

# How to Spend a Weekend North of San Francisco

(Courtesy of Jennifer Dayton, The Discoverer)

A visit to cosmopolitan San Francisco is a feast for the senses, full of the high-end cuisine and urban attractions that you'd expect from one of the country's most vibrant cities. But once you're done exploring the city, consider adding a few days to your itinerary and heading north of the Golden Gate Bridge, where you can slow your pace and savor the outdoors. Enjoy a gentle come-down from the constant stimulation and hectic pace of one of the most alluring cities in the world by transitioning to hiking, beach combing, gallery hopping, and wine tasting — all of which await you just a short drive north of the "City by the Bay."

## Leaving San Francisco



Photo by [Roland Wood](#)

Don't leave San Francisco without walking the span of the Golden Gate Bridge, even if you make it only to the middle and back. Park at the vista point lot at the north end of the bridge. From there you can head out on the pedestrian walk (separated from traffic) and enjoy picture-perfect views of San Francisco. Looking down at the water 220 feet below, you may be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of a pod of dolphins or a stately whale passing through. Gaze east into the Bay for a postcard shot of [Alcatraz Island](#). Be sure to wear a sweater or jacket, even in the warmest weather. The wind out on the span is ferocious and cold, but thrilling!

Next, for something a bit more urbane (and less windy), head to Sausalito's waterfront. Just a five-minute drive north from the Bridge, Sausalito offers galleries, shops, restaurants, and a lovely walk right along the water on Bridgeway Street. Be sure to visit the [Hanson of Sonoma Tasting Room](#) for a sip or two of artisanal organic spirits (flavored vodkas!), and wander in and out of any number of charming and eclectic art galleries also clustered along Bridgeway, the street fronting the water. If you favor lunch right on the bay, try [Fish](#), [Le Garage](#) (housed in a converted auto shop), [The Spinnaker](#), or [Scoma's of Sausalito](#). After lunch, stroll around the [Waldo Point Harbor](#) community of houseboats ranging from the funky and fantastical to the downright posh. Imagine what it might feel like to live literally on the water.

### **Go Redwood Spotting**



Photo by [Caleb Jones](#)

After Sausalito's chic streets and shops, head west to [Muir Woods](#). Here you can stop in the small visitor's center to learn about the ecosystem of the California redwood, and then choose any of the loop trails (1/2 hour to 1 ½ hours) that make up six miles of hiking through the forest and along Redwood Creek. Tall trees, ferns, mushrooms, and the earthy scent of lush woods will envelope you as you move deeper and deeper into the grove. A National Monument since 1908, this primeval forest will renew your spirit and calm your soul. The shop and café are also worth a quick stop. Be sure to [arrange parking or a shuttle and an entrance ticket](#) before your trip via, as access to this treasured grove is carefully controlled to maintain its pristine beauty.



## Visit Muir Beach



Photo by [Nick Lundgren](#)

Next, head just three miles down the road to [Muir Beach](#), a lovely cove popular with locals who enjoy, at the far northern end of the beach, a clothing-optional section. Always keep one eye on the surf, as there are no lifeguards at Muir Beach, and Northern California shorelines can produce sleeper waves. A wooden pedestrian bridge connects the parking area to the beach, which is a perfect spot for a swim, a picnic, a bit of kite-flying, or a stroll along the water's edge. In the autumn, wintering Monarch butterflies can sometimes be seen decorating the Monterey Pines in their small grove at Muir Beach.

## Take a Hike



Photo by [Joshua Sortino](#)

If a more robust hike is your cup of tea, try [Mt. Tamalpais](#). From Stinson Beach (only six miles north of Muir Beach), take the Dipsea Trail, which leads up and up through grassy headlands offering striking coastal views, and then inland through ravines and ridges, past towering redwoods and burbling creeks crossed on mossy wooden bridges, and even a rushing cataract whose height is traversed by climbing a ladder. You will eventually pass the [Historic West Point Inn](#), accessible only by hiking or biking. Mount Tam rises to a height of 2571 feet, and at the summit, you will find a snack kiosk at the parking lot in case you're famished from the climb. The good news is that it's all downhill when you head back on a different trail toward the beach. Fifteen miles in all, this hike is strenuous, and will take even experienced hikers up to seven hours to complete the loop. But the views from the top are remarkable, and all the more amazing when you've earned them. Oh, you can drive almost all the way to the top of Mount Tam, but wouldn't you rather have bragging rights for making the hike? And, when you get back down to [Stinson Beach](#), you can dip your toes in the water. You'll have earned it.

## Sip Some Wine



Photo by [FloridaStock](#)

Finally, if time permits, consider spending another day or two (or a week?) in Sonoma and Napa Counties visiting wineries, galleries, restaurants, shops, and spas. The sights and experiences are far too numerous to list here, but the small towns of Sonoma, Napa, Sebastopol, Guerneville, Windsor, Healdsburg, St. Helena, Calistoga, Napa, Occidental, and Geyserville will enchant you with their charm and proximity to world-class wineries. Or, embrace your adventurous spirit and head off the beaten track to enjoy the smaller boutique wineries, which offer a more personal touch and, often, pours handled with a personal touch by the actual vintner.

If self-indulgence is on your list, head to the [Sonoma Mission Inn and Spa](#), or book a mud bath in Calistoga. If your legs can take any more hiking, go to the coast to revel in trails, sand, and sea at [Point Reyes National Seashore](#), or to Bodega Bay for a freshly caught seafood lunch. For a real adventure, book a whale-watching excursion off Bodega Head, one of the premier whale-watching spots on the West Coast.