

San Francisco with Kids

The kitchen window of this Airbnb flat overlooks Fisherman's Wharf and Alcatraz Island



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF ADAMS HANSEN STOCK PHOTOS

“Really? San Francisco with all of us?” I pay attention when our daughter makes trip suggestions. She’s an experienced traveler with great ideas, but this one sounded a little dicey — considering that *all of us* includes a first grader. “Won’t she be bored?” I queried.

What followed confirmed my long-held belief that today’s young moms are somewhat super-human. They can plan community events, work out, and assemble a room full of Ikea furniture — all before stopping for lunch. And, at least one of them knows how to organize a successful 3-generation trip to a not-particularly-kid-friendly place. Why did I even question this travel idea? Here’s what I learned:

Keep it age appropriate While my idea of a good time in SF is browsing among breakables at Biordi Art Imports, clearly that wasn’t going to happen on this trip. Instead, the agenda started with Aquarium of the Bay and included the Exploratorium and a boat cruise. The San Francisco City Pass — which includes these things, plus California Academy of Sciences, the Legion of Honor, de Young Museum, and a 7-day Muni & Cable Car Passport — made everything doable for one set price. (www.citypass.com/san-francisco)

Exploratorium? Think Reuben H. Fleet on steroids. Located at Pier 15 on the Embarcadero, this place is an interactive museum with more than

600 hands-on science experiments. “Granddad” showed off his degree in engineering by explaining an optical illusion, helping to set up chain reactions, and enabling little hands to build 3-dimensional structures. (www.exploratorium.edu)

I loved the aquarium, where we walked through 300 feet of clear plastic tunnels and watched as marine animals from San Francisco Bay swam all around us. It’s the view that SCUBA divers enjoy, but without getting wet (or being eaten). We also made friends with some North American river otters, were mesmerized by a swirling school of anchovies, and got to know a shovelnose guitarfish. However, the touch pools were the biggest hit. Here

we rolled up sleeves to feel sharks, rays, and sea stars. Close to the aquarium, we stopped to visit the 700 or so sea lions that make their home at Pier 39.

(www.aquariumofthebay.org)

Bring some wheels

Short legs have trouble keeping up in a big city, so savvy parents bring or rent a bike or toss a scooter or skateboard in the car. From the aquarium we walked — she scooted — all the way along the waterfront to the Ferry Building Marketplace.

With older kids, it's also possible to bike the Golden Gate Bridge, either with a group or self-guided. Another big treat is bike riding in Golden Gate Park on Sundays when the main entrance on JFK Drive is closed to car traffic.

Of course, cable cars provide a scenic way to see the city while seated. >>

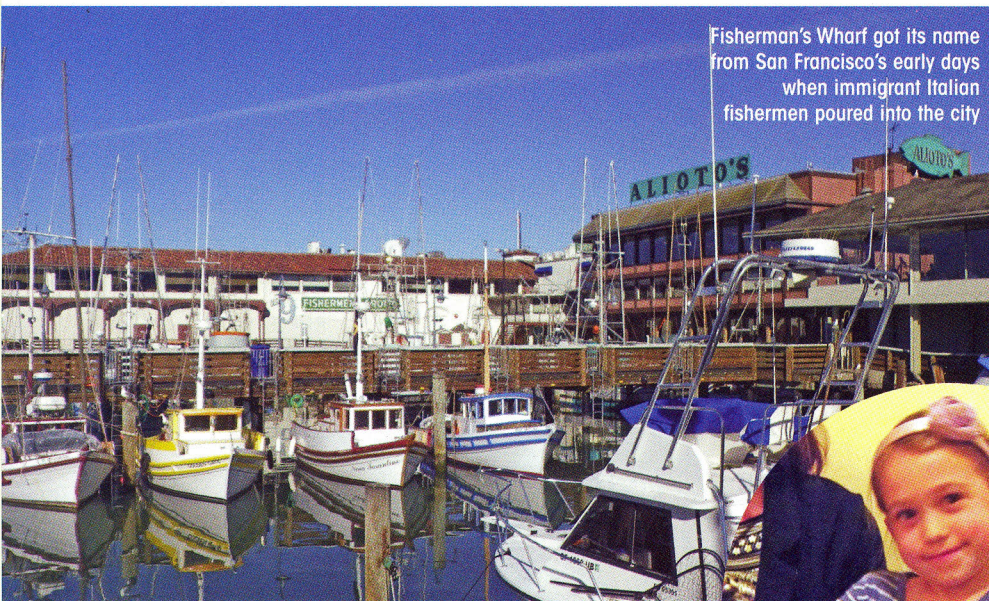
Since it opened in 1937, the Golden Gate Bridge has always been painted "International Orange"



The exhibits at the Exploratorium challenge kids to explore with their bodies as well as their minds

San Francisco is one of the most bike-friendly cities in the U.S. (#7)





Fisherman's Wharf got its name from San Francisco's early days when immigrant Italian fishermen poured into the city



Great pasta is part of SF's heritage



Exhibits at Aquarium of the Bay appeal to all ages

« It was a real boon that our City Passes provided free travel on these sentimental favorites, as well as unlimited use of all buses and the historic streetcars that go back and forth along The Embarcadero.

Focus on fun dining

To me, San Francisco means fine dining, but after a dinner at Greens ("Nirvana for foodies"), I realized we needed to focus on fun.

The next night we ate at super-casual Tommaso's in North Beach — "home to San Francisco's oldest and most beloved wood-fired pizza oven." This popular eatery's history starts in 1935 when it was opened by immigrants from Naples. It's been handed down through several families since then and, along the way, it became a San Francisco institution. Francis Ford Coppola became a regular and brought friends like Robert Duvall, Andy Garcia, and George Lucas.

Pick family-friendly lodging

Instead of multiple hotel rooms, we rented a 3-bedroom flat through Airbnb. This way, we all had our own space, but could hang out together in the living room and kitchen. "Our" place was right across the street from Ghirardelli Square and had a great bay view with Fisherman's Wharf in the foreground. From the kitchen window, Alcatraz Island felt close enough to reach out and touch. We could even step out onto a tiny balcony and hear the sea lions at Pier 39.

Thanks to her mom, the youngest among us could eat breakfast in her jammies — and had a ready supply of chocolate right across the street. San Francisco just doesn't get any sweeter than that. ELIZABETH HANSEN