

San Francisco City Guide

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Even the most eloquent words can sometimes fall short when describing the city of San Francisco. Although many have tried, it's difficult to pigeonhole a city that's elegant and filled with natural beauty, while at the same time being edgily cosmopolitan and a force for pushing the political envelope ever closer to the left.

San Francisco's raw beauty and seemingly countless man-made attractions draw people to it from all over the world. Many of those cultures have settled in the city and are now represented in its population. The city's neighborhoods reflect that diversity, and are destinations worth visiting in and of themselves.



But San Francisco's neighborhoods are more than tourist destinations; they're incredible places to live and work. Residents love the unique lifestyle the city affords. Outsiders, too, have a fascination with the city--and of late, with its healthcare workers. At least, that's the case on TV, where the San Francisco-based hospital dramas *MDs* and *Presidio Med* both made their debuts in the same television season. In real life, San Francisco is home to the facility that *U.S. News & World Report* called "the seventh best hospital in the United States" in the year 2002: University of California San Francisco Medical Center. It also plays host to California Pacific Medical Center, which is one of the largest private, non-profit, academic medical centers in California.

Something for everyone

There are approximately 45 distinct San Francisco neighborhoods, although the exact number depends on which map you consult. Neighborhoods are determined by a combination of factors: architecture styles, construction dates, the dictates of residents associations, official real estate descriptions, and which landmarks are present. If you're a San Franciscan, chances are you're particular about your neighborhood and want people to understand exactly where you reside.

From wildly bohemian to strictly upper crust--and everything in between--the old cliché "something for everyone" applies to the city's neighborhoods. That can also be said of San Francisco's weather. Although referred to as "the air-conditioned city" in honor of its breezes and generally cool weather, the city occasionally experiences temperatures that climb to over 100 degrees. The weather even can be neighborhood-specific, with differences from one area to another. For example, some sections west of Twin Peaks tend to be foggy throughout the summer, so residents who prefer lots of sunshine tend to stick to the east side of the city.

Political views also differentiate the neighborhoods. Although only loosely connected geographically on the east side of the city, the neighborhoods of Western Addition, Bernal Heights, Eureka Valley, the Haight, Potrero Hill, Bayview, and Downtown are considered liberal havens. Their brand of politics is usually considered ultra-liberal by the outside world. On the other end of the spectrum, Parkside, Sunset, Richmond District, West of Twin Peaks, Pacific Heights, Sea Cliff, Chinatown, and North Beach are considered quite conservative when compared with their left-leaning neighbors. The outside-of-San Francisco equivalent to this brand of politics probably would be labeled moderate to liberal. The rest of the city's neighborhoods, with a few exceptions, fall somewhere in between these two political perspectives.

For obvious reasons, many students live in close proximity to San Francisco State University and UC San Francisco, creating pockets of younger residents. And it's widely known that San Francisco is home to a large homosexual community. The Castro area has traditionally been favored by gays, but there is now a marked trend toward heterosexuals moving into the neighborhood. This trend, along with population shifts in other neighborhoods, has prompted city planners to label most of San Francisco "transitional." This means that neighborhood populations may change from decade to decade, keeping real estate investors and residents wondering what will happen next.

While age--and to a lesser extent, sexual preferences--carves some areas of the city into factions, race doesn't seem to be as strong a factor for division as it is in other cities. With the exception of Chinatown, Japantown, and a few others, neighborhoods are ethnically diverse. In fact, most San Franciscans pride themselves on their commitment to diversity.

World-class architecture

San Francisco is known the world over as the home of buildings constructed in what is loosely called the Victorian style. Actually, any structures built during Queen Victoria's reign from 1837 to 1901 are considered "Victorian," so many types of housing fall under this title. Some of the more prominent styles that appear in San Francisco's neighborhoods are Queen Anne, Greek Revival, Gothic Revival, and San Francisco Stick, the least ornate of the Victorian styles. Some of the finest examples of this collection of architectural styles can be found in Pacific Heights, Alamo Square, Cow Hollow, the Haight, Western Addition, and Fillmore.

Getting around

San Francisco city planners have done a great job of providing access to transportation. As a result, a car isn't a necessity in many neighborhoods. In fact, depending on where you are in the city, you might be better off without one. According to the San Francisco Metropolitan Transportation Commission, there are over 50 public and private transportation services in and around the Bay area. Among them, they offer a wide range of options, including cable cars, trains, buses, commuter vans, and ferries.

A few of these transportation services are famous for being uniquely San Franciscan. The most widely recognized are the city's historic cable cars, which also happen to be a bargain if you live and work along their routes. For a low monthly fee, you can buy a FastPass, which entitles you to unlimited rides on the three cable car routes. The FastPass becomes an even better bargain when you consider that it also allows you access to buses (as long as you stay within the confines of San Francisco) and Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART).

BART is San Francisco's other famous transportation gem. With Jules Verne-like vision, it was the people of the Bay Area--not government leaders--who first initiated discussion in 1946 that an innovative solution had to be found to address the city's mounting bridge traffic problems. During the 1950s, a plan was developed for this space-age underwater tube that connects San Francisco and Oakland via a high-speed electric train. Twenty or so years later, the first passengers boarded BART, making transportation history. Today BART can take you across the Bay in as little as 11 minutes, depending on your departure and destination stations.

The perfect destination

There's a reason so many superlatives have been written about San Francisco, however much they may fall short of conveying its limitless appeal. It's a town in which classic architecture, cool breezes, and unique transportation options are only a few of its many assets; a place where diversity is not only tolerated, it's celebrated. It's a perfect destination for healthcare workers, who can take advantage of the presence of a wide range of prestigious medical facilities, while enjoying the breathtaking views and a lifestyle that just can't be found anywhere else.