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21 ways to have a perfect day in San Francisco

Discover immersive adventures on the Bay by using advice from a creative leader with an eye for extraordinary experiences.

4 MINUTE READ



BY CHRIS FLINK

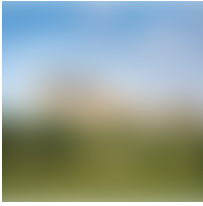
The City by the Bay is California's original bohemian gem—an ADVERTISEMENT unmatched, innovative ecosystem with a habit of pushing boundaries and upending perception. Once known for the hippie movement, San Francisco has become synonymous with inventive design and the intermingling of technology, science, and artistry. With a vibrant food scene, world-class museums, and the hypnotic tumbling of fog past the Golden Gate Bridge, it's a city that should be on every traveler's bucket list.

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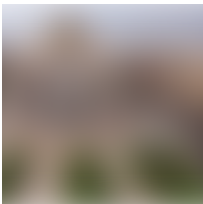
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Morning

To me, traveling is a special gift because it helps open your eyes in powerful ways. You observe, with fresh eyes, everything from how locals interact and dress to how they engage with the landscape. Visitors may also pay extra attention to natural phenomena like sounds, motion, and light—all of which are particularly inspiring in the early morning along San Francisco’s Embarcadero. If you’re an occasional jogger, an early trot as the sun comes up behind the Bay Bridge is an unforgettable way to wake up. At dawn, this bridge will be animated by the “Bay Lights”—light artist Leo Villareal’s imaginative installation of 25,000 white LEDs. Pro tip: Most of the piers are open to the public, so instead of running along the street, you can weave your path right along the water’s edge by following the outline of the piers.

After your invigorating run/walk, you can zip on one of the many app-enabled scooter or bike shares toward the [Ferry Building](#) where there are a few nice coffee shops that open early. Or, for something a bit less touristy, I'm a fan of [Jackson Place Cafe](#) on nearby Battery Street. Tucked into a charming little alley, this unexpected outdoor café is a calm place to pause, observe, and set your intention for the day.

Around 10 a.m., head to [Fort Mason Center](#). If it's a Sunday, the farmers' market is one of my favorite scenes, and you must enjoy the city's best breakfast burrito at the local, sustainable, and delicious [Green Grocer](#) tent. On any day of the week, contemplate a calming long-term mindset while sipping an artisan coffee or cocktail amidst mesmerizing mechanical prototypes at the at Long Now Foundation's [The Interval](#). For beers and schnitzel in a nicely designed environment with marina views, grab a snack or early lunch next door at [Radhaus](#). Stroll along the Marina District waterfront and tune into nature and the unique [Wave Organ](#); a wave-activated acoustic sculpture built on a nearby jetty (largely using material from a demolished cemetery) by two talented Exploratorium artists-in-residence in 1986. Pro tip: The Wave Organ sounds best at high tide.

Afternoon

Next, hail a ride to 1401 Howard St. to check out the [Carpenters Workshop Gallery](#), within [Saint Joseph's Arts Society](#). A renovated

landmark church, Saint Joseph’s has recently been recast as a source of inspiration for artists, patrons, and the public. Local design phenomenon Ken Fulk transformed this 1913 church—that had been abandoned since the Loma Prieta earthquake—to create a dramatic space and truly remarkable experience. The gallery’s “functional sculptures” are definitely worth a visit, and the venue itself will make your pupils dilate.



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Not too far from your next cluster of inspiring activities, set your course to the [Pirate Supply Store](#) in the Mission District, a whimsical front to an imaginative kids' writing program. Procure all the eye patches, wooden legs, and mermaid bait your crew can handle—all sales benefit writing and tutoring programs for under-resourced youth. Just a few steps away is [Paxton Gate](#), a place to discover countless oddities plucked from the garden and natural sciences. Continue on foot to check out the [Clarion Alley Street Art](#) before leaving the Mission District.

Before you get “hangry,” let’s talk lunch options. Pub fare at my regular haunt the [Old Ship Saloon](#) is a great way to taste the city’s history. It’s a storied tavern built atop a buried 1840s ship at what used to be San Francisco’s gold-rush shoreline. Or, if you’d rather ponder the future than the past, head to start-up restaurant [Creator](#) to have a robot build you a tasty burger. Not only is this feat of engineering oddly entertaining, it’s a delicious burger for just \$6.

At this point, a late-afternoon hike up [Telegraph Hill](#) via the steep Filbert Street steps to [Coit Tower](#) is a must. As you ascend through the surprising gardens, a keen observer may spot flocks of wild parrots or even an occasional urban coyote. If you time it well, the apex of Telegraph Hill is an ideal place to greet both of our beloved bridges as the sun slips down and the colors shift.

Evening

If it happens to be a Thursday night, definitely check out my magical workplace, the [Exploratorium](#), for our adult-only [After Dark](#) programming. Some playful exploration will awaken your curiosity and offer insights into scientific and social phenomena.

For another immersive experience, get tickets in advance to soak in the [Speakeasy SF](#), surrounding yourself with the energy of North Beach in the roaring 1920s. Dress your part and engage with flappers, floozies, gangsters, and bootleggers in this unique choose-your-own-adventure theatrical experience. Include a visit to nearby apothecary-themed boozery, [the Devil's Acre](#) for fiendishly good cocktails, handmade sodas and tinctures, and a hidden basement bar down the unmarked staircase at the back.

Whenever you're ready for dinner, I adore the jazzy San Francisco supper club [Bix](#). Spilling over with architectural ambiance and its own glimmers of gold rush history, it's my favorite place to sip a perfect manhattan and reflect on the experiences of the day.

Are you seeing San Francisco a little bit differently now? 🟡

[Chris Flink](#) is the CEO and executive director of the Exploratorium, a San Francisco non-profit renowned for its innovative museum of science, art, and human perception.