Viator Insider’s Guide
San Francisco

The Top Attractions, Tips, & The Best Things to See and Do
San Francisco is one of the top cities in the world. The Golden Gate Bridge, the DeYoung Museum, and Coit Tower are the big draws, but spend some time walking the city’s steep and winding streets, exploring its diverse neighborhoods and mingling with friendly locals and you’ll see why so many travelers have left their hearts here. Teeming with ornate Victorian houses, innovative restaurants, and anything-goes festivals, San Francisco has lured travelers for decades—and turned many of them into longtime residents. Ask nearly any local how they came to live here and the answer is usually, “I came here years ago and couldn’t leave.” Don’t say we didn’t warn you.

In this guide we’ll show you the very best of what makes the City by the Bay so captivating, so you can travel like an insider in San Francisco!

Meet the Insiders

Bay Area born and raised, Katrina is Viator’s Destination Marketing Manager for San Francisco, a city she loves for its culture, innovation and incredible natural surroundings.

Jenna is a fifth generation local and has been writing about San Francisco for more than five years. She is Editor-at-Large at San Francisco magazine.
Best Way to See Alcatraz: Like a VIP

Alcatraz Island is one of San Francisco’s most captivating attractions: first it imprisoned the guilty, then it captured the intrigue of the innocent as a National Park. With as much international infamy as some of its former prisoners (like Al Capone), its tours frequently sell out.

Beat the crowds with a [VIP tour of Alcatraz](#), which puts you on the first ferry to Alcatraz for priority entrance with the award-winning audio tour. Once you’ve escaped safely, a city sightseeing tour whisks you through Chinatown, North Beach, and across the gleaming Golden Gate Bridge in a converted cable car. As a bonus, you’ll get a behind-the-scenes tour of Boudin Bakery for a peek at how they make the best sourdough outside of France.

“A great day! Starting so early meant that the experience of Alcatraz was enhanced by being in the first group on the island and understanding the isolation and beauty of this place.”

- Bill
**Best Ways to See the Golden Gate Bridge:** Over, Under, and Above

The Golden Gate Bridge is a prism from which each angle has a different appeal. Watch the ghostly fog creep in through the red cables from Fort Point or Vista Point, or walk or bike across its 1.7-mile (2.7 km) long span while stopping for postcard-worthy photo-ops.

From the bridge itself you can see sailboats and windsurfers cruising along the glistening waters, view Alcatraz and Angel Island, and watch massive cargo ships pass below. Admire the views from the comfort a bay cruise or the thrill of a helicopter or seaplane—whatever you choose, you can’t go wrong.

**Insider’s Tip**
Crossing the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco brings you to Marin County, where you’ll find the historic Cavallo Point Lodge and Sausalito. Book a tour to the Muir Woods National Monument, a short drive away.
Exclusive

Best Way to See Wine Country: In True Luxury Style

Skip the traffic and get an exclusive birds-eye-view of one of the world’s top wine regions on a VIP Napa tour by helicopter.

See unparalleled views of the Bay, Golden Gate Bridge and Alcatraz, then enjoy an intimate guided winery tour and tasting. When it’s time to go, just hop back in your helicopter for the quick and scenic flight back to San Francisco. If you have more time, stay a night or two and check out Napa Valley from another angle: in a hot air balloon, on a bike, or on the famous Napa Valley wine train.

Browse other VIP and exclusive tours of wine country

“If you’re going to Napa and you want to do something special and totally unique, this is the tour to do. The flight on the way back was spectacular and the whole experience was flawless.”

-Nathan
Only in San Francisco

Best Ways to Understand Modern San Francisco: Take a Tour of the Past

In the mid-1800s it was the pioneers seeking gold, in the 1950s it was the Beat Generation, and today it’s the quickly-growing tech industry: San Francisco’s ever-changing personalities are at the center of its allure and there are plenty of places to gain a deeper understanding of San Francisco’s dynamic history and promising future.

The Beat Museum and walking tour walks you through local landmarks essential to the rise of writers like Ginsberg and Kerouac; the Magic Bus takes you back to the Summer of Love; and historic saloons set the scene for the Gold Rush years along the Barbary Coast.

Insider’s Tip
Explore the largest Chinatown outside of Asia on charming Grant Street, with red lanterns swaying in the breeze above the bustling sidewalks, shops, restaurants and tea stores. Don’t miss the Golden Gate Fortune Cookie Factory, where you can watch the crisp golden cookies being made from scratch.
Best Foodie Experiences: Eating Like a Local

Crusty sourdough, briny oysters, creamy cheeses—San Francisco is a foodie wonderland of fresh local ingredients crafted into unique dishes using modern techniques. Start with a food tour of the Ferry Building, which houses dozens of artisanal food vendors and hosts a farmers’ market on Saturdays.

Sample thin-crust pizzas in North Beach, dim sum in Chinatown, and Mexican food in the trendy Mission neighborhood. You can even get a taste of wine country in the city with an urban winery tour.

"Taking a food tour is a must-do. The best part of it is that at the end of the tour, I was able to go back to all these places and shop away, knowing exactly where to go and what to buy." - Tillie W.

Browse all food tours in San Francisco
Outdoor Adventure

Best Nearby National Park Experience: Taking a Day Trip to Yosemite

One of the most appealing aspects of San Francisco is what lies just beyond its concrete sidewalks: nature. One of the world’s most stunning national parks, Yosemite can be visited on a day trip from the City by the Bay. Take a full-day tour of Yosemite’s majestic granite cliffs and iconic Half Dome, immerse yourself in the mists of Yosemite Falls, and meander scenic hiking trails that lead to jaw-dropping vistas.

Closer to San Francisco, cross the Golden Gate Bridge and head to Muir Woods National Monument, what John Muir himself declared “The best tree-lovers monument that could possibly be found in all the forests of the world.”

Insider’s Tip
Other day trips for nature-seekers include rafting down the scenic American River, whale watching just off the coast, and even urban hiking in San Francisco’s Presidio, a former military base that’s now part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area.
Best Cultural Experience: Touring the City’s Diverse Neighborhoods

From the designer boutiques of Hayes Valley to the urban art of the Mission district, San Francisco’s neighborhoods are as diverse as the people who inhabit them. Whatever it is you’re seeking, you’ll find it in one of San Francisco’s 36 distinct neighborhoods.

Stroll the historic Haight-Ashbury neighborhood to see beautiful Victorian architecture, eat your way through “Little Italy” in San Francisco’s North Beach neighborhood, spend an evening walking through vibrant Chinatown, or explore the upper crust borough of beautiful Nob Hill.

Insider’s Tip
See many of San Francisco’s iconic neighborhoods in one day by taking advantage of the Hop-On Hop-Off tour, a double-decker bus that whisks you through the city, letting you get off at nearly 20 designated stops.
Best Way to Work Up a Sweat: Climbing San Francisco’s Hills

With more than 50 hills, San Francisco is the second hilliest city in the world. And there’s no better way to see them than to tap into your inner mountain climber and conquer them. Scale the wooden steps of Telegraph Hill, through storybook gardens, until you’re rewarded by Coit Tower and 360-degree views of the city, or take an urban hiking tour that leads you through more verdant hills and off-the-hidden path areas such as quirky Seward Street Slides.

Insider’s Tip
For less active ways to sightsee, take a Hop-On Hop-Off bus tour or ride a cherry red cable car to the tops of Nob Hill and Russian Hill. If the lines are long at the beginning of the cable car line, just walk a few blocks to the next stop. Planning your ride to avoid the mid-day rush will also cut down on time in line.
The views from the tops of San Francisco’s many hills are undeniably beautiful (and worth the climb), but from the shimmering waters of the San Francisco Bay, you can see even more of the city’s stunning skyline.

Along with the – often fog-blanketed – city, you can view the belly of the Golden Gate Bridge and the Bay Bridge as you pass beneath them on a bridge-to-bridge tour, explore by land and water on an amphibious Duck tour, or sip champagne with a sunset view on a catamaran cruise. Zip past Alcatraz and Pier 39 on a fast-paced RocketBoat ride, or for an inspiring panoramic of the San Francisco skyline, relax on a ferry ride from San Francisco to Sausalito and watch the city slowly pan-out.
Best Active Sightseeing:
Biking

Burn off those sourdough bread calories wheeling along San Francisco’s stunning waterfront and across the Golden Gate Bridge on a bike tour. Or fuel your activity with some tasty beers on a small group craft brews and bike tour.

Best Place for Sourdough and Seafood: Fisherman’s Wharf

Head to Boudin Bakery for their famous San Francisco sourdough bread (best enjoyed as bread bowl filled with clam chowder), then wander the bustling Fisherman's Wharf district, check out the sea lions at Pier 39, and take in pristine views of the bay and Alcatraz.

Best Unusual Transportation:
Segways

Bypass the crowds and seamlessly glide through the streets of San Francisco on Segway tour. Balancing on the two-wheeled, battery-powered personal transport, explore the gardens of Golden Gate Park or try the advanced Segway down curvy Lombard Street.
Best Scenic Drive:
Monterey and Carmel

Along California’s scenic coastline on a relaxing day trip from San Francisco to the picturesque seaside towns of Monterey and Carmel. Stroll along Steinbeck’s Cannery Row or visit the ocean-side Monterey Aquarium.

Best Family Attraction:
California Academy of Sciences

Explore the fascinating natural history exhibits, aquarium, and planetarium at Cal Academy, one of San Francisco’s most popular institutions. On Thursday nights, the museum stays open late for adults-only with special exhibits, live music, and cocktails.

Best San Francisco Show:
Beach Blanket Babylon

An outlandish San Francisco tradition, and the city’s longest-running show, Beach Blanket Babylon, is a dazzling cabaret spectacle in the heart of North Beach.
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