

A San Francisco Treat : Travel Feature

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

Travel to most cities in the world and the first thing that usually strikes you is how bustling they are. New York, London, Los Angeles -- all busy places with lots going on. So when you first get to San Francisco, it's a bit of a culture shock.

San Francisco was the city that thousands of people flocked to during the original "Summer of Love" in 1969 to "turn on, tune in and drop out" and perhaps that's why it maintains a laid back feel today. No-one seems to be in a hurry, except for the tourists, trying to cram in everything that there is to see here.

Apart from the laid-back way of life, the other thing you notice soon after arriving here is the geography of the area. Hills are everywhere here and although it's a compact city to walk around, the hills can be exhausting. What may only appear a couple of blocks away on the map can become a hike that leaves you gasping for breath if you end up having to head up one of the city's infamous hills.

For exactly that reason, it's a good idea to make Lombard Street one of your first stops. Head to the top of Lombard Street and then walk down the world's most crooked street. With a 27° incline, if you do decide to try and struggle your way up this road, then spare a thought for vehicles. The eight twists and turns had to be added in the 1920s to lessen the gradient, so that cars could use this street. These days, it's somewhere that any visitor with a car should make a beeline for. Nearly every car you see going down Lombard Street has passengers on board with cameras or video cameras in hand. Pedestrians can make their way down -- or up if you're feeling very active -- on the steps at the side of the street.

If you don't have a car to experience Lombard Street -- and with the sky high parking charges in San Francisco, that's no bad thing -- you can even turn your journey there into a tourist attraction, by using San Francisco's unique cable car system. First launched in 1873, the cable cars were developed to help deal with the amazingly steep hills in the city. Working on a system of moving cables that run under the ground, the real star on each car is the gripman. He's the one who starts and stops the cars, requiring a lot of strength and good reflexes. It's perhaps not surprising that only a third of candidates pass the training course.

These days there are three lines, two of which start off from the turntable at Powell and Market Streets, to the south of downtown, by

Union Square. Both take you up towards the Fisherman's Wharf area. The other line runs east to west through the Financial District and Chinatown. Both routes offer plenty of sights along the way, as well as helping to get visitors around the city and, for the bravest, there's added excitement from jumping on board, standing on the boards and clinging on to the poles on the outside of the car. It's something that everyone should experience on their trip to the city.

Tickets are \$3.00 each way for everyone over the age of five. Seniors and the disabled can get a discounted rate of \$1.00 between 9pm and 7am, but the more cost-effective way to get around is to buy a passport, which also allows you to ride on the bus and streetcar systems. They cost \$9.00 for one day, \$15.00 for three days and \$20.00 for seven days.

Perhaps the most popular cable car destination is Fishermen's Wharf. Although some people feel that this area has become too commercial, it still has a lot of charm. You'll never go hungry or be without a souvenir for long in this part of the city! The less commercial attractions include the sea lions that bask on the famous Pier 39, and San Francisco Maritime, a historic park run by the National Park Service, which includes a range of historic maritime vessels, a museum, and a fascinating visitor's center.

Walk a little further along and you'll come to Ghirardelli Square, a definite "must-do" for every chocolate lover. Although you won't find candy bars made here now, they're still for sale, are certainly worth sampling, and may prove to be an excellent source of souvenirs for everyone back home!

This area offers some superb views out to what may well be San Francisco's best known landmark -- the Golden Gate Bridge, although count yourself lucky if you can see it without the famous fog that often enshrouds it. The fog is formed where cold ocean water meets the heat of the Californian mainland. When the Golden Gate Bridge opened in 1937, it was the world's longest and tallest suspension structure and today around 40 million vehicles use its six lane highway each year. You don't need a car to cross the bridge, though. Pedestrians and cyclists can use the sidewalks during daylight hours, but bear in mind the bridge is 1.7 miles long, so be sure to wear comfortable shoes!

For many years, the Bay Bridge, which connects San Francisco to Oakland, has been the poor relation to the Golden Gate Bridge, but now that's all changing. At a cost of \$6.3 billion, a new bridge is being built and is due to be completed in 2012. In the meantime, traffic continues to use the old Bay Bridge, damaged in the 1989 earthquake, and it's a

fascinating drive, allowing you to see how construction is progressing.

Having now mentioned the dreaded "E" word, it's worth saying something about the prospect of earthquakes that constantly haunts this city. It's no doubt on the minds of many visitors to San Francisco, but there are plenty of words of advice as soon as you arrive. We found our TV in our hotel had an entire channel dedicated to earthquake preparation and much of it is common sense. If you're inside and in bed, then stay there. If not, keep away from windows, hanging objects or tall furniture and try and find cover under a strong table or desk or drop to the floor and cover your head and neck with your arms. If you're outside, then move to a clear area and try to not to stop under power lines, near trees or buildings. It's also worth keeping a set of clothes by your bed to be fully prepared -- and it helps to get you moving in the morning!

San Francisco really is unlike any other city in the world - easy going, but full of hills that really are hard work, a unique transport system that is one of the city's biggest tourist attractions, and it's definitely a place not to be missed on any tour of California.

(Next week, Cheryl will devote an entire article to Alcatraz. Will she and her husband Mark escape "The Rock"?)

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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