

20 Things to Do With Kids in San Francisco

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Just take a quick flight from Seattle, and you'll be in the land of sourdough bread, sea lions and the always-impressive Golden Gate Bridge. With so many great free and low-cost activities and outdoor spaces to explore, San Francisco is a great vacation destination for families any time of the year.

I grew up in the Bay Area and have lived here with my kids for over a decade. We've spent tons of time exploring the parks, touristy areas and smaller neighborhoods, and these are our favorite things to do in the City by the Bay.

1. Visit Golden Gate Park. You could easily spend all day exploring [Golden Gate Park's](#) 1,000-plus acres, from checking out the bison to stopping to smell the tulips by the North Windmill. Enjoy a meal on the [Park Chalet's](#) outdoor patio and then rent a rowboat in Stow Lake. Don't leave without stopping by the [Koret Children's Quarter](#) for some playground time.

2. See the view from the top of the de Young Museum. Kids always get in free to the [de Young Museum](#), and the whole family can access the Hamon Educational Tower Observation Deck even without museum admission. You'll have a 360-degree view of the park, perfect for selfies.

3. Meet an albino crocodile at the California Academy of Sciences. Across the lawn from the de Young is this massive science center that is fun for kids of all ages (and parents, too!). It has an aquarium, a planetarium and a rainforest you can actually walk through. Head up to the living roof for a stunning view of the city and check out the 87-foot blue whale skeleton that will make you feel smaller than ever.



Hanging out in a rainforest at the California Academy of Sciences. Photo: Kate Loweth

4. Play antique games at the Musée Mécanique. A humble warehouse in Fisherman's Wharf is home to hundreds of vintage games and coin-operated mechanical musical instruments. You could easily spend a few hours here! When you've played all the games, head across the parking lot for soup in a sourdough bread bowl at the Boudin Bakery flagship store.

5. All aboard the cable cars. Riding the manually operated cable car system is a thrill, even as an adult. You can hop aboard at Fisherman's Wharf to make your way to Union Square with a stop to see windy Lombard Street in the middle. Keep in mind that the wait at Fisherman's Wharf can be quite long; you might have better luck riding the California Street line that runs from the Ferry Building west through Nob Hill.

6. Visit Pier 39. Yes, this is a tourist trap, but my kids love it so much I had to include it as a recommendation. We usually make a beeline to check out the sea lions on the dock, then stop for mini donuts at Trish's before heading to the musical staircase. The carousel is fun for the little ones, while older kids will enjoy getting lost in the mirror maze.



Pier 39 is popular with humans and sea lions! Photo: Kate Loweth

7. Go inside a World War II submarine. The USS Pampainto is docked right near the Musée Mécanique, and it is a fun spot for kids to visit. My youngest especially enjoyed the self-guided audio tour where you can walk through the submarine and learn how it was used during the war.

8. Get a hot fudge sundae at Ghirardelli. This spot has been a San Francisco landmark for decades and there's a reason it draws so many families visiting the city. You'll be transported back in time when you visit this nostalgic ice cream shop, complete with a chocolate wall. Visit any of the Ghirardelli chocolate shops at Ghirardelli Square and you can get a free chocolate to sample!

9. Tour Alcatraz. You'll want at least half a day to visit Alcatraz Island because it takes some time to get to the island on the ferry. Take the self-guided audio tour through the prison and listen to the stories of the inmates who lived there. Make sure you book your tour with the

official concessioner and not one of the other cruises that only circle the island.



Take a self-guided audio tour of Alcatraz. Photo: Kate Loweth

10. Visit the San Francisco Railway Museum and the Cable Car Museum. For kids who like learning about trains and how things work, visiting these two museums is a must. Both are free to enter and have interactive exhibits that the kids will love.

11. Make your way to the Randall Museum. Speaking of free museums, I'd be remiss to leave out the stellar Randall Museum located in the Corona Heights neighborhood. Train lovers will adore their massive model train exhibit in the basement, and kids will find tons of opportunities to learn about the flora and fauna of California, earthquakes and microscopic ocean creatures. Climb to the top of Corona Heights Park for some stunning views of the Bay.

12. Slide down the Seward Street slides. One of my kids' favorite things to do is bring some cardboard and visit the concrete Seward Street slides. Tucked in the Castro neighborhood, the slides are a flash of the past, and I'm always surprised they are still around. The cardboard helps you slide down the concrete, and there's usually some available at the slides if you don't have your own.



Grab some cardboard and slide! Photo: Kate Loweth

13. Find your fortune in Chinatown. San Francisco's vibrant Chinatown is a fun place to explore, with loads of trinket shops, dumpling spots and tea cafés. Our favorite stop is the [Golden Gate Fortune Cookie Factory](#), where you can see these iconic cookies being made by hand. Little ones will enjoy running off some energy at the [Willie "Woo-Woo" Wong Playground](#) with its colorful dragon climbing structure.

14. Get your STEM fix at the Exploratorium. Located on Pier 15 along San Francisco's waterfront is [this massive museum](#) that has interactive exhibits that will get everyone excited about science. You can jump into a tornado, learn about decomposition and even drink out of a toilet (a kid favorite, for sure).



Who could pass up the chance to drink from a toilet? Photo: Kate Loweth

15. Walk or bike across the Golden Gate Bridge. Yes, pedestrians are allowed on the Golden Gate Bridge! If the fog stays away, walking or biking across is a fun family activity, though it can get quite windy.

16. Listen to the ocean play music. One of the most unique spots we've visited in San Francisco is the Wave Organ, located in the Marina District. Jutting out into San Francisco Bay, the Wave Organ is a sculpture made of PVC pipes, concrete and salvaged material from a demolished cemetery (yes, you can find some gravestones there). When the ocean waves enter the pipes, they play musical notes.

17. Visit the Presidio Tunnel Tops. If you want stunning Golden Gate Bridge views and a fun spot for kids to run around, the Presidio Tunnel Tops is where you should go. There's a large nature play area for kids, plenty of space to spread out a picnic blanket and sweeping coastal views (when the fog isn't there).



A beautiful view and play area at the Presidio Tunnel Tops. Photo: courtesy of Presidio Trust

18. Find some greenery in the city. If you walk past Salesforce Transit Center, you might not know that just a few floors above you is a four-block living roof anyone can visit. You'll find 13 ecosystems here, from a redwood forest to a fog garden. Ride the gondola up from the street for the full experience.

19. Hike at Lands End. If you want even more coastal views and a bit of San Francisco history, make your way to Lands End. Kids will love scampering over the Sutro Bath ruins, hiking the Lands End Trail, and finding hidden beaches along the way.

20. Visit the animals at the zoo. Located right next to the Pacific Ocean, the San Francisco Zoo is a great spot for an afternoon visit with kids who want to learn about the conservation of different animal species. My kids could spend hours pretending to be meerkats at the meerkat and prairie dog enclosure and climbing the Banyan tree in the Elinor Friend Playground.