



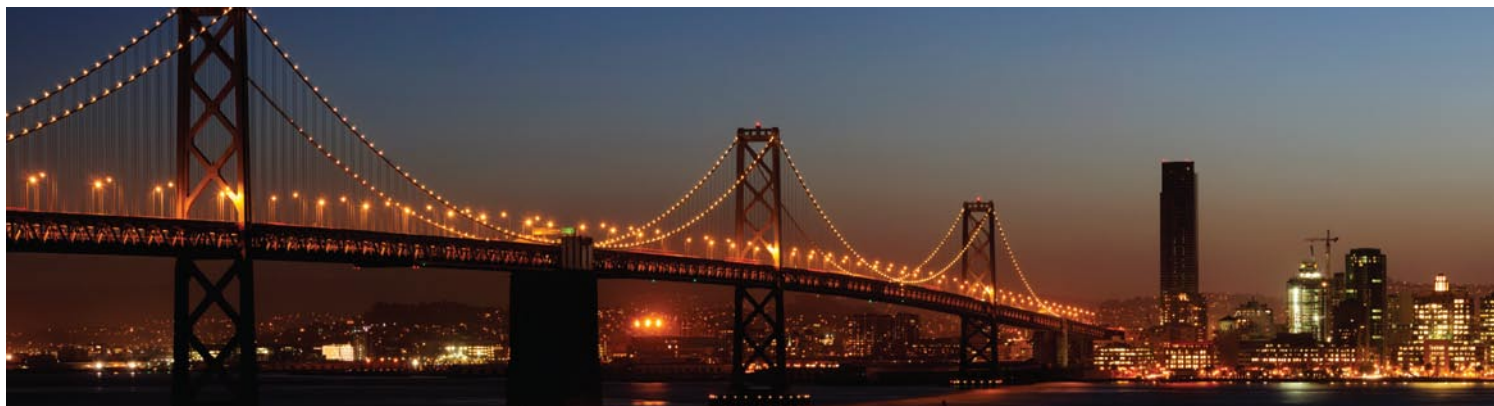
Freewheeling in San Francisco

It's a hilly city, indeed, but you may be surprised to find that it's one of the more accessible cities in the country. Take a rolling tour with a seasoned travel professional.



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By Bonnie Lewkowitz



QUICK CLICKS

San Francisco Visitor Information Center

(415) 391-2000

www.onlyinsanfrancisco.com

Access Northern California

(510) 524-2026

www.accessnca.com

The Presidio/Crissy Field Center

(415) 561-7690

www.presidio.gov

Alcatraz Cruises

(415) 981-7625

www.alcatrazcruises.com

San Francisco Sightseeing/Grayline

(888) 428-3937

www.sanfranciscosightseeing.com

On The Level Tours

(415) 921-1382

www.onthelevelsf.com

Gourmet Walks

(800) 979-3370

www.gourmetwalks.com

GoCar Tours

(800) 91-GoCar

www.gocarstours.com

It's famous for its scenic beauty, cultural attractions, diverse communities, and world-class cuisine, so it's no wonder that San Francisco has been voted the "Best U.S. City" 17 out of 18 years by *Condé Nast Traveler's* Readers' Choice Awards. Add to that world-class accessibility and you have a winning combination for a top-notch destination for people with disabilities.

Also known for its hilly streets, one might initially think San Francisco wouldn't be a good destination for wheelchair riders. But having traveled to more than 45 states I can attest to it being one of the more accessible cities, never mind being the most fun. Wheelchair riders can readily visit all the San Francisco landmarks, including the Golden Gate Bridge, Fisherman's Wharf, Alcatraz, Golden Gate Park, Union Square, North Beach, and even parts of Chinatown and Coit Tower. If you enjoy the outdoors there are countless things to do, such as sailing an

adaptive boat, watching a Giants baseball game in a classy stadium overlooking the bay, listening to a free concert in Yerba Buena Gardens, and wheeling for miles along the Embarcadero, a bayside promenade. Accessible tours by ferry, bus, or on foot are all possible. Visitors will find a welcoming, attentive attitude, no matter what their accessibility needs.

San Francisco is a walking person's town, so there's no need to rent a vehicle. In fact, due to the parking challenges, you're encouraged to use public transportation. BART, the underground transit system, Muni's bus and rail system, and taxicabs are all accessible. If you opt to get around solely by wheeling—which I encourage, at least in a motorized wheelchair or scooter—then a good first stop is to visit the San Francisco Visitor Information Center at Hallidie Plaza to pick up, for a nominal fee, a bike map and walking guide that shows street grades. You'll also find a wealth of other tourist information there.





Lodging Options Abound

Choosing the right hotel can play a pivotal role in the enjoyment of any vacation. This is even more the case when you have accessibility needs. Fortunately, options abound in San Francisco, where access is not the exception but the norm. Good access is found everywhere, from smaller boutique European style inns to large chain names, and even to the first certified “green” hotel. To find lodging that meets your particular access needs get a copy of the San Francisco Access Guide from the San Francisco Visitor Information Center, or download it at the Web address listed at the end of this article. It lists the access features of many hotels throughout the city, in addition to providing a wealth of other valuable visitor information. To easily reach many of the tourist attractions, a few good locations to stay are either in the Union Square or Fisherman’s Wharf areas. At Union Square you’re in the heart of the shopping and theater district. The square is actually a landmark park that was renovated in 2002 with granite terraces, a performing arts plaza, and a café where sipping a glass of California wine while people-watching offers a perfect end to a day of shopping. Take note that a few blocks in either direction of Union Square can get rather hilly. Fisherman’s Wharf is very flat and has easy access to boat tours and several waterfront marketplaces including Anchorage Square, The Cannery at Del Monte Square, Ghirardelli Square, and PIER 39. Restaurants serving fresh fish are plentiful here.

Living on the Edge

Traveling along the city’s perimeter you are guaranteed no hills, as well as being able to experience some of the best that San Francisco has to offer. You can easily





spend a full two days sight-seeing and tasting the foods that give San Francisco its reputation as a food lovers' paradise by following a five-mile stretch of Bay Trail from the Ferry Building, at the foot of Market Street, to Fort Point at the base of the Golden Gate Bridge.

Start the day at the renovated Ferry Building; not only a terminus for ferries to Sausalito, Tiburon, Angel Island, and the East Bay, but more renowned as an epicurean marketplace. Inside this Beaux Arts structure locals and tourists alike shop for fresh, local artisan foods and delicacies. It's a great place to pick up snacks for the day, especially if the Farmers Market—held every Tuesday and Saturday—is in full swing. Step out back to catch the ferries or to enjoy the picturesque bay-front set-



ting. See if you can spot the statue of Mahatma Gandhi.

Head north along the wide, paved, palm tree-lined pedestrian promenade known as the Embarcadero, or for a short distance lovingly known by locals as Herb Caen Way after the famed San Francisco columnist responsible for coining the term “beatnik.”

The port authority at Pier 1 has an exhibit showcasing the history of the bay front. It's free, and open during regular business hours. A short distance farther along, behind Pier 7, is a new public promenade and an 840 foot-long fishing and recreational pier. Excellent views of Alcatraz Island can be enjoyed here.

As you continue traveling you can learn about the waterfront's history from the tall black and white striped posts with photos and text that are scattered along this route. Views of Telegraph Hill—home to Coit Tower, a towering structure designed, as urban legend claims, to resemble a fireman's hose—comes into view on your left. One of the most popular attractions in San Francisco is Alcatraz Island. Ferries operated by Alcatraz Cruises leave from Pier 33, and reservations are essential, which can be made online (see “Quick Clicks” sidebar).

Most famous as the federal penitentiary that held such notorious prisoners as Al “Scarface” Capone and the “Birdman,” Robert Stroud, there is a wealth of other history to learn about on the island. On a clear day views of the San Francisco skyline are breathtaking. Alcatraz Cruises operates the ferries, which have been upgraded to include accessible restrooms. The steepness of the ramp on and off the boat depends on the tide, but trained

AIRPORT TRANSPORT

BART runs from the San Francisco International Airport to several stops along Market St. in downtown San Francisco. Supershuttle, at (415) 558-8500, and most taxi companies have accessible vans. Wheelchair Getaways rents ramped mini-vans, at (800) 642-2042.



staff are eager to assist. Coined “The Rock” because of its terrain, most of the island is only accessible to birds and wildlife. That said, access is good throughout the various facilities. The main highlight is the cell house that is reached via a quarter-mile switchback climb up a very steep hill. Fear not, an electric ramped shuttle called the Sustainable Easy Access Transport, or SEAT, waits dockside to transport people with mobility disabilities who can’t make the climb. A brand-new elevator enables

access to all floors of the cell house. An audio tour narrated by correctional officers and inmates who lived on the island enriches the overall experience. Plan two to three hours for the entire trip.

Back on land follow the Embarcadero to the more-crowded PIER 39, and on to Fisherman’s Wharf. PIER 39 is a two-level complex catering to tourists with more than 100 shops, 11 restaurants, a carousel, outdoor performances, and numerous attractions including a sea lion viewing area



Street-scene photography courtesy of the author, above.

FISHERMAN’S WHARF

- **The Sheraton features 16 accessible rooms, three roll-in showers, is newly renovated, has wireless Internet (room charge), a restaurant on premises, and beds are 28” high.**
(415) 362-5500
www.sheratonatthewharf.com
- **The Radisson has 13 accessible rooms, seven roll-in showers, and free wireless Internet.**
(415) 392-6700
www.radisson.com



HELPFUL HINTS

- Many museums offer one free day a month, so check their Web sites.
- Bring layered clothing year-round, summers can be cool.
- Half-price theater tickets are available at TIX Bay Area at Union Square.
- To discover trails in and around San Francisco, request a free copy of *A Wheelchair Rider's Guide: San Francisco and the Nearby Coast*.
(510) 286-1015
www.scc.ca.gov/publications/wheel.htm

at K Dock and the Aquarium of the Bay. Along Jefferson Street more shops line the streets, and crabs can be purchased fresh from the pot. The sidewalks narrow around Fisherman's Wharf, and it can be challenging in a wheelchair to navigate through the crowds. Step back in time when you step into the Musee Mechanique at Pier 45. Antique arcade machines and mechanical instruments liven the space with carnival sounds. Next take Jefferson Street west from Fisherman's Wharf to the San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park. Learn about Pacific Coast maritime history and other features of the park, including the Hyde Street Pier, at the National Park Service visitor center next to the Argonaut Hotel. Across the way, at the pier, you can board several of the historic vessels. If you're not yet exhausted you can continue uphill to Ghirardelli Square, located at North Point Street between Beach and Larkin Streets. Here you can indulge in a world-famous hot fudge sundae or sample California wines.

The remaining three miles of this tour along the bay's shore should be saved for another day. Hop on a bus or taxi to Fort Mason and continue along the shoreline through the Yacht Harbor, Crissy Field, and to its endpoint at Fort Point, where a 19th century fort stands on a promontory near the base of the Golden Gate Bridge. Only the first level of the fort is accessible, and doorways are 28"-30" wide, but you can get a virtual tour of the upper



floors by watching a video in the auditorium. Two side trips along this route are the Exploratorium—a hands-on museum of science, art, and human perception—or catch the PresidiGo, an accessible shuttle that tours the Presidio, a decommissioned military base transformed into a 1,500-acre public park. The shuttle leaves across from the Crissy Field Center at Halleck Street, where a beach wheelchair is also available.

Golden Gate Park

Another day trip in itself is Golden Gate Park. Covering more than 1,000 acres, it offers something for everyone. In addition to the miles of level walking paths there are two museums, a flower conservatory, several lakes, ball playing fields, and an arboretum with paths that are navigable in a motorized wheelchair or manual with upper body strength. The newly rebuilt de Young Museum, its architecture integrating with the natural landscape, showcases priceless collections of American art from the 17th through the 20th century, and art of the native Americas, Africa, and the Pacific. A floor-to-ceiling glass viewing tower, which is free to the public, provides an unsurpassed 360-degree view of the city. Set to reopen September 2008, the sustainably designed California Academy of Sciences—one of the largest natural history museums in the world—under one roof will house an aquarium, a planetarium, and a natural history museum. Unique to this structure will be the “living roof,” undulating green hill-tops blanketed with more than a million native plants.

A short distance away, on infamous Haight Street, the “Summer of Love” lives on mainly in stores offering vintage clothing, books, and records throughout this charming Victorian neighborhood.

Tours for a Variety of Tastes

If you’re the kind of traveler who prefers organized tours then you’ll be pleased with the variety and number of tours that are accessible. San Francisco Sight-seeing/Grayline offers tours around the city as well as to outlying regions such as the wine country, Monterey, and the redwoods. Forty-eight hours notice is required for the lift-equipped bus. At On the Level Tours, unique walking tours are specifically designed to be wheelchair accessible. You can either purchase self-guided pamphlets or sign up for a guided tour of such areas as Yerba Buena Gardens, Pacific Heights, or Cow Hollow, among others. Chocolate fanciers can take a three-hour walking tour to five chocolate shops with Gourmet Walks, complete with learning how the best chocolate is made as well as some local history. Billed as “The Cure for the Common Tour,” GoCar Tours offers GPS-guided touring cars. These three-wheeled, canary colored, two seat mini-cars are outfitted with hand controls.

Just as the 49ers traveled to San Francisco back in the mid 1800s in the hopes of discovering gold, nearly 200 years later you might find gold yourself here in “Everybody’s Favorite City.” ☞

UNION SQUARE

– **Handlery Union Square has 12 accessible rooms, five roll-in showers, mini refrigerators, wireless Internet (room charge), restaurant on premises, beds 23”-25” high.**

(415) 781-7800

www.handlery.com

– **Orchard Garden offers nine accessible rooms, one roll-in shower, and free wireless Internet. It is eco-friendly, with a restaurant on premises.**

(415) 399-9807

www.theorchardgardenhotel.com