

Things to Do in San Francisco: 18 Best Attractions and Experiences



San Francisco is one of the most [*recognizable cities in the United States*](#), known for its dramatic hills, historic cable cars, colorful neighborhoods, waterfront views, and world-famous landmarks. From walking across the Golden Gate Bridge to exploring Alcatraz Island, watching sea lions at Pier 39, and discovering hidden corners of Golden Gate Park, there is no shortage of memorable experiences.

The best things to do in San Francisco include a mix of iconic attractions, museums, outdoor spaces, historic neighborhoods, and local experiences. Whether you are visiting for a weekend, traveling with kids, planning a romantic getaway, or exploring the city for the first time, this guide will help you choose the attractions worth adding to your itinerary.

Quick Facts About San Francisco

- **Best known for:** The Golden Gate Bridge, cable cars, Alcatraz, steep hills, and diverse neighborhoods
- **Best for:** First-time visitors, couples, families, food lovers, and culture seekers
- **Recommended trip length:** 2 to 4 days
- **Best way to explore:** A combination of walking, public transportation, and rideshares
- **Top attraction for first-time visitors:** Golden Gate Bridge and Alcatraz Island
- **Best for outdoor activities:** Golden Gate Park, the Presidio, Lands End, and the waterfront

18 Best Things to Do in San Francisco

From famous landmarks to beautiful parks and vibrant neighborhoods, these are the experiences that should be at the top of your San Francisco itinerary.

1. Walk or Bike Across the Golden Gate Bridge

No visit to San Francisco feels complete without seeing the Golden Gate Bridge. Its distinctive orange towers, dramatic setting above the Golden Gate Strait, and sweeping views of the bay make it the city's most iconic landmark.

You can admire the bridge from several viewpoints, but walking part of the bridge gives you a completely different perspective. The views can include the San Francisco skyline, Alcatraz Island, the Marin Headlands, and the Pacific Ocean, depending on the weather.

If you have more time, consider exploring the surrounding Presidio or Crissy Field before or after your visit. These areas offer some of the city's best outdoor views.

Best for: First-time visitors, photographers, couples, and outdoor lovers

Travel tip: San Francisco's weather can change quickly. Bring an extra layer, especially if you plan to walk across the bridge.

2. Visit Alcatraz Island

Alcatraz Island is one of the most fascinating attractions in San Francisco. Located in San Francisco Bay, the former federal prison housed some of America's most notorious prisoners before closing in 1963. Today, the island is part of the National Park Service and offers visitors a chance to explore its prison buildings, historic structures, and waterfront views.

The journey itself is part of the experience. The ferry ride provides excellent views of the San Francisco skyline and the Golden Gate Bridge before arriving at the island.

The cellhouse audio tour is one of the highlights of a visit, giving visitors a deeper understanding of life inside the prison and the people who lived and worked there.

Best for: History lovers, first-time visitors, families, and anyone interested in iconic San Francisco attractions

Travel tip: Reserve your tickets in advance. The National Park Service recommends advance reservations, and the official ferry ticket includes transportation and the cellhouse audio tour.

3. Ride a Historic San Francisco Cable Car

San Francisco's cable cars are more than a way to get around. They are one of the city's signature experiences.

The historic cars climb and descend some of San Francisco's famous hills, providing a memorable way to see the city. Even a short ride offers a sense of San Francisco's character that you simply cannot get from a car or rideshare.

Cable cars are especially popular with first-time visitors, so expect lines at major boarding locations.

Best for: First-time visitors, families, and photographers

Travel tip: Try combining a cable car ride with a visit to Chinatown, Nob Hill, or Fisherman's Wharf to make the experience part of a larger day of sightseeing.

4. Explore Fisherman's Wharf and Pier 39

Fisherman's Wharf is one of San Francisco's busiest visitor areas, especially for first-time travelers. It combines waterfront scenery, restaurants, shops, attractions, and easy access to several other major sights.

Pier 39 is particularly famous for its resident sea lions, which gather near the waterfront and have become one of the area's most recognizable attractions. The pier also offers restaurants, entertainment, shops, and views across the bay.

Fisherman's Wharf is touristy, but it remains a convenient place to experience San Francisco's waterfront atmosphere and visit nearby attractions.

Best for: Families, first-time visitors, and travelers with limited time

Don't miss: Watching the sea lions, walking along the waterfront, and enjoying views toward Alcatraz Island.

5. Spend a Day Exploring Golden Gate Park

Golden Gate Park is much more than a city park. Its large green spaces, gardens, museums, trails, and cultural attractions can easily fill several hours or even an entire day.

Some of the park's most popular attractions include the California Academy of Sciences, the de Young Museum, the Japanese Tea Garden, and the Conservatory of Flowers. There are also quieter areas where you can walk, relax, or simply enjoy a break from the busy city.

Because the park is so large, it is best to choose a few attractions rather than trying to see everything in one visit.

Best for: Families, museum lovers, nature lovers, and travelers looking for a relaxed day

Travel tip: Plan your visit around one or two major attractions and allow time to enjoy the park itself.

6. Visit the California Academy of Sciences

The California Academy of Sciences is one of the best attractions in San Francisco for visitors of all ages. Located in Golden Gate Park, it combines an aquarium, planetarium, rainforest, and natural history museum in one major attraction.

This makes it an especially good choice for families, although adults can easily spend several hours exploring the exhibits as well.

The museum is also an excellent option when the weather is foggy or rainy and you want an indoor activity without leaving Golden Gate Park.

Best for: Families with kids, science lovers, and museum enthusiasts

Travel tip: Allow several hours for your visit. There is much more to see here than at a typical museum.

7. See Lombard Street

Lombard Street is famous for its steep, winding section between Hyde and Leavenworth streets. Often described as one of the most crooked streets in the world, its series of sharp turns, landscaped gardens, and hillside views make it one of San Francisco's most photographed spots.

You can walk down the street or view it from nearby. Driving through is possible, but traffic can be heavy during busy periods.

Lombard Street works best as a quick stop while exploring nearby neighborhoods such as Russian Hill and North Beach.

Best for: First-time visitors and photographers

Travel tip: Walking gives you more time to appreciate the views and avoids the frustration of waiting in traffic.

8. Take in the Views from Coit Tower

Perched on Telegraph Hill, Coit Tower is one of San Francisco's most recognizable landmarks. The tower itself is worth seeing, but the surrounding area is equally appealing.

From Telegraph Hill, you can enjoy views of the city, the bay, Alcatraz Island, and the surrounding waterfront. Inside, the tower is also known for historic murals.

Coit Tower is a great addition to a day spent exploring North Beach, Chinatown, or the Embarcadero.

Best for: View seekers, history lovers, and photographers

Travel tip: Combine your visit with a walk through the surrounding streets of Telegraph Hill for a more memorable experience.

9. Explore the Ferry Building Marketplace

The Ferry Building is one of the best places in San Francisco to experience the city's food culture. Located along the Embarcadero, this historic waterfront building is home to specialty food vendors, restaurants, and shops.

It is an easy place to stop for breakfast, lunch, coffee, or a snack while exploring the waterfront. The location also provides views of the Bay Bridge and convenient access to the surrounding Embarcadero area.

The Ferry Building is especially popular during its farmers market days, but it is worth visiting even if you simply want to walk through and explore the waterfront.

Best for: Food lovers, couples, and first-time visitors

10. See the Painted Ladies at Alamo Square

The Painted Ladies are among San Francisco's most famous residential buildings. These colorful Victorian and Edwardian homes sit beside Alamo Square and offer one of the city's most recognizable postcard views.

The real attraction is the combination of historic architecture, the green space of Alamo Square, and the city skyline in the background.

It is an easy stop for photos and a relaxing break between larger attractions.

Best for: Photographers, architecture lovers, and first-time visitors

Travel tip: Bring a snack and enjoy the park while taking in the view rather than treating it as only a quick photo stop.

11. Explore the Presidio and Presidio Tunnel Tops

The Presidio is one of San Francisco's most impressive outdoor spaces. Once a military post, it is now a large national park area with trails, scenic overlooks, historic sites, and spectacular views of the Golden Gate Bridge.

Presidio Tunnel Tops has added another reason to visit, creating an inviting outdoor space with open views and areas for relaxing and exploring.

This is one of the best places in San Francisco for travelers who want to combine history, scenery, and outdoor recreation.

Best for: Families, couples, hikers, and photographers

Don't miss: The views of the Golden Gate Bridge and San Francisco Bay.

12. Explore Chinatown

San Francisco's Chinatown is one of the most historic and vibrant neighborhoods in the city. Walking through its streets is an experience in itself, with colorful storefronts, traditional architecture, markets, restaurants, and cultural landmarks.

Start near the Dragon Gate and allow yourself time to explore beyond the busiest streets. Chinatown rewards visitors who slow down, browse local shops, and stop for food.

It is also centrally located, making it easy to combine with a cable car ride or a visit to nearby North Beach.

Best for: Food lovers, culture seekers, and first-time visitors

13. Walk Through the Mission District

The Mission District offers a different side of San Francisco. Known for its murals, Mexican and Latin American cultural influence, restaurants, and lively atmosphere,

it is one of the best neighborhoods for travelers who want to experience the city's local character.

The area's colorful street art is a major draw, particularly around Balmy Alley and Clarion Alley. The neighborhood is also one of the best places to explore San Francisco's food scene.

Take your time here. The Mission is less about checking off one landmark and more about walking, eating, and experiencing the neighborhood.

Best for: Food lovers, art lovers, and repeat visitors

14. Relax at Dolores Park

Located near the Mission District, Dolores Park is one of San Francisco's favorite places to relax outdoors. On a sunny day, the park fills with locals and visitors enjoying picnics, views, and the city's atmosphere.

The park's hillside location offers a beautiful view toward downtown, making it a great place to take a break after exploring the Mission.

Dolores Park is also a good reminder that some of the best experiences in San Francisco are simple. You do not always need a ticket or a major attraction to enjoy the city.

Best for: Budget travelers, couples, and visitors exploring the Mission District

15. Visit the Palace of Fine Arts

The Palace of Fine Arts is one of San Francisco's most beautiful landmarks. Its grand rotunda, classical architecture, lagoon, and surrounding green space create a setting that feels completely different from the busy streets of downtown.

Originally built for the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition, it remains a popular destination for walking, photography, and relaxing.

It is particularly appealing for couples and photographers, although families and first-time visitors will also appreciate the scenery.

Best for: Couples, photographers, and architecture lovers

16. Explore the Japanese Tea Garden

Located inside Golden Gate Park, the Japanese Tea Garden offers a peaceful contrast to San Francisco's busy attractions. The garden features traditional landscaping, winding paths, bridges, ponds, and carefully maintained plants.

The garden is especially beautiful during spring, when cherry blossoms add color to the landscape.

It is the oldest Japanese tea garden in the United States and covers 3.5 acres within Golden Gate Park.

Best for: Couples, garden lovers, and travelers seeking a quieter experience

Travel tip: Visit earlier in the day for a more peaceful experience, then continue exploring other attractions in Golden Gate Park.

17. Watch the Sunset at Lands End or Ocean Beach

San Francisco's location beside the Pacific Ocean provides plenty of opportunities to enjoy dramatic coastal scenery.

Lands End is one of the best areas for scenic walking, with coastal trails, rugged views, and a different perspective of the Golden Gate Bridge. Nearby Sutro Baths adds another historic and scenic stop.

Ocean Beach offers a simpler experience. Walk along the sand, watch the waves, and enjoy the wide-open Pacific coastline.

Best for: Nature lovers, photographers, and couples

Travel tip: The coast can be much cooler and windier than other parts of San Francisco, so bring a warm layer.

18. Take a San Francisco Bay Cruise

Seeing San Francisco from the water provides a new perspective on the city's famous landmarks. A Bay cruise can offer views of the skyline, the Golden Gate Bridge, Alcatraz Island, and the waterfront.

This is a particularly good option for first-time visitors because it combines sightseeing with a relaxing experience.

Different cruises offer different routes and experiences, so choose based on the landmarks you most want to see and the amount of time you have.

Best for: First-time visitors, couples, and photographers

Best Things to Do in San Francisco for First-Time Visitors

If this is your first trip to San Francisco, it can be difficult to decide where to start. The city has far more attractions than most visitors can see in a short visit.

If you only have a few days, prioritize these experiences:

- Walk or bike across the Golden Gate Bridge
- Visit Alcatraz Island
- Ride a historic cable car
- Explore Fisherman's Wharf and Pier 39
- Spend time in Golden Gate Park
- Visit one of the city's major neighborhoods, such as Chinatown or the Mission District

These experiences give you a strong introduction to San Francisco's history, scenery, culture, and character.

Best Free Things to Do in San Francisco



San Francisco can be an expensive city, but many of its most memorable experiences cost little or nothing.

Some of the best free things to do include:

- Walking part of the Golden Gate Bridge
- Exploring Golden Gate Park
- Visiting the Painted Ladies at Alamo Square
- Walking through Chinatown
- Relaxing at Dolores Park
- Exploring the Mission District murals
- Walking the waterfront near the Ferry Building
- Enjoying coastal scenery at Lands End
- Visiting Ocean Beach
- Exploring the Presidio

These activities are ideal for travelers who want to experience the city without building their entire itinerary around paid attractions.

Things to Do in San Francisco with Kids



San Francisco offers plenty of family-friendly attractions, from hands-on museums to outdoor parks and waterfront experiences.

Some of the best options include:

- California Academy of Sciences
- Pier 39 and the sea lions
- Riding a cable car
- Exploring Golden Gate Park
- Visiting the Japanese Tea Garden
- Walking along the waterfront
- Taking a Bay cruise

Families should also consider the amount of walking involved in a typical San Francisco itinerary. The city's hills can be challenging for younger children, so balancing sightseeing with parks and indoor attractions can make the trip more enjoyable.

Romantic Things to Do in San Francisco



San Francisco is an excellent destination for couples, particularly for travelers who enjoy scenery, historic neighborhoods, waterfront walks, and memorable dining experiences.

For a romantic day in the city, consider:

- Watching the sunset near Lands End
- Visiting the Palace of Fine Arts
- Walking through the Japanese Tea Garden
- Taking a Bay cruise
- Enjoying views from the Golden Gate Bridge
- Exploring the waterfront around the Ferry Building
- Spending an afternoon in Golden Gate Park

The best romantic experiences are often the ones that allow you to slow down and enjoy San Francisco's scenery rather than rushing from attraction to attraction.

Best Museums in San Francisco

San Francisco has an excellent museum scene, with options covering science, art, history, and culture.

California Academy of Sciences

One of the city's best all-around attractions, combining an aquarium, planetarium, rainforest, and natural history exhibits.

de Young Museum

Located in Golden Gate Park, the de Young is a major art museum and an attraction in its own right because of its distinctive architecture.

Exploratorium

A hands-on science and learning museum that is particularly popular with families and curious travelers of all ages.

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

A major destination for modern and contemporary art lovers.

Walt Disney Family Museum

Located in the Presidio, this museum explores the life and creative legacy of Walt Disney.

You do not need to visit every museum during a short trip. Choose one based on your interests and build the rest of the day around the surrounding neighborhood or park.

Explore San Francisco's Best Neighborhoods



One of the best ways to experience San Francisco is to spend time beyond its major landmarks. The city is made up of distinct neighborhoods, each with its own history, architecture, food, and atmosphere.

Chinatown

Explore historic streets, restaurants, markets, and cultural landmarks in one of the city's most famous neighborhoods.

Mission District

Discover colorful murals, excellent food, local culture, and Dolores Park.

North Beach

Often associated with San Francisco's Italian heritage and Beat Generation history, North Beach is a great neighborhood for walking, dining, and exploring nearby landmarks.

Haight-Ashbury

Known for its connection to the counterculture movement of the 1960s, Haight-Ashbury offers historic character, independent shops, and easy access to Golden Gate Park.

Outdoor Things to Do in San Francisco

San Francisco is known for its famous landmarks, but some of its best experiences happen outdoors. From waterfront walks and coastal trails to large urban parks and scenic viewpoints, the city offers plenty of opportunities to enjoy the outdoors.

Walk Along the Embarcadero

The Embarcadero runs along San Francisco Bay and connects several popular attractions, including the Ferry Building, Pier 39, Fisherman's Wharf, and the waterfront.

It is a great area for a relaxed walk, especially if you want to combine sightseeing with food, shopping, and views of the Bay Bridge and Alcatraz Island.

Hike at Lands End

Lands End offers some of the most dramatic coastal scenery in San Francisco. The trails provide views of the Pacific Ocean, rugged cliffs, the Golden Gate Bridge, and historic landmarks such as the Sutro Baths.

It is an excellent choice for travelers who want to escape the busiest tourist areas without leaving the city.

Explore Crissy Field

Crissy Field is a popular waterfront area in the Presidio with open space, walking paths, and outstanding views of the Golden Gate Bridge.

The relatively flat paths make it a good option for families and travelers looking for an easy outdoor activity.

Visit Ocean Beach

Ocean Beach stretches along San Francisco's western edge and offers a completely different atmosphere from the busy downtown waterfront. It is a good place to walk, enjoy the ocean views, and experience the city's Pacific coastline.

Swimming conditions can be dangerous because of strong currents and cold water, so this is generally better for walking and sightseeing than casual swimming.

A Perfect 2-Day San Francisco Itinerary

Two days is enough time to see many of San Francisco's major attractions, although you will need to plan your route carefully. This itinerary combines the city's most iconic sights with a few neighborhood and local experiences.

Day 1: Classic San Francisco Landmarks

Start your morning with a visit to the **Golden Gate Bridge**. Walk part of the bridge or enjoy the views from the surrounding Presidio or Crissy Field.

Afterward, continue to **Fisherman's Wharf and Pier 39**. Watch the sea lions, explore the waterfront, and enjoy lunch in the area.

In the afternoon, visit **Alcatraz Island** if you have a reserved tour. If Alcatraz is not part of your plans, explore the waterfront or take a Bay cruise instead.

Finish the day with a ride on a historic **San Francisco cable car** and dinner in Chinatown, North Beach, or another nearby neighborhood.

Day 2: Parks, Culture, and Neighborhoods

Begin your day in **Golden Gate Park**. Choose one or two attractions, such as the California Academy of Sciences, Japanese Tea Garden, or de Young Museum.

In the afternoon, explore the **Mission District**, see the colorful murals, and relax at Dolores Park.

For the evening, visit a scenic location such as the **Palace of Fine Arts**, Lands End, or the waterfront to enjoy San Francisco's views.

Have More Than Two Days?

With three or four days, you can explore more neighborhoods at a relaxed pace and add attractions such as the Presidio, Coit Tower, Haight-Ashbury, the Exploratorium, or additional museums.

The biggest mistake many first-time visitors make is trying to see too much in one day. San Francisco's hills, traffic, and distances between neighborhoods can make an overly ambitious itinerary exhausting.

Best Time to Visit San Francisco



San Francisco can be visited throughout the year, but the best time depends on the type of experience you want.

Spring

Spring is a good time for sightseeing, parks, and outdoor activities. Temperatures are generally comfortable, although conditions can change quickly.

Summer

Summer is one of the busiest times for tourism, but it does not always bring the warmest weather. San Francisco is known for its summer fog, especially near the Golden Gate Bridge and the Pacific coast.

Bring layers, even during the warmer months.

Fall

Fall is often one of the best times to visit San Francisco. The weather can be warmer and clearer than during summer, making it a popular season for sightseeing and outdoor activities.

Winter

Winter usually brings fewer crowds and can offer lower travel costs, although rainfall is more likely. It can be a good time for museum visits, restaurants, and indoor attractions.

Overall, September and October are often excellent months for a first visit, while spring is also a good choice for travelers who want pleasant sightseeing weather.

Where to Stay in San Francisco



Where you stay in San Francisco can have a major impact on your trip, especially because attractions are spread across different neighborhoods and the city's hills can make getting around more time-consuming.

Union Square and Downtown are convenient for first-time visitors who want central access to shopping, restaurants, and public transportation. **Fisherman's Wharf** is a popular choice for families and travelers who want to stay close to waterfront attractions. **Nob Hill** offers a more upscale and quieter atmosphere, while neighborhoods such as **North Beach** and the **Mission District** provide more local character.

For most first-time visitors, staying in a central neighborhood with easy access to public transportation can make sightseeing much easier.

Travel Tips for Visiting San Francisco

A little planning can make your San Francisco trip much easier. The city's steep hills, changing weather, busy attractions, and expensive parking can surprise first-time visitors.

- **Dress in layers:** Temperatures can change significantly throughout the day, especially between the waterfront and inland neighborhoods.
 - **Book Alcatraz early:** Alcatraz is one of the city's most popular attractions, so secure your visit in advance.
 - **Wear comfortable walking shoes:** San Francisco is a walking city, but its hills can be challenging.
 - **Do not rely on driving everywhere:** Parking can be expensive and difficult to find. Public transportation, walking, and rideshares can be more convenient.
 - **Plan by neighborhood:** Group nearby attractions together rather than crossing the city several times in one day.
 - **Allow extra time for transportation:** Traffic, hills, and public transit schedules can make travel between neighborhoods slower than expected.
 - **Check the weather by neighborhood:** Conditions near the Golden Gate Bridge and coast can be much cooler and foggier than downtown.
 - **Protect your belongings:** Never leave valuables visible in a parked vehicle, and remain aware of your surroundings in crowded tourist areas.
 - **Balance major attractions with free experiences:** Some of the best views, parks, and neighborhoods in San Francisco cost nothing to explore.
 - **Avoid overplanning:** Leave time to walk, discover neighborhoods, and enjoy the city without rushing from one attraction to another.
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Conclusion

San Francisco offers an incredible variety of experiences, from world-famous landmarks like the Golden Gate Bridge and Alcatraz Island to colorful neighborhoods, scenic parks, waterfront walks, museums, and unforgettable food experiences.

The best way to enjoy the city is to combine its iconic attractions with time to explore at your own pace. Walk through a neighborhood, stop for local food, enjoy a scenic viewpoint, or spend an afternoon in one of the city's parks. These moments often become just as memorable as the major attractions.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the best things to do in San Francisco for first-time visitors?

For first-time visitors, the best things to do in San Francisco include seeing the Golden Gate Bridge, visiting Alcatraz Island, riding a cable car, exploring Fisherman's Wharf and Pier 39, and spending time in Golden Gate Park. Exploring Chinatown or another historic neighborhood also gives you a better sense of the city's culture.

What should I not miss on my first trip to San Francisco?

You should not miss the Golden Gate Bridge, Alcatraz Island, a historic cable car ride, and San Francisco's waterfront. If you have more time, visit Golden Gate Park and explore neighborhoods such as Chinatown, North Beach, or the Mission District.

Can I see San Francisco in two days?

Yes, you can see many of San Francisco's major attractions in two days. Focus on the Golden Gate Bridge, Alcatraz or a Bay cruise, Fisherman's Wharf, a cable car ride, Golden Gate Park, and one or two neighborhoods. Planning attractions by location will help you make the most of your time.

What are the best free things to do in San Francisco?

Some of the best free things to do in San Francisco include walking across part of the Golden Gate Bridge, exploring Golden Gate Park, seeing the Painted Ladies, visiting Chinatown, relaxing at Dolores Park, and hiking at Lands End. The city's waterfront and many scenic viewpoints are also free to enjoy.

What is the best month to visit San Francisco?

September and October are often considered among the best months to visit San Francisco because the weather can be warmer and clearer than during the foggiest

summer months. Spring is also a good option for sightseeing, parks, and outdoor activities.

How many days do you need in San Francisco?

Two to four days is a good amount of time for most visitors. Two days allows you to see the main landmarks, while three or four days gives you more time to explore neighborhoods, museums, parks, and local experiences without rushing.