

Weekend Flyaway: San Francisco

WEEKEND FLYAWAYS

San Francisco

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Each of my children got a solo visit this year with their grandmother in San Francisco. The rules were simple: they chose whatever they wanted to do, buy or eat for three days.

And what a place to do it! Boring old Grandma's house this is not.

Sara, age 12, chose shopping and the beach and ate nothing but Caesar salad all weekend. She watched the wild parrots of Telegraph Hill and the sea lions of Pier 39. After warning her that a day at a Northern California beach usually involves two sweatshirts and a Thermos of coffee, we awoke to a 90-degree Sunday. Sara rode to the beach in a Porsche with the top down. "I love my life," she said.

My history buff, 15-year-old Mark, loved the tales of escape we heard at Alcatraz Island. But food was the center of his weekend. Fresh crab, delicate Chinese dumplings and serious sweets vanished in front of him.

September and October may be the best months to visit – the wind abates, the fog burns off, the Stanford-Cal football rivalry heats up, the tourists go home. Fleet Week (Oct. 4-9) sends the U.S. Navy's Blue Angels screaming over The City -- the same weekend the Castro Street Fair Oct. 7 fills the neighborhood with leather boys and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence.

GET THERE

All the major airlines fly to San Francisco from Denver International Airport, most nonstop. Promotional round-trip fares of \$198 pop up frequently.

GET AROUND

San Francisco is not a car-friendly town. Narrow streets, steep slopes and the lack of freeways within the city conspire to slow down traffic. Street parking, if you can find it, is a huge hassle, while your hotel will charge \$30 to \$60 per night to garage your vehicle. If you must rent a car at SFO, the AirTrain's Blue Line takes you to an off-airport location housing all the car companies.

Public transit, private shuttles, taxis and your own trusty feet will serve you well in this compact and mostly walkable city. A reasonably fit Coloradan will have no problem hiking up and down San Francisco's hills, but anyone with mobility issues should check with a local before heading out – that single block between the Fairmont and Union Square, for example, would be a black diamond run back home.

For transit, traffic and bicycling information all over the Bay Area, visit 511.org. You'll find San Francisco-specific information at sfmuni.com, the Municipal Railway – a seven-day pass good on buses, streetcars, cable cars and the Muni Metro runs \$24.

STAY

THE '50s MOTEL: Seal Rock Inn, 545 Point Lobos Ave., 888-732-5762, sealrockinn.com. Perched above the Pacific and surrounded by the windblown eucalyptus and cypress trees of Sutro Heights Park, the Seal Rock Inn offers big family rooms with a queen and two twin beds, a courtyard pool with ping-pong table, and free underground parking. Walk to Golden Gate Park, Ocean Beach and the Palace of the Legion of Honor, take the Muni downtown or have a sunset cocktail at the Cliff House two blocks away. Rates start at \$95.

THE GRANDE DAME: Fairmont San Francisco, 950 Mason St., 866-540-4491, fairmont.com/sanfrancisco. At the peak of Nob Hill, the Fairmont reeks of a very San Francisco mixture of money and misbehavior. After a hundredth-anniversary renovation, guests can choose from large new tower rooms, charming turn-of-the-century rooms or outrageous corner suites complete with telescopes. For a nightcap, choose between the Fairmont's Tonga Room with its floating tiki band and indoor monsoons, or perfect martinis at the Top of the Mark across the street. Rates start at \$289.

CENTER OF THE ACTION: Westin San Francisco Market Street, 50 Third St., 888-627-8561, westinsf.com. Formerly the Argent, the Westin was just overhauled, spiffed up and Heavenly Bedded from top to bottom. Despite floor-to-ceiling windows, the rooms are quiet, service professional and location perfect for business or pleasure. Moscone Center and Yerba Buena Center are two blocks in one direction, Union Square two blocks in another, Chinatown and North Beach an easy walk, and you can grab a cab, streetcar or BART train just steps away. Rates start at \$159.

DINE

LUXE: Boulevard, 1 Mission St., 415-543-6084, boulevardrestaurant.com. Designer Pat Kuleto put industrial twists on a classic Parisian brasserie, and Chef Nancy Oakes hangs onto her Zagat ratings with lush flavor combinations like roast pork tenderloin with braised bacon, spinach, brown butter figs and almonds. You'll be looking for Henri Renoir and Jane Avril at the next table.

EVENING IN VENICE: Da Flora, 701 Columbus Ave., 415-981-4664. A triangular room decorated like a gypsy caravan, Da Flora features Venetian food, including sweet potato gnocchi in a pancetta cream sauce you'll want to scrape up with a spoon. Come here for the best focaccia in the city, rich with olive oil and crunchy with salt, plus desserts like plum-blueberry crisp with vanilla ice cream.

PIER PRESSURE: Eagle Café, Pier 39, 415-433-3689, eaglecafe.com. Thirty years ago, the Eagle was a waterfront dive plucked from its moorings and placed on Pier

39's second level, complete with intoxicated regulars and bleached-out Coke sign. To find white tablecloths and \$18 sandwiches at the Eagle was a shock, but the Dungeness crab salad on ciabatta is tasty, the fish-and-chips platter hearty, and every entrée is big enough for two. Come early for breakfast platters like corned beef hash and silver dollar pancakes.

AW SHUCKS: Hog Island Oyster Co., 1 Ferry Building, 415-391-7117, hogislandoysters.com. On a nice day, perch at a picnic table and suck down oysters plucked fresh from the waters of Tomales Bay – Rockefeller-style, with caper butter or straight off the shell. The sublime clam chowder is fragrant with thyme, bacon and vegetables. If you visit during a month with no “R” in it, try the grilled cheese sandwich made with Cowgirl Creamery fromage blanc, Mezzo Secco and cave-aged Gruyere.

OCEAN VIEW DINER: Louis' Restaurant, 902 Point Lobos Ave., 415-387-6330. Skip the overpriced food at the Cliff House down the street and enjoy basic American coffee shop chow: eggs, pancakes and burgers, served with a stunning coastal view. Hontalas family members have been serving food near Lands' End since 1937, making Louis' the place to stoke up before a beach walk or morning at the Golden Gate Park museums. Cash only.

BURRITO BONANZA: La Taqueria, 2889 Mission St., 415-285-7117. These days you can get an overstuffed burrito almost anywhere, but there's no better place to eat carnitas than at a picnic table in this Mission District institution. They don't bloat the burritos with rice – just meat and beans, maybe a little guacamole. Tell the person next to you to shove over, add some homemade salsa or bottled hot sauce to your carne asada, and chase it with a strawberry aqua fresca or a cold Tecate. Cash only.

CREPE ESCAPE: Ti Couz, 3108 16th St., 415-252-7373. Parking's a problem and there's almost always a wait, but it's worth it to enjoy honest-to-goodness Breton buckwheat crepes washed down with a cider, Chimay beer or glass of wine. On the savory side, try anything (chicken, scallops, caramelized onions) with the mushroom reduction; for a sweet finish, try banana with Nutella, or the poire belle Helene, a poached pear with chocolate, vanilla ice cream and chantilly. Named after Helen of Troy, it's the crepe that launched a thousand ships.

PIECES OF HEART: Ton Kiang, 5821 Geary Blvd., 415-752-4440, tonkiang.net. Skip Chinatown and head to the Richmond to eat Chinese food like a local. At lunch, the line snakes out the door for dim sum served from carts -- steamed dumplings with pea shoots, shrimp-stuffed eggplant or egg custard tarts. At dinner, you can order from the dim sum menu or try Hakka clay-pot dishes like chicken with salted fish and tofu.

SHOP

DESIGN FINDS: Eden & Eden, 560 Jackson St., 415-983-0490, edenandeden.com. Where the Financial District meets North Beach, you'll find this

boutique where the merchandise ranges from housewares to wearables and good design trumps all. Laser-cut lucite jewelry, crocheted beer cozies, vintage furniture,

PAN PACIFIC: Kinokuniya, 1581 Webster St., 415-567-7625, kinokuniya.com. Books in Japanese and English fill this Japantown stalwart, including more manga and anime stuff than you can shake a stick at, and beautiful Japanese cookbooks and craft books. Across the mall, the Kinokuniya stationery store is a pen-lover's dream where you'll find the Doraemon or Pizza Donut notebook you've been searching for. Check out the photo booths on the lower level, the bento box lunches and melon-flavored sodas at Nijiya Market (1737 Post St.) and Ichiban Kan (1625 Post St.), a Japanese dollar store loaded with treasures like dumpling molds and Hello Kitty slippers.

SHIRT ART: My Trick Pony, 742 14th St., 415-861-0595, mytrickpony.com. Come up with an idea and they'll put it on one shirt, just for you, or outfit your family, softball team or whole company. This Castro neighborhood store sells artist-designed shirts and holds fun events, including monthly movie nights where admission includes a souvenir shirt based on the film.

SEALED WITH A KISS: Lola of North Beach, 1415 Grant Ave., 415-781-1817, lolaofnorthbeach.com. Beautiful, funny, thoughtful, sexy and clever cards and other paper goods. Irresistible baby gifts include onesies that say "My Dad's a Geek" or "Photo With Baby, 25 Cents."

GIRLY FUN: Ooma, 1422 Grant Ave., 627-6963, ooma.net. The name of Kate Logan's store stands for "Objects of My Affection," fun and reasonably priced jewelry, dresses and separates from independent designers. Cross Audrey Hepburn with Trina Turk and you get the vibe.

ENJOY

JAILHOUSE ROCKS: Alcatraz Island, nps.gov/alca/index.htm. This tourist fave is definitely worth doing. Brand-new interpretive materials, including audio narration by former inmates and guards, make the cellblock tour better than ever. On a sunny day, the city beckons, just a quarter mile away; when the cold fog rolls in, you understand the desperation of the men imprisoned there. For the lowest price, book your boat trip (\$24.50 adults, \$15.25 children) through the National Park Service's concessionaire, alcatrazcruises.com. Other online vendors mark up tickets as much as 50 percent.

WATERFRONT PICKS: There's little to recommend the tourist scene at Fisherman's Wharf, but plenty to do elsewhere on the water. The sea lions on the west side of Pier 39 flop, fight and bellow for free. At Hyde Street Pier, the World War II liberty ship S.S. Jeremiah O'Brien, the square-rigger Balclutha and the lumber schooner C.A. Thayer are open for tours. Visit the Civil War battlements at Fort Point, directly under the southern anchorage of the Golden Gate Bridge, or climb the Sutro Bath ruins or the many World War II-era gun emplacements scattered along the coastline. Info on the many San Francisco sites in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area: nps.gov/goga.

FERRY FOOD: San Francisco Ferry Building, 415-693-0996, ferrybuildingmarketplace.com. Beautifully remodeled, the 1898 Ferry Building fills your need for all things gastronomical. Ogle the mushrooms at Far West Fungi, taste the olive oil at McEvoy Ranch and sniff the cheese at Cowgirl Creamery. Restaurant options range from upscale Vietnamese at The Slanted Door to onion rings and a malt at Taylor's Automatic Refresher. The Farmer's Market occupies the east plaza all year round, Tuesdays, 10 a.m.-2 p.m., and Saturdays, 8 a.m.-2 p.m. And yes, you can still catch ferries to Marin County or the East Bay.

PARK PLACE: Golden Gate Park, west of Stanyan between Fulton and Lincoln. San Franciscans are still arguing about the copper-clad design of the new M.H. DeYoung Museum, but the art inside remains above reproach. Wander the placid Japanese Tea Garden, then spend \$2.95 for a hot or cold tea and some rice crackers. Go rowboating, lawn bowling or kite-flying; rent a bike or archery gear, or just hang out on the grass. There's something in the 1,017-acre park for everyone – windmills, a new children's playground, the Conservatory of Flowers and a buffalo herd. The San Francisco Chronicle gives you the rundown at <http://www.sfgate.com/traveler/guide/sf/neighborhoods/ggpark.shtml>.

LIFE'S A BEACH: Ocean Beach, Sutro Heights Park south to Fort Funston along the Great Highway. You'll meet everyone and their dog along this long, long stretch of sand. Watch the hang gliders launch off the dunes near Fort Funston, have a burger and a microbrew at the Beach Chalet (where Golden Gate Park dead-ends at the ocean) or join a bonfire party after dark.

HIGH SEAS: Adventure Cat, Pier 39, Dock J, 777-1630, adventurecat.com. For a different view of the City by the Bay, a catamaran sail is hard to beat. For \$25 (\$15 for big kids, \$2 for little kids) , you sail by Alcatraz, Tiburon and Sausalito, under the Golden Gate to the open ocean with sea lions and pelicans for company. Sunset cruises cost more (\$45) but come with drinks and food.