Chronicle columnist Stanton Delaplane who brought the recipe back from Dublin in 1952, and a Buena Vista bartender who re-created it stateside for the first time. The legendary bar serves up some 2,000 Irish Coffees a day.

Day 6-7

Spend a day devoted to Golden Gate Park, the city's communal backyard. Designed by William Hammond Hall, and nurtured for 50 years by gardener John McLaren, the greenbelt stretches for three miles between the Haight-Ashbury and the Pacific Ocean and encompasses 1,017 acres of gardens, groves, and lakes. Ground Zero is the de Young Museum, housed in a striking copper-clad building designed by Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron. Next to the de Young is the Japanese Tea Garden, where you can partake of traditional Japanese tea and cookies and wander manicured paths past bonsai and cherry trees, pagodas, and an enormous Buddha. Across the tree-lined concourse is the bandshell, where the park band plays on Sundays, and the new home for the California Academy of Sciences. Re-opening in the fall of 2008, the natural science museum, aquarium, and planetarium, designed by Italian Pritzker Prize-winning architect Renzo Piano, will be housed in what is to be the world's 'greenest' museum—an environmentally sustainable building that contains a rainforest, a coral reef, and a living roof supporting some 1.7 million plants.

From here, walk east to the Conservatory of Flowers — the oldest building in the park and the oldest Victorian glass greenhouse in the Western Hemisphere. If you're feeling energetic, make a detour into the Haight-Ashbury for a Flower Power flashback and then rent bikes at one of the shops along Stanyan or Haight streets. On Sundays, the park is closed to car traffic along its main drags, and you can ride all the way from the Panhandle to the shores of the Pacific. Following John F. Kennedy Drive you'll wander past the Children's Playground and Hippie Hill, the rhododendron dell, charming Stow Lake, the rose garden, the buffalo paddock, and the Dutch windmill and tulip garden.

At the western edge of the park, where it meets the Pacific, the popular Park and Beach Chalet restaurants provide an idyllic spot to rest and resuscitate. On sunny afternoons, the grassy area facing the park is filled with locals sipping margaritas and house-brewed beers, and kicking back in Adirondack chairs. Upstairs, diners get uninterrupted views of the horizon while they munch on Dungeness crab cakes and big, juicy burgers.

If you still have a craving for art and ocean vistas, head up from Ocean Beach along the Great Highway to the California Palace of the Legion of Honor. San Francisco's most seductively situated museum, it's set on ocean cliffs boasting spectacular views. A three-quarter-scale adaptation of the 18th-century Palais de la Légion d'Honneur in Paris, the building was refurbished in 1995 to showcase its outstanding collection of masterworks by El Greco, Rembrandt, Monet, Matisse and Picasso, and its large holdings of Rodin sculpture.