

SAN FRANCISCO

WORDS - HEIDI MORTLOCK

AS THE UNDISPUTED CULTURAL CAPITAL OF CALIFORNIA, SAN FRANCISCO'S APPEAL KNOWS NO BOUNDS, WRITES HEIDI MORTLOCK.

If one could describe San Francisco in a single word it would undoubtedly be 'eclectic'. With a bustling, skyscraper-laden downtown, an architecturally jaw-dropping bridge, and its very own Chinatown, it almost feels a little Sydney-esque. Though this sentiment fades when you find yourself on a cable car carrying you over the city's repetitious steep hills lined with Victorian-style houses reminiscent of Europe. It has a plethora of sub-cultures and a great arts scene, similar to that of Melbourne or New York, but the blue skies, palm trees and slow pace are testament to the fact you are without a doubt in California.

With a colourful background including the hippies of Haight-Ashbury (in 1967's Summer of Love) and the groundbreaking gay rights movement (à la Harvey Milk), San Francisco has long been crowned the epicentre of liberal activism in the United States. More recently, the city has also earned a new moniker as the dot-com hub of the world. The online boom of the 1990s saw vast numbers of start-up companies migrate to the area, and the subsequent social media frenzy has cemented their stay with the headquarters for Google, Facebook, LinkedIn and eBay all currently based in the San Francisco Bay Area. For this reason the city has recently experienced a gentrification like no other; with population highs and housing expansions, the city has inevitably given birth to a

string of trendy areas with fabulous hotels as well as places to drink, dine, and shop.

Home to the Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco is a hotspot for tourism and is always modestly buzzing. From a day trip to the former notorious prison on Alcatraz Island or a visit to Fisherman's Wharf, this metropolis has an abundance to offer travellers. On any day of the week Pier 39 in the Fisherman's Wharf district is teeming with people who have either come to try its world-famous variety of seafood, get swept-up in the lively atmosphere or see the profusion of boats, most of which belong to third generation fishermen, dating back to the days of the gold rush. Aside from lots of tourists, you can expect to find shops, restaurants, street performances, the aquarium, and a cluster of sea lions sprawled out on the docks.

Shopping in downtown San Francisco is world class. Big names like Macy's, Bloomingdale's and Nordstrom are all within a few minutes of each other and all your usual luxury boutiques including Giorgio Armani, Cartier and Gucci line the Union Square area like eyelashes. For lovely and relaxed specialty store shopping, Fillmore Street in Pacific Heights has at least a day's worth of great shops to visit as well as divine cafes, book stores and restaurants; it is unquestionably one of the most beautiful and popular streets in the entire city.



Another path that shouldn't be missed is Hayes Street in the newly gentrified Hayes Valley, which boasts a chain of unique boutiques, trendy cafes and sensational shopping for one's home. For those with a penchant for jazz, Hayes Village is also where you'll find the SFJAZZ Center, San Francisco's new jazz concert hall that opened just this year with an inaugural celebration emceed by Bill Cosby. The country's first freestanding building dedicated entirely to jazz, the centre seeks to expand the reach and strengthen respect for jazz musicians internationally.

San Francisco is also renowned for its eventful art scene. From the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), to the de Young Fine Arts Museum and the Cartoon Art Museum, there is something for everyone. The city also hosts an annual contemporary and modern art fair, artMRKT, which brings some of the globe's most celebrated artists and galleries to town. Over three days the fair attracts thousands of visitors keen to browse the art collections, join in on arts discussions and attend performances.

When it comes to the number of restaurants per capita in the whole of the United States, San Francisco is the leader of the pack. Not only is the city big on sustainability and supporting local produce, the food is sensational on both a high-end and more affordable scale. In terms of the cuisine itself, the selection is nothing short of diverse. If Chinese is your pleasure then head to the ever-buzzing Chinatown; for some authentic Mexican go to Mission District; or if you prefer Italian, visit North Beach's Little Italy – the traffic lights decorated with Italian flags are a pretty good indication you've arrived.

In a city celebrated for good food, you never have to travel far to find it. Gastronomy connoisseurs have made it even easier to stumble on the perfect bite with around 150 mobile food trucks including the Creme Brûlée Cart and The Taco Guys circling the city. Food trucks can be tracked through live online maps or at the Off the Grid weekly markets – your roaming mobile food extravaganza armed with free sides of music, craft and soul.

If you fancy a weekend of wine tasting and fine dining in the world famous Napa Valley (just one-hour away), you cannot go past The French Laundry restaurant, which has received a 3-star Michelin rating annually since 2007. Located in the small town of Yountville, this is possibly the most famous restaurant in the region with its unpretentious exterior and minimal yet charming decor. The nine-course degustation menu changes daily and each dish gives you a small taste that leaves you wanting more! The specialty 'oysters and pearls' is simply mouth-watering, as is the Peking duck served with bean purée, globe artichoke, bell peppers and lemon zest.



STATS

POPULATION 8.37m

SIZE 600.6km²

OFFICIAL LANGUAGE English

OFFICIAL CURRENCY American Dollar

LOCAL WONDER Little over an hour's drive from San Francisco you will find yourself in the Napa Valley, one of America's best wine regions. Over 400 wineries dot the area, ensuring a drop to suit every persuasion, but St. Clair Brown provides the most beautiful setting with its tasting room housed in an old greenhouse

NATIONAL HOLIDAY July 4

CLIMATE Don't be fooled into thinking San Fran enjoys California's famed good weather. Its summers are the coolest of the major U.S. cities, rarely surpassing 24 degrees, while the winter months are equally mild and moist

USA GDP \$14.99 trillion (2011)

USA WEALTH PER CAPITA \$42,693 (2012)



A 'dark treacle' of chocolate marquise, golden syrup and burnt honey ice cream makes for the perfect closing. Visitors should note, however, that bookings must be made a minimum of two months ahead of the calendar day, so getting your preferred date and time is akin to winning the green card lottery.

As for the San Francisco nightlife, there is a string of great nightclubs, bars, galleries and live music venues, each with its own unique voice and personality. For drinks in the afternoon sun head to The Tipsy Pig in Cow Hollow; it has a great outdoor patio and conjures the feeling of an old English pub. Also a winner is the sophisticated and buzzing Park Tavern in North Beach, where you can have a bite to eat should you so choose. For something a little more underground check out the dynamic Valencia Street in the Mission District, or for tequila aficionados, Mosto, which stocks more than 100 varieties. San Francisco is known for its legendary cocktails but the El Mosto (with tequila, agave nectar, and lime juice) takes this reputation to a new level. For dinner, try Lolinda, an Argentinian steakhouse that combines Latin American flavours with Californian sensibilities. An added bonus is the new rooftop bar, El Techo de Lolinda, which mixes up a mean caipiroska.

To sleep (although you will never want to), the Mandarin Oriental has mind-blowing views of some of San Francisco's most famous attractions. Located in the heart of the city, this stylish and modern hotel is a short walk to the city's Embarcadero, which has great restaurants, bars and local events. It's also just a short walk to Union Square or a cable car ride to Fisherman's Wharf, making it the perfect central base. Plus, if you fancy a little pampering, the hotel spa and wellness centre is a haven for respite, equipped with magnificent rainforest showers and a relaxing tea lounge.

All in all, there is something for everyone in San Francisco and if you are yet to visit this destination should be swiftly added to your bucket list. The pure scope of its neighbourhoods and the distinct pockets that define them ensures that this reasonably small city leaves one very large impact.



HIT LIST

SAUSALITO Just a wee ferry ride away (or short drive over the Golden Gate Bridge) lies Sausalito, a picturesque and quaint waterfront town that offers stunning views of San Francisco. The community is home to a collection of great boats, restaurants, cafes and bustling ice-cream shops and is certainly worth a visit

FOREIGN CINEMA This restaurant has harvested international acclaim as a quintessentially San Franciscan dining experience. It serves a Californian-Mediterranean inspired menu and while you enjoy your meal independent films are screened in the outdoor courtyard

BAY TO BREAKERS A footrace held every year in May, Bay to Breakers sees some 75,000 runners and walkers tackle the treacherous course, many of whom dress up in colourful and comical costumes

EMBARCADERO FARMER'S MARKET Held every weekend, Embarcadero Farmer's Market has the perfect backdrop – the water and the Oakland Bay Bridge. Brimming with beautiful flowers, organic produce, Blue Bottle Coffee and cheeses of the world, visitors can also expect to see some great street performers, musicians and artists while they peruse the stalls

