

BY THE BAY: San Francisco waterfront with the Ferry Building

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Hop, Skip and Jump

San Francisco's lively spirit makes it easy to combine work and play. BY WENDY O'DEA

It's a gorgeous night, and the San Francisco vibe is electric. Emerging from the underground BART station to the pulsing center of downtown, it feels as if we've "chunneled" our way directly from Los Angeles to San Francisco with little effort.

In reality, after finishing up business in L.A., my family and I hopped a short flight on Virgin America. After a quick 30-minute ride on Bay Area Rapid Transit to downtown's Powell and Market streets, we've arrived in the heart of the city. Ahead, the steep climb of Powell snakes north toward the Wharf, and to the right, Market Street stretches east to the Ferry Building and the shores of San Francisco Bay. It's obvious we're not in Kansas anymore or Los Angeles — or anywhere else, for that matter.

San Francisco is uniquely its own, perhaps unlike any other American city, barring New York. And it rarely disappoints. With a culture of art and innovation, a pioneering spirit and an avant-garde dining and social scene, the City by the Bay is just plain cool. I had not visited since my daughter was born, so I'm excited to discover what it has to

offer for families — especially for businesspeople with kids in tow.

On day one, we head straight to Ghirardelli Square. No doubt my 8-year-old expects it to be akin to Willy Wonka's chocolate factory. It's actually more of an upscale shopping square with boutiques, restaurants and more than one Ghirardelli Ice Cream Shop. We check out the digs for the new Chocolatier Program, where chocolatiers make small batches of their signature sweets on site rather than at the San Leandro factory. Then my kid downs a massive banana split. Who needs that Wonka, anyway?

Having lucked out with the weather (No rain! No fog!), we spend most of our free time wandering along San Francisco's stunning waterfront. There have been a number of changes in recent years with the opening of a new cruise terminal at Pier 27 and a new location for the popular Exploratorium at Pier 15.

After nearly 44 years inside The Presidio's Palace of Fine Arts, The Exploratorium moved into a location with three times as much space for the interactive exhibits intended to create a culture of learning and

nurture curiosity. Not only that, but the building was constructed with the goal of becoming the largest net-zero energy museum in the United States (if not the world) and received LEED Platinum certification by the U.S. Green Building Council. That's innovation.

We spend hours at The Exploratorium, and it still doesn't feel like enough time. My daughter and her friend flit from one exhibit to the next, trying everything, finally stopping at the Tinkering Studio, where college-bound engineers help them build scribble machines. "This is the best trip ever!" declares my little bombast.

After tearing ourselves away, we head south to the Ferry Building in the Embarcadero, San Francisco's financial district. The building continues to be a ferry transport hub connecting the neighborhoods around the Bay, but the real draw is the eclectic marketplace that spotlights local artisan goods committed to sustainability.

We peruse the multitude of shops and boutiques, taste-testing cheeses from Cowgirl Creamery, salami from Boccalone and gluten-free pastries from the Mariposa Baking Co. You'd never guess the pastries are sans gluten. We sit in the sun by the Bay Bridge scarfing them down in disbelief, then go back and buy more to go.

Another day we explore Fisherman's Wharf and Pier 39. The narrow, covered walkway of Fishermen's Grotto is packed with people, a cacophony of languages floating through the air. Both locals and tourists flock here for a quick, inexpensive lunch, selecting their fresh catch and waiting on the sidewalk for it to be prepared. A steel drum band starts playing a lively tune, and a middle-aged man coaxes his lady friend to dance.

At this point, our empty tummies demand attention, and we scoot around the corner to Scoma's — a San Francisco staple for nearly half a century. We don our plastic bibs and tear into a huge bowl of crab. Messy? Definitely. Worth it? Absolutely. We leave with fishy-smelling fingers and happy bellies.

Just offshore we spot the infamous Alcatraz Island. Well over a million people wander Alcatraz's cold, damp halls every year, imagining the lives

LODGING

FOUR SEASONS HOTEL SAN FRANCISCO

An ideal location near the Financial District, Moscone Convention Center and Union Square, the Four Seasons delivers its usual impeccable service, including a gift for young children upon arrival. *757 Market St.* \$\$\$\$\$

MYSTIC HOTEL BY CHARLIE PALMER

This boutique property is Chef Charlie Palmer's first foray as a hotelier. The building is old (small rooms and elevator, no air-conditioning) but charming and just one block off Union Square. *417 Stockton St.* \$\$\$\$

THE SCARLET HUNTINGTON HOTEL

A \$15 million remodel in 2014 incorporated eclectic, whimsical décor into this historic property on Nob Hill. The classic Big 4 restaurant remains stately and frequented by San Francisco's elite. *1075 California St.* \$\$\$\$

INFO TO GO

San Francisco International Airport lies 13 miles south of the city. BART trains to the city cost approximately \$9 per person, one way. Renting a car is not advised, given the hilly landscape and high overnight parking fees. Travel options within the city include cable cars, historic streetcars, buses, cabs and Uber. The San Francisco CityPASS (\$89) includes free transportation on Muni trolleys, buses and historic cable cars for seven consecutive days, as well as admission to a number of major attractions.

DINING

HAKKASAN

This high-end and trendy Chinese restaurant occupies a lush space on the second floor of an office building. Entrées are on the small side, desserts just the opposite. *1 Kearny St.* \$\$\$\$

PARALLEL 37

Foodies will love the impeccable market-driven tasting menus by Chef Michael Rotondo at The Ritz-Carlton's newly renovated space. *The Ritz-Carlton, San Francisco, 600 Stockton St.* \$\$\$\$\$

SCOMA'S

A mainstay at the Wharf, Scoma's is the place for fresh seafood and a view. *Pier 47 on Al Scoma Way* \$\$\$

ART OF THE CITY: *Palace of Fine Arts (left), and the famous Pier 39 crab sculpture (right)*

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HISTORIC SIGHTS: Alcatraz Island (top), Pier 39 Farmer's Market fruit stand (middle), and Fisherman's Wharf sign (bottom)

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of prisoners once held in the infamous penitentiary. The stories and images send shivers up the spine, as do the artistic works currently on display. The prison, now a federal park, serves as a gallery to seven art installations for the “@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz” exhibit. The works by the Chinese artist and dissident are on display in some areas of the prison not normally open to visitors. They explore human rights and freedom of expression, something clearly at odds with the experience of former Alcatraz prisoners and Weiwei himself, unable to leave China for more than three years since Chinese authorities confiscated his passport.

But on to happier, kid-friendly activities. We're off to Pier 39, the most visited attraction in San Francisco and home to shops, restaurants, a two-story carousel and the Aquarium of the Bay. But what attracts most people here is the mass of playful and boisterous sea lions piled atop the floats on the west side of the pier.

ONLINE EXTRA
Jump to gtravmag.com/sf to read about San Francisco's historic Presidio.

It's unclear why they came when they did, but a few sea lions appeared here soon after San Francisco's Loma Prieto earthquake in 1989. By January 1990 they apparently invited all their friends and family to join them, and droves of sea lions flopped onto the docks. After snapping a few photos from the viewing platforms, we reluctantly move on.

The walking is taking a toll and my quads are sore, having walked the city for days, including the steep incline of California Street from Market Street to Chinatown and Nob Hill. But expending so much energy pays off, and in San Francisco that comes by way of fine dining. One night we indulge in upscale Chinese food at Hakkasan and another we go with steaks at the French brasserie Gaspar. The ultimate reward, however, is the fixed-price tasting menu at The Ritz-Carlton's Parallel 37, where the 8-year-old orders seared octopus with a green shiso sorbet and then bravely orders the rabbit loin with sautéed stinging nettles and burgundy snails. Seriously. Whose kid is this?

We return to our little boutique hotel on our last night, prepared to get back to business the next day. As I'm ready to drop into bed, I notice a card on the desk with a quote from author Gene Fowler: “Every man should be allowed to love two cities, his own and San Francisco.” I hope that applies to every woman and child, too.

Alcatraz Island

nps.gov/alca

Hakkasan

hakkasan.com

CityPASS

citypass.com/sanfrancisco

Mystic Hotel by Charlie Palmer

mystichotel.com

The Exploratorium

exploratorium.edu

Parallel 37

parallel37sf.com

The Ferry Building

ferrybuildingmarketplace.com

Pier 39

pier39.com

Fisherman's Wharf

fishermanswharf.org

San Francisco Travel Association

sanfrancisco.travel

Four Seasons Hotel San Francisco

fourseasons.com

The Scarlet Huntington Hotel

thescarlethotels.com

Gaspar

gasparbrasserie.com

Scoma's

scomas.com