

# Leave your heart in San Francisco

**Susan Morrell** explores the vertiginous hills, kitsch-filled wharfs, unbeatable Chinatown and old-world elegance of a city that feels like a familiar movie set

**I** thought it was the jetlag clouding my vision, but after a few sleepy blinks I realised the fog-bound vista spreading out before me really was the San Francisco of so many movies. With angular buildings poking out of wisps of clouds, the sprawling city was a hodge-podge of architecture, each cluster of buildings the remnants of a different era.

We had arrived late the previous night, after a lengthy journey made all the more unpleasant by storms, flight delays and soggy luggage. After we awoke at dawn to cool summer temperatures and grey skies, we hit the streets and witnessed a city coming to life.

We ambled down the steep incline of Nob Hill, at times picking up too much momentum and nearly somersaulting to the bottom. San Francisco was slowly waking up around us; classic American diners and family-run laundromats opening their doors on every corner.

So electric was the buzz that it could have come from the cable car lines that crisscrossed overhead. The iconic cable cars were already making their steady, clanking journeys up and down those steep hills, with hearty tourists hanging from the sides with total disregard for safety.

We filled our bellies with a greasy spoon breakfast at a no-frills cafe run by two elderly Asian gentlemen, the kind of place where basic decor is sacrificed in exchange for legendary omelettes and strong coffee at dirt-cheap prices (Golden Coffee, 901 Sutter Street).

Sufficiently fuelled for a busy day on foot, we rambled on through the shopping district of Union Square.

Window shopping and people-watching couldn't get much better, as trolleys blended into traffic jams, and local characters began their daily hustle of the tourists. Luckily, there seemed to be as many cafes with sidewalk seating as there were laundromats.

When the sun cracked through the fog and the day suddenly brightened, we doubled back towards Chinatown, clearly not taking any logical route. We were staying in a hotel perched atop the vertigo-inducing Nob Hill and knew that somewhere nearby was the recognisable Dragon Gate that marks the edge of the oldest Chinatown in North America, and the largest one outside Asia.

Browsing in Chinatown is a delight with all its cramped shops bursting with knick-knacks and curios, brightly painted shopfronts and assorted dumpling cafes and other tempting eateries. Encouraged by the warming temperatures, we continued on foot, braving the steep hills (they say there were seven originally, but it feels more like 70) and discovering a city that seems to change personality at each summit.

On posh Telegraph Hill, we marvelled at the candy-coloured townhouses and well-tended flower boxes, set in the shadow of the art deco Coit Tower. Slightly disoriented, we then found ourselves in North Beach, where the hipster bars and boutique shops of Grant Avenue collide with the neon glare of Broadway strip clubs.

Somewhere in the middle sits the legendary City Lights Bookstore (261 Columbus Avenue), spiritual home to the beat generation and former haunt of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg – and thankfully still a great book store. The Beat Museum is located nearby at 540 Broadway and offers literary walking tours.

North Beach is also known as San Francisco's Little Italy, so it's the place to head if you're hankering for a great meal shared over a checked tablecloth. Entertainment for afterwards is never hard to find. We enjoyed pints at the Grant & Green Saloon (1371 Grant Avenue) and passed several bars that had colourful crowds of dancing drinkers spilling out onto the sidewalk.

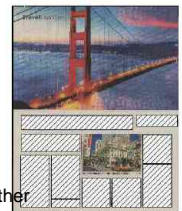
As with much of San Francisco, this area is full of oddities and contradictions – just ask the crowds at Kennedy's Irish Pub Curry House (1040 Columbus Avenue), which boldly combines Guinness with an Indian buffet and pinball machines.

Being first-timers to the city, we made a beeline for Fisherman's Wharf.

Anyone who tells you to stay away is just a cynic; the carnival atmosphere of this mega-boardwalk is a great place to spend the day, with its bustling fish restaurants, T-shirt shops, souvenirs and increasingly odd street performers.

We headed straight for Pier 39, the main attraction of the wharf with its carousel, restaurants, sweet shops and sea lion watching. For the best viewing of these playful animals, visit in the winter (sea lions migrate south to breed in summer). Lucky for us, a couple had lingered to work on their tans, so we snagged a few photos.

Seafood restaurants mix with burger joints, ice cream stands and donut shops, and we found the raucous kitsch and massive portions at Bubba Gump Shrimp Co to be calling us. Perhaps too cheesy for some, this lively spot (inspired by the Tom



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Hanks film) has a loud and family-friendly atmosphere. And it has the best views across the bay to Alcatraz too. From Pier 33, we caught a quick ferry to Alcatraz Island. Built in 1859, the fort on the island was opened as a federal prison in 1934 and shut down in 1963. An excellent audio tour brings visitors through the rusty cells that were once home to Al Capone and George 'Machine Gun' Kelly.

The prison had been used as a Civil War defence post and later a military prison; once abandoned it became the site of a Native American protest in 1969-1971.

Sturdy legs are once again required, as visitors typically spend 2-5 hours exploring Alcatraz and the surrounding outbuildings and gardens. The in-depth tour, whether paired with a visit to neighbouring Angel Island or not, is well worth the price (\$26-\$58, depending on package).

There was plenty more history to be soaked up near our hotel. Nob Hill, still one of the city's most elegant areas, was previously known as the home to the Big Four, a team of railroad barons who made their fortunes on the Central Pacific Line in the 19th century. Now surrounded by other five-star hotels, the Huntington Hotel was originally designed as a luxury apartment building and has been transformed without sacrificing its period details.

We revelled in the Huntington's signature mix of old and new, each guestroom retaining the original, roomy proportions of their former use. Antique doorknobs, art deco light fixtures and extravagant crown moulding add to the vintage feel. Some rooms look out to Huntington Park and the gothic Grace Cathedral across the street. Staying for a while in these plush surroundings, you easily feel transported to another era.

We packed a lot into our short stay, pushing our legs to their limits (though we opted to view the crazy hairpin turns of Lombard Street

from a safe distance) and soaking up a quick cross-section of the city's history.

With more time to spend, the city offers endless distractions and unique enclaves, each with its own charming personality: the extensive Golden Gate Park and that world-famous bridge to the north that leads to picturesque Sausalito; the gay-friendly Castro district; the for-

mer hippy hide-away of the Haight; the dives of the Tenderloin; and the hidden gems in the Mission.

In our few days, we barely scratched the surface of San Francisco's foggy exterior. No doubt when the mood strikes for a trip back to the days of gold rush tycoons and beat poets, or when the world simply starts to feel too flat, we know precisely where to go.

## Getting there

**How to get there:** Prices for flights with United, from Dublin to San Francisco via Newark, currently start at \$717.50 including tax from united.com.

\$395 per night plus tax; huntingtonhotel.com.

**Where to stay:** The Huntington Hotel, 1075 California Street; rates from \$235 per room plus tax. The hotel is offering a special holiday (Christmas) package that includes champagne, Christmas cookies and a take-home gift for

**What to do:** Take an Alcatraz Island tour, departs daily from Pier 33; visit the Cable Car Museum, 1201 Mason Street; eat in Chinatown; explore Golden Gate Park (at over 1,000 acres, it's larger than New York's Central Park).

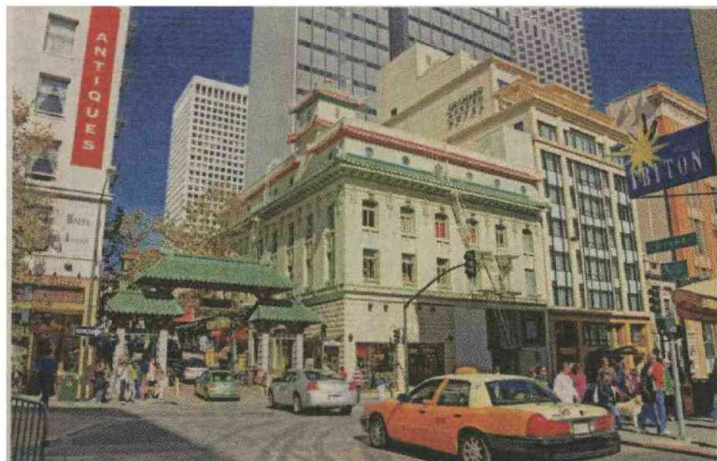
**Useful websites:**  
www.sanfrancisco.travel



Left: the Golden Gate Bridge at dawn; above: a cable car with Alcatraz Island in the background

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