

# You can always lean against San Francisco



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Travel

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San Francisco is one of those rare cities that are genuinely unique. No other city could possibly match its spectacular site, its crazy topography, its ever-changing climate, its quirky character, its thoroughly mixed-up architecture.

It occupies the tip of a 50-km-long hilly peninsula between the Pacific Ocean and San Francisco Bay. The 40-or-so hills within the city offer wonderful vistas out to sea and across the bay - but, boy, do they make hiking and biking difficult!

"When you get tired of walking around in San Francisco," some wag once said, "you can always lean against it."

When the Spanish established an outpost of New Spain (Mexico) in 1776 at one of the few relatively flat sites on the peninsula, they surely didn't dream that the surrounding hills, steep as they are, would ever become part of a major city.

But the outpost did become an important port city, starting with the Gold Rush of 1849 (three years after California was annexed by the U.S.) and continuing with the discovery of the Comstock silver lode in Nevada in 1859. Great fortunes were made, not so much from mining as from the sale of supplies to prospectors and the building of railways from the east.

#### ON NOB HILL

Outward signs of that wealth are still to be seen here and there, in such opulent 19th-century palaces as the Job Hill mansion that is now occupied by the ultra-exclusive men's club called the Pacific Union, and the slightly less noble homes of the rich who inhabit the Pacific Heights district.

From those heights, the old

families can look down upon the colorful (some might say seedy) district known internationally as Haight-Ashbury, after its main intersection. This working-class neighborhood was taken over in the 1960s by "hippies" and "flower children," whose total dedication to short-term hedonism ran counter to everything that the majority of San Franciscans stood for.

Make no mistake: In character and outlook, San Francisco is poles apart from that other California metropolis far to the south, Los Angeles. The Big Orange is laid back and spread out, long noted for its freaks, its freeways and its cults.

Its northern neighbor, sometimes called Fog City, has always been a business-oriented and (apart from such enclaves as Haight-Ashbury and North Beach) a dress-up kind of place, its Victorian-era gabled houses jammed close together as though for mutual security and warmth.

#### MILD YEAR-ROUND

Warmth is not something that Angelinos have to seek - the southern California sun takes care of that.

But San Francisco's northerly, sea-girt situation means that hot days are as rare as the foggy, cool mornings are common. On the whole, visitors find its climate pleasant - blessedly cool in the summer compared to most big cities of North America, relatively mild when those other cities are in the grip of winter, and ideal in spring and fall.

That bible of baseball, The Sporting News, has described 30-year-

old Candlestick Park, home of the 1989 National League West champion San Francisco Giants, as the worst of all major-league ballparks because of its cool, windy weather. In the 1961 all-star game there, a pitcher was blown off the mound by the cross-winds.

A proposal is afoot to build a new baseball stadium, as part of a redevelopment of a more sheltered section of San Francisco's 39 km of waterfront - a proposal that was possibly inspired by the enormous success of the area known generally as Fisherman's Wharf, which these days seems more concerned with reeling in shoppers and diners than fish.

#### ON THE WATERFRONT

Although the name, Fisherman's Wharf, properly belongs to a specific pier for crab-boats and trawlers, it is applied broadly to a highly popular and scenic area stretching from Ghirardelli Square on the north (a former chocolate factory, now an assemblage of up-market boutiques) to Pier 39 on the south.

Pier 39 is a 45-acre seaport village lined with entertainment facilities, restaurants and shops, open daily except U.S. Thanksgiving and Christmas Day. It's hard to believe that what was an abandoned cargo pier only a dozen years ago is now ranked (by Amusement Business magazine) as the third biggest amusement attraction in the U.S.

Estimated attendance last year was 10,465,000, exceeded only by the 25.1 million who visited Walt Disney World and Epcot Centre near Orlando, Fla., and the 13

million visitors to Disneyland in the Los Angeles area.

Unlike the two Disney amusement sites, Pier 39 charges no admission. Its attendance is estimated on the basis of exit polls and other interviews.

It is home to 10 restaurants and about 110 shops offering such unusual fare as gifts for the left-handed, music boxes (most of them playing a Tony Bennett song that you may have heard), hand-puppets and so on.

#### BLUE AND GOLD

Pier 39 also features an unusual two-deck carousel made in Italy, and it operates its own fleet of 400-passenger Blue and Gold sightseeing vessels that tour the Bay. For city sightseeing, Pier 39 sends out a rubber-tired fleet of replicas of San Francisco's famous cable cars.

As for the real, cable-operated cars, no visit to San Francisco would be complete without a trip on one of them. What they lack in comfort, they make up for in nostalgia.

Adult fare on the municipally owned cable cars is \$2 (exact fare required) but your ticket is good on any public-transit vehicle for two hours from time of purchase.

"Passports" for unlimited travel cost \$6 for one day, \$10 for three days, and are valid on the entire San Francisco Municipal Railway system ("Muni") including cable cars and buses.

But for the handicapped, and

those who are over 65, there is a little publicized discount fare of only 15 cents - one of the great public-transit bargains of the decade. This ticket, too, is valid for two hours, on any form of Muni transit.

San Francisco's cable cars have been officially designated as "national landmarks" (Americans love such proclamations), but don't regard them solely as museum-pieces - they are an invaluable aid to coping with the city's steep hills. Never risk walking downhill in leather-soled shoes that haven't been broken in; falls and broken bones ruin a vacation.

Air Canada recently announced discounts ranging from 59 to 72 per cent (off regular economy fares) for travel from Canada to the two largest California cities, between November and February inclusive.

That's the period designated by the California Office of Tourism as Maple Leaf Days, a Canadian-oriented travel promotion now in its fifth year.

The 72-per-cent discount applies to flights to San Francisco from Toronto (\$299) and Montreal or Ottawa (\$359). From Halifax or St. John's, it is \$563. From each of these departure points, the fare to Los Angeles is moderately higher.

However, fares to the two California cities are the same from Western Canadian points - for example, \$336 to either San Francisco or Los Angeles, from Regina or Saskatoon.

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