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San Francisco Revisited

Exploring new and classic attractions in the City by the Bay

By David Armstrong



San Francisco's iconic experiences include walking along Fisherman's Wharf and riding cable cars (right).

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"We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time." —T.S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*

I HAVE LONG BEEN INTRIGUED by these evocative words, even if I didn't fully under-

stand them. As time has passed, I've put my own interpretation on Eliot's words, recognizing how a deeper understanding of a familiar place can be triggered by travel—by departure and return.

For me, the place is San Francisco. I wasn't born there, but I came of age there,

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The Golden Gate Bridge has been a symbol of the city since its construction in the 1930s.

living and working in the city for more than two decades. My wife and I live to the south now—in Carmel-by-the-Sea. Still I return to San Francisco to see it through the fresh eyes of a traveler. Even as I happily sample the latest and greatest in this dynamic city, I revisit longtime favorites, from the cable cars to the waterfront to the Golden Gate.

I BEGIN MY LATEST EXPLORATION of the city with a ride on a rolling national historic landmark: a **cable car**. I hop on the metal-wheeled, manually operated conveyance at the foot of the Powell Street hill at Market Street, near the glittering shops of the **Westfield San Francisco Centre**.

Standing on the outside running board, I grip a pole for the rumbling 9-mile-per-hour climb on the Powell-Hyde Line. For me, this is more than a ride. It was on a cable car, ascending **Nob Hill** as I am now, that I first felt like a San Franciscan.

I don't know where my fellow cable car riders are going today, but the members of

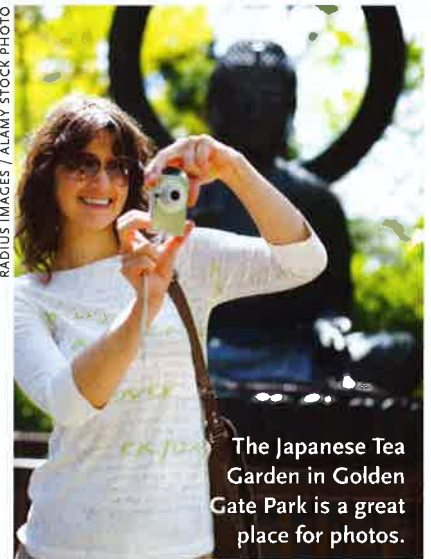
this diverse group, with their engaging variety of accents and attire, seem to have one thing in common: They are having a good time, listening to the rhythmic clang of the hand-rung cable car bell.

Our cable car rumbles past **Union Square** with its palm trees and outdoor cafe tables. We take in heart-catching views of San Francisco Bay at the crest of Nob Hill, near Sacramento Street, at the western edge of **Chinatown**. We slow where Powell intersects Washington and Jackson streets, and we gaze east between buildings toward San Francisco Bay.

The route turns left, and eventually right again as we enter the Russian Hill area, rolling past large, well-kept homes and 1920s apartment buildings. The cable car pauses near the top of **Lombard Street**, with its familiar line of vehicles inching down the hilly and famously curving stretch, as virtually everyone takes videos and snaps photos of the east-facing bay view.

After riding through town, I hop off the

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The Japanese Tea Garden in Golden Gate Park is a great place for photos.

cable car near its terminus at **Aquatic Park**, on the panoramic northern waterfront. To my left as I face the park is the handsome red-brick **Ghirardelli Square** and its popular shops installed in a historic former chocolate factory. Moored nearby is the giant 1886 square-rigger **Balclutha**. The ship

shares the **San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park** with attractions such as the 1939 Aquatic Park Bathhouse Building, a gleaming structure with the sleek lines of an ocean liner. This building now houses an engaging maritime museum.

At Beach and Hyde streets, I slip into the bustling, jovial **Buena Vista Cafe**, which introduced a now-famous Irish coffee recipe to America back in 1952. Here I sip a perfect mix of rich hot coffee and Irish whiskey, topped with thick whipped cream.

Then I set off on foot to **Fisherman's Wharf**.

I didn't visit Fisherman's Wharf often when I lived in San Francisco. But absence has changed the way I experience the city. Walking east along the wharf, on Jefferson Street, I pass a food-stall worker dressed in white who is stirring a steaming crab pot, a woman behind a shop counter handing heaping ice cream cones to a beaming boy and girl, a family tearing off pieces of hot sour-dough bread and tucking into bowls of clam chowder. These sights lift my spirit as the smell of salt spray refreshes my senses. I wonder at why I didn't appreciate the wharf more when I lived in town.

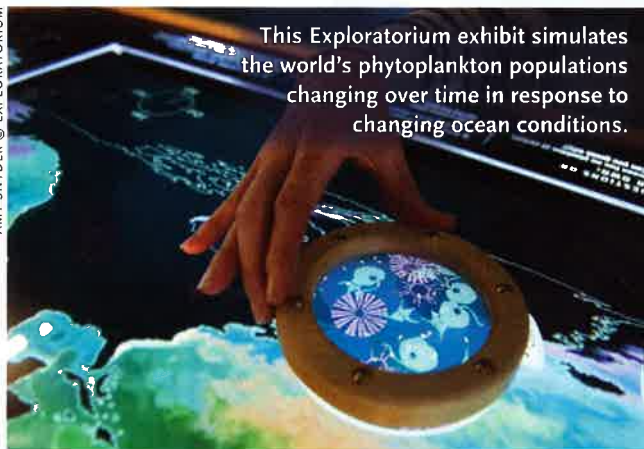
Continuing my bayside stroll, I veer right along **The Embarcadero**, heading toward downtown. Much has changed since I first walked this route. Driven by the arrival of high-tech and new-economy companies such as Twitter, Uber and Salesforce, the city is more of a young person's town than before, fused at the hip culturally and financially with Silicon Valley. Though San Francisco has always welcomed new developments and reinvention, the city is even more of a transformative place than I remember—with a fervid embrace of social and technological innovation.

That focus on innovation is exemplified by the **Exploratorium**, San Francisco's



The San Francisco Ferry Building, on The Embarcadero, hosts a popular outdoor farmers market and indoor marketplace.

JORGE GARRIDO / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



AMY SNYDER © EXPLORATORIUM

This Exploratorium exhibit simulates the world's phytoplankton populations changing over time in response to changing ocean conditions.

I'm excited by all the changes and new offerings in San Francisco. ... I also value old favorites.

long-established and recently relocated and revamped museum of "science, art and human perception," which opened its bayside location in 2013 with 330,000 square feet of space in total—indoor and outdoor. The Exploratorium (which was originally located across town at the Palace of Fine Arts) revolutionized the idea of what a museum can be when it opened as a

hands-on, interactive institution in 1969. Its inspiring model has since been emulated all over the world.

I pass part of an afternoon at the Exploratorium's new, expansive location on Pier 15. The bigger space has allowed the museum to add to its already famous range of interactive elements. It's an inviting, family-friendly place, with an ever-changing, free-admission outdoor area covering 1.5 acres and paid-admission areas that have more than 600 exhibits—including those in the recently installed "Science of Sharing" exhibition, which explores the dynamics of social interaction.

The Exploratorium is a bayside gem too multifaceted to absorb in a single visit. I enjoy the **Fisher Bay Observatory Gallery and Terrace**. Its "Visualizing the Bay" exhibit includes a 3-D, interactive map in a room looking out over the water—the map incorporates information about natural forces, such as tides and fogbanks, and human data, such as income distribution, that shape the Bay Area.

The City by the Bay will get another new/old museum this year, when the **San Francisco Museum of Modern Art** opens in May with its downtown home remodeled and expanded into a state-of-the-art facility. The new venue will feature a refreshed

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architecture, three times its previous exhibit space, new performance areas and the new Pritzker Center for Photography. At the opening, the museum plans its first showing of more than 600 works promised to the museum.

Other museums around the city are hosting major new exhibitions in 2016. These include the venues of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. The Legion of Honor is presenting the West Coast premiere of "Sublime Beauty: Raphael's 'Portrait of a Lady with a Unicorn,'" January 9–April 10, which features one of the Italian master's most intriguing works. This museum will also display "Pierre Bonnard: Painting Arcadia," February 6–May 15, an exclusive U.S. show of works from France that trace the artist's role in Modern Art's transition from Impressionism to abstraction. At the de Young Museum, within Golden Gate Park, the world-premiere exhibition "Oscar de la Renta," featuring more than 130 ensembles by the fashion icon, will run March 12–May 30.

I'M EXCITED BY ALL THE CHANGES and new offerings in San Francisco, and I'm curious about what will come next. That said, I also value old favorites such as Golden Gate Park.

When I was a resident San Franciscan, I lived on a Richmond District hill from which I could see the Pacific and hear the breakers late at night. Partly for that reason, I often gravitate toward the ocean-facing end of Golden Gate Park, near where the park ends at the north-south Great Highway, with Ocean Beach just beyond. Unlike many parts of town, the western reaches of Golden Gate Park haven't changed much lately. Two wooden windmills built just after 1900 still stand tall near the coast. The 1930s wall murals in the seaside Beach Chalet building still vividly depict San Francisco life during the Great Depression. Playful kids still operate radio-controlled toy boats on Spreckels Lake, inside the park.

San Francisco Attractions

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North Windmill at Golden Gate Park.

Joggers and walkers still orbit the simple dirt track around the park's Polo Fields, accompanied by the resonant baritone of foghorns marking the Golden Gate Strait a few miles north.

From the park's watery western edge, I take a spectacular drive north past the Cliff House restaurant, then northeast along El Camino Del Mar and eventually Lincoln Boulevard to the incomparable Golden Gate Bridge. Once there, I take a right at the last San Francisco exit before the toll plaza and park in the visitors' parking lot. I walk the fenced east sidewalk to the middle of the noble, burnt-orange span. I peer inland over San Francisco Bay toward Alcatraz Island and the East Bay hills, with the Pacific at my back. An in-line skater scoots by. Lovers link arms. A sea breeze rises as sleek, white sailboats tack on the bay.

Looking east at America from the Golden Gate Bridge, my exploration ceases, if just for a moment. I feel that I've arrived at a still point in a turning world. The moment passes, and I'm back in the bustling city. And, as it always has been, it's a very good place to be. ▲

A longtime San Francisco resident, David Armstrong now lives in Carmel-by-the-Sea.

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