

# The Canny Traveller See



## Up for a steep, cheap treat

Passionate local guides make San Francisco's past come to life for **Sue White**.

**WHAT** Walking tours of San Francisco.

**WHERE** Across San Francisco city, covering both famous landmarks and sites well off the beaten track.

**HOW MUCH** Free, although donations are always appreciated.

**WHY GO** With attractions like the Golden Gate Bridge and Alcatraz, character-filled streets and fantastic transport (you've got to love those trams), San Francisco is a hit with most visitors. But tucked around every nook and cranny is a story and for the average tourist, simply strolling on your own won't convey the tales behind the city.

With a walking tour, however, the city's history comes alive.

Possibly the only thing that beats hearing a city's tales from a local is hearing them from a local who is so enraptured with their home town that they voluntarily head out to share their (often mind-blowingly detailed) knowledge. In this regard, San Francisco city guides are an inquisitive visitor's dream. The service was started more than 30 years ago by the San Francisco library, when the mayor asked the city's librarian to find volunteers to

run tours of City Hall. Today, the non-profit, mainly volunteer organisation has grown to a fully fledged operation boasting more than 200 enthusiastic and knowledgeable guides running dozens of different themed walks every week.

For those who love a good walking tour, it's almost too good to be true. Captivated by Little Italy? No problem – North Beach tours run both day and night. Want to learn how the other half live? The Nob Hill wander conveys the elegance of days gone by – when silver kings lived here in rococo-style palaces.

History buffs will appreciate that both the famous and infamous aspects of the city are well represented. Golden Gate Bridge tours and Fisherman's Wharf walks both run twice a week but the Bawdy & Naughty tour, which explores how prostitution arose in the Gold Rush days, tops them both. It's on offer three times a week.

The content is good and, let's face it, the price is right, although there is a slight risk of your San Francisco stay turning you into a walking tour groupie.

You could easily spend Monday

wandering the alleys and side streets of Chinatown; Tuesday ogling the mansions of Pacific Heights; Wednesday on a behind-the-scenes tour of the city's 150-year-old theatre scene; and so on. By the time Sunday rolls around (Haight-Ashbury, Castro or the downtown art-deco scene, plus a dozen other choices), you'll not only know the city better than most tourists ever will but you'll be sprouting fascinating San Francisco tidbits to anyone willing to listen. ("Here's where Billie Holiday was busted for opium," or "Did you know a cemetery once covered the civic centre?")

If there's one challenge that springs to mind walking San Francisco, it's the notoriously steep hills. Some trips are a giveaway that your legs are in for a workout: anyone taking the Russian Hill stairways tour should expect to work hard. Of course, there is a payoff, as this former haunt of writers, artists and bohemians is home to secret gardens and amazing views.

Aside from the obviously strenuous options, most tours cover only short distances and you will spend just as much

time standing and listening as you do actually moving around.

There are very few downsides, unless you're a child, who may be bored by the standing and listening component, or an adult who has decided to come along despite poor weather (tours run rain or shine).

Unless you're a group of eight or more, you don't need to book. Most tours last between 90 minutes and two hours.

**FREE STUFF** The tours themselves are always free, so the real find is having your own walking, talking specialist on hand.

Most guides will attempt to answer every question you throw at them on the area in question, no matter how obscure.

**ADDED BONUS** After you finish your guided experience, leave time to eat or drink in the region you've been visiting. San Francisco's food and cafe scene is great and your guide will likely know the best haunts, so you'll be able to make like a local and slide into the scene without too much difficulty.

**DETAILS** See [sfcityguides.org](http://sfcityguides.org). More than 70 tours a week. There's no need to book in advance.