

One Short Day in San Francisco

Eight Hours in the City by the Bay
by Lauren Hauptman

San Francisco is not small: It holds 49 square miles, to be precise. So to enjoy the city in one short day, you'll need to limit yourself geographically. Our approximately 8-hour tour concentrates on the city's northeast corner and takes you to some of its best- and least-known treasures.

Adjust the tour as you like. We'll take you to eat, shop and stroll, recommending stores, museums, eateries and sites along the way. And in addition to the must-see things of which you've already heard, we'll send you to our favorite shops and stops that are primarily locally owned and offer slices of life you won't find elsewhere.

So set your alarm, put on some comfortable shoes, and start your one short day.

MORNING

9 am (8 am on Saturdays): The Ferry Building

(The Embarcadero at Market Street)

Our starting point is possibly the best thing to happen to San Francisco in the past decade: [The Ferry Building Marketplace](#). Completely remodeled and refurbished in 2003, this building at the base of Market Street is where Marin and Alameda residents catch their ferries back home, but, more importantly, it is the gourmet centerpiece of San Francisco. It's worth battling the throngs on Saturday mornings for the weekly **Ferry Building Farmer's Market**, at which local restaurants and bakeries set up stands from which they'll serve you breakfast. On other days, buy some pastry, bread and cheese from one of the inside shops, and sit outside to take in the lovely views. You must have coffee from **Blue Bottle Coffee Co.**, as this Bay Area "microroaster" is, by far, locals' favorite cup o' joe. And if it's open before you leave, stop by **Recchiuti Confections** to procure a few artisanal chocolates for later.

10 am: Union Square

(bordered by Stockton, Geary, Powell & Post Streets)

A short walk up Market Street, then right on Stockton Street will bring you to [Union Square](#). Despite a complete remodel not that long ago, the square itself is rather uninspiring. The stores around it, however, offer plenty of inspiration, with outposts of some of the world's top retailers calling it home. Highlights include San Francisco stalwart **Levi's**, which was founded here in 1853; the multilevel store at the northeast corner of the square is the only Levi's store on earth with a customization counter where you can have your jeans embellished with all manner of bling. And don't miss **Gump's** (135 Post St., between Kearny and Grant Streets), an only-in-San Francisco wonderland famous for its unusual, high-end home décor.

11 am: Yerba Buena

(bordered by 3rd, Howard, 4th and Market Streets)

Back across Market Street, between Third and Fourth Streets (straddling Mission Street), is what has been recently dubbed the Yerba Buena District. [Yerba Buena Gardens](#) are joined by the **Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial**, the **Metreon** shopping mall, a carousel, an interactive kids' museum (**Zeum**), the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#) (you'll want to stop in the museum store) and the popular **Contemporary Jewish Museum**. More than a decade in the making, this museum finally opened in 2008. Designed by architect Daniel Libeskind in a 1907 Willis Polk-designed power substation, it's a wonderful melding of old and new, with its blue steel addition (impressive both inside and out) jutting out the side and into the Four Seasons Hotel. The ever-changing exhibits, gift shop and café are winners, as well.

AFTERNOON

12:15 pm: Fisherman's Wharf/Ghirardelli Square

Hop on the Powell–Mason line **Cable Car** at Powell and Market Streets and head to **Fisherman’s Wharf**. When you get off at Bay Street, head toward the water, and turn left. Fisherman’s Wharf is San Francisco’s #1 tourist destination; a mecca of seafood, shopping, tours, street performers and Pier 39’s famous barking sea lions. On the west side of Fisherman’s Wharf you’ll find **Ghirardelli Square**, a one-time chocolate factory that is now home to unique shops and dining establishments.

Surely you are starving by now; dining choices abound. May we suggest:

1. For a quick bite on the go, sample San Francisco’s famous chowder in a sourdough bread bowl or fresh crab from any of the stands along the wharf.
2. For a unique experience, try a high-tea–style lunch at **Crown & Crumpet** in Ghirardelli Square (at Beach and Larkin Streets), where the owner, San Francisco native Amy Dean, will welcome you with her British accent.
3. For dessert, indulge in an ice cream sundae at **Ghirardelli Ice Cream and Chocolate Shop** or a cupcake from local fave **Kara’s Cupcakes**, both in Ghirardelli Square (which, by the way, is pronounced *Gear-ar-deli*).

2 pm: The Marina

A stroll northwest along the water will give you both beautiful views of the bay and a chance to walk off lunch. On your right, you’ll pass **Aquatic Park** and **National Maritime Historical Park**, then head up and around (just follow the water to your right) to **Fort Mason**. At the top of the hill in Upper Fort Mason, there is a quiet park on the left side that offers superb 360-degree views. Continue down and around, past Fort Mason and the **Marina Green**. On clear days, you’ll see Alcatraz, Marin County, the San Francisco Bay and the Golden Gate Bridge in the distance. Continue along Marina Boulevard to Baker Street, where, to your left, you’ll see the fabulous **Palace of Fine Arts**, left over from the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exhibition, and its duck-filled lake. The fascinating **Exploratorium**, “the museum of science, art and human perception,” also lives here.

2:45 pm: Crissy Field or Union Street

At this point, you’ll need to choose between nature and shopping. If you go for nature, continue your hike northwest through the Marina Gate into **Crissy Field**, part of the Golden Gate National Parks and the Presidio of San Francisco. Crissy Field was once an Army airfield and is now a favorite place to run, walk, fly a kite and play with puppies. The Golden Gate Promenade provides access to the restored tidal marsh and beaches. You may also hike to **Fort Point**, the only Civil War–era brick-and-mortar fort on the West Coast, which sits at the base of the **Golden Gate Bridge**. (Fort Point is located about two miles from the Marina Gate; be aware if you do this worthwhile trek, you may have to forgo much of the rest of our tour.) On the way, **The Warming Hut**, at the West Bluff of Crissy Field, is a great place to stop for a snack, peruse the bookstore and get additional visitor information, and the **National Marine Sanctuary Visitor Center** is worth a stop if you have time. *(If you choose the nature option, follow the path to Union Street and catch back up with us at any point along Polk Street or on Nob Hill.)*

If you choose shopping, **Union Street** is our destination. Turn left on Baker Street and head south to Union, where you will turn left again. Filled with wonderful shops and cafés, this strip in the Cow Hollow neighborhood is a local favorite. Don’t miss **Kozo Arts**, which has been handcrafting books and albums from gorgeous Japanese papers here for more than two decades (free exquisite wrapping, too!); **Mabel Chong**, with her unique, well-priced, handmade jewelry; **CocoaBella**, locally owned but featuring an impressive array of chocolates from small chocolatiers around the world; and **Cheengoo** (relocating here from Nob Hill in fall 2009), where you’ll be greeted by lovingly barky Abi, as well as gorgeous collars and accessories made by Abi’s mom — great gifts sure to get you extra licks from your best friend back home.

4 pm: Polk Street

Continue east on Union to **Polk Street**, which is populated almost exclusively by locally owned shops, including **Molte Cose** and **Belle Cose**, which offer an eclectic mix of clothing and décor, both old and new; **Spring**, one of many eco-friendly stores that have sprung up throughout the city; **Lemonaia** (just off Polk on Vallejo Street), with its well-edited selection of gifts; and **Studio** — the popular San Francisco gallery — a friendly and affordable place that lives up to its mantra, “local art by local artists.”

5 pm: Nob Hill

From Polk Street, take either the 1-California bus (on Clay Street) or the California Street cable car — or, gasp, walk — to the very top of **Nob Hill**, and get off at Jones Street. (Note: The view east from the corner of Jones and Clay Streets is a photographer’s dream.) Nob Hill was settled — and is still populated — by some of the city’s wealthiest residents. The views are amazing, and there is plenty to do up here. Visit stately [Grace Cathedral](#), which boasts a triptych altarpiece by artist Keith Haring and a weirdly mesmerizing labyrinth. The Huntington Hotel’s **Nob Hill Spa** (1075 California Street, between Taylor and Mason) is one of the most posh respites in the city, and the **Fairmont Hotel**’s lobby is worth a peek if only to marvel at its ostentatious ornateness.

EVENING

Now is the perfect time to take a little rest and plan your evening. Grab a bench in **Huntington Park** in front of Grace Cathedral, or climb back down Powell Street to Union Square, pull up a chair and make some decisions.

San Francisco is rumored to have more restaurants per capita than any other city in the United States, so whether you want to have an early bite to leave time for an evening activity or you want to linger for hours over your meal, your choices abound. For extensive and searchable listings, [click here](#) for Must See San Francisco’s general dining page. A couple favorites:

Fish & Farm (339 Taylor Street): We know of no restaurant that represents this city’s culinary expertise better than Fish & Farm, whose New American menu changes with seasonal availability. Leading the transition from “organic” to “sustainable” cuisine, Fish & Farm has exclusive relationships with local farms and is committed to locally sourced produce. Order any dish that features just-picked vegetables. Of course, the best burger this side of heaven and the fried chicken are always pleasing, as well. And don’t miss the cheesecake in a jar. Really.

Colibri (438 Geary Street): Well-known for its guacamole, handmade table-side to your specifications, and an endless list of top-shelf tequila, this Mexican Bistro offers authentic upscale Mexican food served in a dark wood setting. Colibri’s location is smack in the middle of the Theater District. You can’t go wrong with any of more than a dozen margaritas paired with anything smothered in the deep, rich house mole sauce.

If you would like a little culture fix, procure tickets to the city’s renowned symphony, opera or ballet, or enjoy a bit of theater or a visiting musical act. (Check out the [Tix Bay Area](#) discount-ticket booth on the west side of Union Square.

However you choose to spend your evening, know that you’ve packed a lot of pop into your One Short Day in the City by the Bay. You should be very proud.

Lauren Hauptman is a native New Yorker who is temporarily a long-term tourist in San Francisco. She has been a contributing editor and writer for WHERE San Francisco and Pulse Guides, and is an editorial and creative services consultant for numerous other publications and organizations (www.laurenhauptmanink.com). She recently wrote our One Short Day in Midtown (Manhattan).