

REVIEW:

# Chinatown

*The biggest Chinatown outside of China itself.*



Alexander Spatari/Getty

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## Tell me: What's this place all about?

San Francisco's Chinatown looms large in our collective imagination, and rightly so. Born during the California Gold Rush years, it dates back further than any other Chinese community in North America and, spanning 30 city blocks, it's also the largest neighborhood of its kind outside Asia. The neighborhood is lively, densely populated, and—with its shops and eateries, temples and alleyways—it draws millions of visitors.

### **What's it like being there?**

Shop windows arrayed with silk scarves, colorful kites, and gently-waving Lucky Cats; restaurants and markets hawking plantains, trussed roast ducks, and fresh-boiled lobsters; alleyways resplendent with murals of lion dancers, lotuses, and local legends (we're looking at you, Bruce Lee!)...Chinatown is a feast for the senses. Wandering its streets and alleyways, it's impossible not to feel wonder and delight.

### **Who comes here?**

You'll see a real cross-section of humanity here—families [eating dim sum](#), older Chinese men playing cards, influencers snapping selfies on Grant Avenue, and tourists hunting for souvenirs (prices are cheaper here than in Union Square and Pier 39). You'll hear much more Cantonese one block up, on Stockton Street, where grocery cart-toting locals browse dragon fruit, winter melons, and Chinese chestnuts at the produce stalls, peruse jars and bins of herbs at the apothecary, and generally go about their daily lives.

### **Did it meet expectations?**

Chinatown lives up to the hype and then some. The neighborhood unfolds slowly as you explore the nooks and crannies. Around every corner is something new and wondrous: down one side alley sits Tin How Temple, a quiet, incense-filled space where locals gather to pray; down another sits Golden Gate Fortune Cookie Factory, a small shop where workers rapid-fold fortune cookies beneath a soundtrack of whirring machinery. (And yes, they do sell fortune cookies here, in varieties ranging from chocolate-covered to X-rated.)

### **So then what, or who, do you think it's best for?**

Above all, the neighborhood is a shopper's paradise. Beyond the touristy spots slinging T-shirts and shot glasses, you'll find an embarrassment of riches, with stores that cater to every need—whether you're looking for finely-cut pieces of aquamarine and lapis lazuli, handcrafted silk kimonos inspired by traditional Chinese brushwork, or, you know, a holographic wall hanging of Chairman Mao. Come hungry, because Chinatown is rife with restaurants, from high-end spots ([Mister Jiu's](#), [China Live](#)) to classic dim sum parlors, where green-jacketed waiters serve shrimp siu mai and BBQ pork buns to tables full of eager patrons. Pastry shops dot the neighborhood, and you simply cannot leave without eating a flaky-

crusted egg tart...and a custard bun, a crunchy-sweet pastry filled with thick, rich custard. (Napoleon Super Bakery's iteration is superb.)