



here shouldn't be a park here. That's what Frederick Law Olmsted, the legendary designer behind New York's Central Park, told San Francisco bigwigs in 1865, when they first approached him about creating an

equally grand park in their city. The frontier metropolis, he said, was too windy and sandy to support even a tree.

And yet, here it is. Born 150 years ago, Golden Gate Park is a lovely surprise, 1,017 green acres in the heart of one of the densest cities in the United States. It's a place where San Franciscans can toss a Frisbee, row a boat, and joyously decompress. "The best urban park in America," says Phil Ginsburg, general manager of the San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department. Ginsburg's position might make him seem biased, but trust me, he's right. The park has been my family's beloved backyard for nearly 20 years. It is beyond compare.

Ignoring Olmsted, legislators approved the park's development on April 4, 1870. But the proposed site was wilderness, mostly giant sand dunes dotted with tangles of scrub oak. Luckily, two intrepid San Franciscans—park surveyor William Hammond Hall and horticulturist John McLaren—rose to the challenge. "They planted trees to block the wind," explains Ginsburg, discovering that "by mixing barley with sand, they could get things to grow." In two years, the duo had planted 22,000 hardy saplings. Today, the park is verdant with redwoods and rhododendrons, conifers and camellias.

On the map, Golden Gate Park is deceptively simple. Two linked rectangles stretch from the middle of the city to the Pacific. But it holds a parade of wonders: 10 lakes, two windmills, and a bison herd. Plus, on Sundays, an open-to-anybody swing dance class so hot it almost convinces you that you, too, could Lindy Hop to "Jump, Jive an' Wail."

It's a much-used park, with 25 million visitors a year, two major music festivals, and weekly band concerts. There are flower shows, lawn bowling contests, and dozens of races.

And for me? Golden Gate Park has sculpted my life. My wife and I chose our house because it lies next to the park, and the park helped us raise three dogs and one son. It has been our jogging path and our family Christmas photo backdrop. (One year, we dressed our then 4-year-old in a jaunty fisherman's outfit and sat him outside the Angler's Lodge.) Above all, the park is our congratulations when we're feeling good, and our solace when we're feeling bad.

After years of exploring those 1,017 acres, I've come to understand that, like all great urban parks, this one channels its city's soul. Like San Francisco, Golden Gate Park is radiant but sometimes moody, welcoming to everyone, and rich in ways no one could have dreamed of back in 1870. Don't believe me? Come to the park. I'll be there.

Treasures of Golden Gate Park

Your guide to San Francisco's big backyard



San Francisco Model Yacht Club

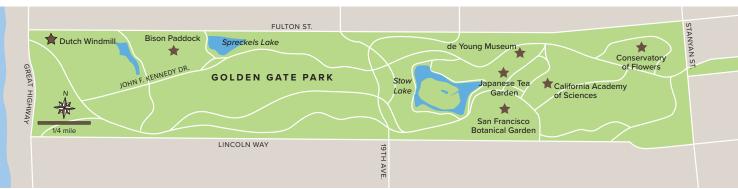
On Spreckels Lake floats the most whimsical fleet this side of *Stuart Little*: the exquisitely detailed, scale-model sailboats and powerboats of the San Francisco Model Yacht Club. Founded in 1898, the group still maintains a regular schedule of regattas. Show up most weekends and you'll see the colorful yachts, some of which took years to build, in maritime competition. If you're lucky, club headquarters will be open—it's that sweet little Spanish building just off the lake—and you can step inside to gaze at row upon row of beautiful model watercraft.



Dutch and Murphy Windmills

When you reach the park's west end and look up, you might feel as though you've stepped into the pages of a forgotten children's book. Above you stand two charming European-style sentries. In their heyday, these windmills pumped thousands of gallons of water through the park. The Dutch Windmill dates to 1902; in spring, the garden at its base offers a rainbow of tulips that is one of the park's most impressive flower displays. Just south, the Murphy Windmill (pictured) shines with a 64-ton copper dome, shipped here directly from the Netherlands.







CONSERVATORY OF FLOWERS

A stately, ornate tribute to the Victorian passion for growing tropical plants in non-tropical climes, this palatial white greenhouse is the oldest surviving building in Golden Gate Park, and perhaps the most beautiful. Opened in 1879, the Conservatory of Flowers is one of the last all-wood conservatories left in the United States; its 16,800 panes of glass let sunshine stream in to nurture some 2,000 species of plants, ranging from giant water lilies to delicate polka-dotted orchids, from the cascading tassel fern to the bright coral, extravagantly named Flame Thrower lipstick plant. Step outside and you'll see flower beds planted in rigorously regimented 19th-century fashion but glittering with one bit of 21st-century bling—French artist Jean-Michel Othoniel's *La Rose des Vents*, a golden sculpture that gleams as it swivels in the wind.

Picnic supplies

ARIZMENDI BAKERY

Just two blocks south of the park, this worker-owned co-op serves fresh-baked artisan pizzas—thin crusted and delicious—along with the best scones in the world. The corncherry is legendary.

HOOK FISH CO. This counter-service spot near the west end of the park traffics in poke and fish tacos. The ceviche is sublime.

TARTINE INNER
SUNSET A few doors
down from the park's
southern edge, an
airy new outpost of
the beloved Mission
District bakery turns
out breads, salads,
and soups. Want to
score one of the
morning buns? Come
early; they usually
sell out by noon.

WHOLE FOODS
MARKET The upscale
grocery store's
Stanyan Street
branch, near the
southeast corner of
the park, carries
bread, cheese,
wine, and anything
else you might
need for a picnic.



Land o' lakes

CHAIN OF LAKES

A curving drive connects three lakes— North, Middle, and South—that attract wading egrets and herons (and bird watchers). LLOYD LAKE This lake off JFK Drive is graced by Portals of the Past, a white marble portico rescued from a Nob Hill mansion after the 1906 earthquake.

SPRECKELS LAKE

You might spy a swimming turtle as you amble alongside this placid, cypressshaded lake, home of the San Francisco Model Yacht Club. **STOW LAKE** Skim across the park's largest body of water on a pedal boat and you'll see Huntington Falls cascading down the island of Strawberry Hill.

Sporty spots

ANGLER'S LODGE

Jade-green casting ponds sit beside this lodge, home of the Golden Gate Angling & Casting Club. Free lessons for novices take place every second Saturday.

ARCHERY RANGE

On the park's west side sit nine hay bales, but you'll need to bring your own equipment. Happily, it's rentable from the nearby San Francisco Archery shop.

BIKE PATHS Rent a bicycle to explore the park's paved trails. Cycling is especially lovely on Sundays, when some of the main roads are closed to cars.

BOWLING GREENS

The nation's oldest public lawn bowling club offers free beginners' classes twice a week on its impeccably manicured greens.

GOLDEN GATE PARK

Nestled amid stands of cypress trees, this nine-hole course is short but tricky. It's also quite popular, so call ahead to book a tee time.



SAN FRANCISCO BOTANICAL GARDEN

No part of the park proclaims its transformation from sandy wildland to Northern California Eden more eloquently than this enclave, which shelters 9,000 different plants from six continents. The park creators entertained the idea of a botanical garden in the 1870s, but that vision wasn't realized until 1940. Today, you could easily spend your whole visit here. Start at the California Native Plant Garden, sweet with sage, then stroll into the grove of coast redwoods nearby. From there, head for the Mesoamerican Cloud Forest, where tree daisies grow 20 to 40 feet high. Continue on to areas devoted to the plants of South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. Looking for a choice picnic spot? The sweeping Great Meadow can't be beat.



Bison Paddock

Locals and visitors alike gape outside the Bison Paddock. Here, a herd of regal ruminants graze in their own little prairie, sometimes moving majestically toward onlookers—like proud *Downton Abbey* aristocrats—before sidling off again. John McLaren imported the first pair in 1891, when the species seemed doomed to extinction. Now, with bison thriving nationwide, this small herd serves as a welcome reminder that environmental crises can have happy endings.



Beach Chalet

At the park's western edge, just across from the Pacific, sits a striking Spanish revival building. Initially home to a teahouse, the chalet was commandeered for defense during World War II. Later, it became a notorious biker bar. Restored in the 1990s, the local landmark gleams again. On the first floor, WPA murals evoke 1930s San Francisco. Upstairs, the restaurant serves an excellent burger with garlic aioli, a pleasing array of IPAs, and glorious ocean views.





GOLDEN GATE NEIGHBOR

The Presidio

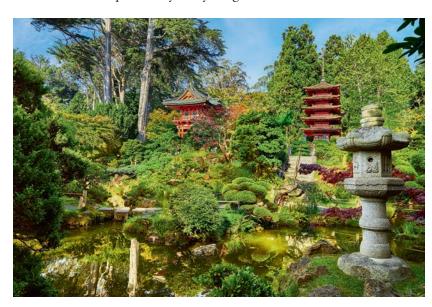
Seven blocks north of Golden Gate Park sits another wildland. Graced with cypress and eucalyptus trees, sandy beaches, and coastal wetlands, with the Golden Gate Bridge at its northern border, the Presidio is a kind of San Francisco in miniature. The park's history also mirrors the city's. The area—once the homeland of the Ohlone people—became a military installation in 1776, controlled first by Spain, then Mexico, then the United States. In 1994 the land changed hands again, becoming a 1,491-acre national park site.

At the visitor center, topographical models and touch screens provide a good overview of the area. Nearby, inside the Officers' Club, the Presidio Heritage Gallery presents thoughtful exhibits on the park's history. The adjacent archaeology lab displays American Indian shell beads excavated from the parade grounds and other artifacts unearthed here.

Modern-day diversions include Star Wars photo ops at Lucasfilm HQ, theme park-worthy displays at the Walt Disney Family Museum, and performances at the newly restored Presidio Theatre. Yet nature remains the park's blockbuster attraction. A quiet eucalyptus grove hides Wood Line, a piece by environmental artist Andy Goldsworthy, and this spring, seven acres along the wetland shoreline will be reclaimed as marshland. Dining options range from lively food truck picnics on the Main Parade Ground to haute Spanish delicacies from James Beard Award winner Traci Des Jardins at the Commissary. - GARRICK RAMIREZ

JAPANESE TEA GARDEN

Walk through the pagoda-style gate, and you enter a wonderland where footpaths meander beneath Japanese maples, a high bridge arcs over the koi pond, and, come spring, cherry trees explode in a brilliant shower of blossoms. Sip a cup of sencha in the teahouse and savor the landscape that has beguiled visitors since it opened as part of the 1894 California Midwinter International Exposition. The garden's grace is largely the product of one immigrant family, the Hagiwaras: Makoto designed the garden and tended it until his death in 1925; later, his daughter and son-in-law took over. During World War II, the family was forced to abandon their beloved garden when they were relocated to an internment camp. Today, a simple but moving monument—created by late, great San Francisco artist Ruth Asawa—honors the people who provided San Francisco with this profoundly lovely refuge.



Move to the music

GOLDEN GATE
PARK BAND Playing
strong since 1882,
this community band
performs some
Sundays in an ornate
band shell that looks
like it came straight
from ancient Greece.

HARDLY STRICTLY BLUEGRASS This free October shindig was financier F. Warren Hellman's gift to the city; Emmylou Harris and Robert Plant have been repeat performers.

LINDY IN THE PARK
Hepcats have been
swing dancing alongside JFK Drive for
20-plus years; if you'd
like to join the fun,
drop by for a free halfhour lesson Sundays
at noon.

OPERA IN THE PARK Each fall, San

Francisco Opera stars belt out pop standards—plus highlights from the upcoming season—in Robin Williams Meadow.

OUTSIDE LANDS
MUSIC AND ARTS
FESTIVAL The threeday August extravaganza draws all-star
headliners such as
Paul Simon, Janet
Jackson, and
Kendrick Lamar.



CALIFORNIA ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

What will wow you first is the living roof, a vivid green landscape with undulating hills, which—you'll note on closer inspection—are covered with native plants that draw bees, butterflies, and other local pollinators. In fact, every part of the California Academy of Sciences rewards this kind of focused attention. While ascending the circular walkway in the lush, four-story rain forest, for instance, sharp-eyed visitors might see some of the exhibit's well-camouflaged inhabitants, such as the spiny flower mantis, blue morpho butterflies, and lime-green Amazonian tree boa. Meanwhile, if you look intently into the luminous, starfishfilled Philippine coral reef exhibit, you might notice underwater formations shaped like feathers and leaves, cattails and cacti. But make no mistake: The focus here isn't just on dazzle. The academy's Institute for Biodiversity Science and Sustainability also gathers data, sponsoring research expeditions all over the planet. To get an in-depth look at the museum and its work—and a peek into the expansive behind-the-scenes collection—pony up for the VIP tour. •

PETER FISH also writes for the San Francisco Chronicle, Sunset, and Houzz.

Best blooms

DAHLIA DELL Come fall, huge yellow, pink, and orange dahlias bloom near the Conservatory of Flowers.

FUCHSIA DELL This quiet nook plays host to a swell of small, delicate pink-andpurple blooms each summer.

JAPANESE TEA
GARDEN At the end
of March, the cherry
trees around the
garden amaze visitors
with a glorious pinkand-white display.

JOHN MCLAREN MEMORIAL RHODODENDRON

PELL Showy pink, red, and white flowers blossom each spring in this hollow just off JFK Drive.

QUEEN
WILHELMINA
GARDEN This neatly
arrayed garden, at
the base of the Dutch
Windmill, is at its best
in early spring, when
hundreds of tulips
emerge in a riot
of color.