

San Francisco's hoods

A haven for free-thinkers, drag queens, hippies, beatniks and bohemians, the "City by the Bay" lives by its own rules and is utterly irresistible because of it.

by Cindy-Lou Dale
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➔ San Francisco is the one your mother warned you about. It's pierced, tattooed, laughs too loud, and drinks and smokes too much. While most cities seduce you with their subtle charms, San Francisco just knocks you on the head and drags you in. She's an ill-tempered wild child with a badass reputation. But love her you will.

THE GAME CHANGER

San Francisco is one of the most idiosyncratic cities in the US and has long been a center for game changers: from the hippies who launched "the Summer of Love" in Haight-Ashbury, to the residents of the Castro—champions of the gay rights movement, to the innovators of Silicon Valley.

The result: a city that combines the friendliness of Southern California with the intellect of New York. It's not for nothing that the Beat Generation's literature was centered around North Beach; San Francisco is a place where you can idly tell a soap seller the smell reminds you of your grandmother, and he'll launch into an anecdote about Proust.

Its formidable past has fostered a culture of acceptance. Different as each neighborhood is, this is one place where you can go anywhere, dressed anyway, and no one will give you a second glance, unless, of course, you're one of the 'naked men of the Castro,' who see nudity as a way of affirming their civil rights.

A PLACE TO FIND YOURSELF

The openness is instantly captivating. It has a laid-back atmosphere, great food and those astonishing views—but with a kooky personality. Slip right in with the boho crowd and explore its farm-to-fork fixtures, craft cocktail bars and independent boutiques where the outlandish and the quirky are all the rage.

"The Summer of Love" may no longer be in bloom, and the misfits are outnumbered by Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, but San Francisco is as captivating as ever. If Los Angeles attracts people hoping to be discovered, San Francisco has always drawn those wanting to discover themselves—amid giant redwoods, sublime headland and rows of candy-colored houses cresting the city's 43 hills.

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SHAPING SAN FRANCISCO TODAY

San Francisco is a collection of independent villages where you'll find enclaves of people fiercely crafting their own communities—but finding them requires looking further than Union Square and Fisherman's Wharf. There's the out-and-proud Castro, which has shaped so much of San Francisco's history, and whose streets are worth a wander whatever your orientation. There's Haight-Ashbury, still clinging to its hippy past. Even North Beach retains echoes of its Beat Generation heyday, but the

neighborhoods shaping today's San Francisco are ones that don't roll off the tongue so easily. Two decades ago, Hayes Valley was the worst area of the city. Today, it's the template for regeneration, with a thriving, yet passionately independent, shopping and restaurant scene.

The Mission has long gone from a working class, immigrant neighborhood to one of the city's nightlife hubs, but recently it's become a daytime destination too, with the emergence of the "Valencia Street Corridor." Meanwhile, SoMa, or South of Market, is the latest district to emerge—its phenomenal bars challenging the Mission for its nightlife crown.

Different as they are, San Francisco's villages are united by a common thread: the desire to be different. The streets



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teem with artisans and entrepreneurs blending chocolate, selling vintage, or crafting Prohibition-era cocktails. From shops to restaurants, keeping it local is the name of the game. It helps, of course, that San Francisco enjoys one of the most spectacular settings in the world. But there's a reason locals call it simply "the city"—everything revolves around these 43 hills. ♦

TEN TOP TIPS

1. Breakfast at Dynamo, the city's gourmet donut shop. (2760 24th St)
2. Take a stroll to admire the mural-splashed Mission District—it's a vibrant mash-up of Latino culture, indie shops, arty hangouts and some of the city's most innovative eateries. Focus on 24th St, Florida St, Alabama St and Balmy St.
3. While on Florida Street stop at Charles Chocolates—an artisanal chocolate maker acclaimed for its European-style truffles.
4. On Valencia St is Craftsman and Wolves, an upscale bakery that caters to the Mission's hipster crowd with a daring selection of exquisite patisserie.
5. The city's premier ice cream parlor, Humphry Slocombe (1790 Harrison St), stands out for its unusual flavors. Try their Balsamic Caramel.
6. To round things off, celebrate a fabulous day of discovery with cocoa-infused specialty cocktails at ABV (3174 16th St), a favorite local hangout in the Mission.
7. Join America's food truck revolution at SoMa StrEat Food Park (428 11th St), a former parking lot that's been converted into a food truck park.
8. The best way to cross the Golden Gate Bridge is to hike or bike across, then get a ferry back from Sausalito.
9. Try Peek—a website that picks the best things to do in San Francisco: www.peek.com.
10. In Chinatown, an affordable spot for steamed dumplings and buns is the Great Eastern Restaurant (649 Jackson St), which also happens to be President Obama's favorite when visiting.



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