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PLUS

OUTDOOR SAN FRANCISCO

Finding adventure in the Bay Area

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OUTDOOR ADVENTURES IN SAN FRANCISCO

*Mountain biking, kayaking, hiking,
Golden Gate Park archery, and more* BY JO PIAZZA



I PUMP THE BRAKES OF MY MOUNTAIN BIKE

when a tawny young deer wanders onto the narrow dirt trail a few yards in front of me. I use the moment to stretch my fingers, admire the grace of the ambling deer, and soak in the view from a magnificent ridgeline overlooking the turquoise waters of San Pablo Bay.

I'm only about 25 miles north of downtown San Francisco, at China Camp State Park in Marin County, reached via the Golden Gate Bridge, but these rolling hills filled with wildlife—deer, coyotes, hawks, wild turkeys and plenty of lizards—make me feel like I've left the city very far behind.

I've ascended about 700 feet above the bay with my guide, Mark Baeder. He's the founder of Mountain Bike SF, and runs half- and full-day group and private tours throughout Marin County. I'm on a half-day version, riding China Camp State Park's Bayview, Oak Ridge and Shoreline trails. We pedal about 8 miles of singletrack in 2.5 hours. If you're into mountain biking or curious about mountain biking, this is the place to do it, and Mark is the guy to do it with. Marin County is generally regarded as the birthplace of the modern sport of mountain biking, according to the Marin Museum of Bicycling (whose docents include Mountain Bike Hall of Fame inductees), and the county boasts some of the best and most beautiful trails in the Bay Area.

Mountain Bike SF operates tours for all levels. I am most definitely a beginner, and Mark promises to go slow. "Keep your eyes ahead of you," he advises me gently as I skid into a hairpin turn. "If you look where you want to go, you'll get there."

I laugh a little and tell him that's good advice for life in addition to mountain biking. "You're like the Buddha of mountain biking," I add.

When I get tired, I pretend I need to take some pictures of the view. Mark acts like he believes me, and lets me rest in the shade of a gnarled old oak as I breathe in the scent of the salt marshes below. A muddy lizard skitters over my sneaker and flicks its tongue at me.

A little while later, Mark calls for another welcome stop, in order to snap pictures of me looking like a pro, he says. He knows exactly the right place to stand to make me look like an expert, and my Instagram self is eternally grateful to him.

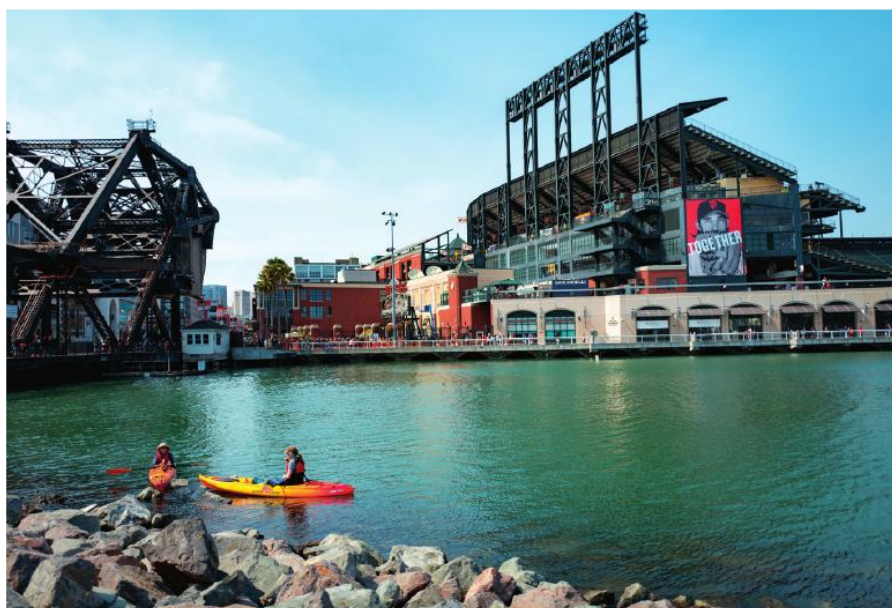
It's a blue-sky morning, perfect for a gorgeous photo, but in San Francisco, you can be outside almost every day if you're dressed properly—layers with an easily accessible raincoat. And the city offers the best of both worlds: exceptional cuisine and urban amenities complementing the ability to seamlessly transition into an adventure in nature. You can

spend the morning mountain biking and the evening in a Michelin-starred restaurant. It doesn't matter whether you're an experienced outdoors person or just dipping your toes in adventurous waters—there's always plenty to do in the Bay Area, from mountain biking to kayaking, from hiking to archery.

KAYAKING MCCOVEY COVE

On another sunny day, I find myself kayaking right past a lazy sea lion. The Bay Bridge (you know: that other bridge in San Francisco, the white one that goes to Oakland) is behind me as I paddle as fast as I can toward the AT&T Park baseball stadium, before a Giants game starts. It takes about 25 minutes to paddle the half-mile south from Pier 40, where I rented my kayak. I wave to sailboat tailgaters (yes, people in San Francisco tailgate on sailboats) before hanging a right into McCovey Cove just in time to hear the final chorus of *The Star-Spangled Banner*.

It doesn't matter that I can't see



» Facing page: A scenic trail in China Camp State Park. This page: Kayaking in McCovey Cove, near AT&T Park.



» Visitors enjoy a viewpoint at Angel Island, top, which can be reached via ferry service, shown above, from San Francisco.

into the stadium from the water. The excitement spills out over the right field wall, along a public waterfront promenade where people are peering through archways into the stadium. For those of us in the cove who can't see the players, boats blast the game on radios to keep everyone caught up.

"Play ball!" I yell as I position my kayak between a boat named *The Barbary Ghost* and a fellow kayaker with a traffic-cone-orange T-shirt that reads, "McCovey Cove Dave."

I take another look at the man in the T-shirt. He's tan, ruggedly handsome and very gregarious. I quickly learn that his real name is Dave Edlund, and he's nabbed the majority of home run balls—36 as of the start of today's game—that have been hit into the bay in the

past 10 years. Dave, a retired tech executive, comes armed with two things: a radio to listen to the game announcers and the competitive spirit needed to be the first kayaker to reach and scoop from the water (Dave uses his hands) a home run ball batted out of the stadium and into the cove.

I try to catch Dave's attention again during the game, but he's very busy. Scooter Gennett is at bat, and Dave needs to keep his eyes in the air. It could be time for No. 37.

Kayaking into McCovey for a baseball game is something of a San Francisco tradition, and City Kayak at Pier 40 offers self-guided kayak rentals for intermediate and experienced paddlers, and two-hour Splash Hit guided tours on select game days for beginners to enjoy part of the ballgame.

The company also takes beginners on three-hour downtown kayak trips with views of landmarks such as the Ferry Building on the way to McCovey Cove. From the cove, the tour goes southwest under the Lefty O'Doul drawbridge to see the houseboats of Mission Creek. It's the perfect trip for those who have never kayaked

before and for families with kids.

For more-experienced kayakers, City Kayak leads a half-day trip across San Francisco Bay to Alcatraz, depending on the currents and weather conditions. Not only does this 1.5-mile excursion give you a spectacular view of Alcatraz from the water, but you'll get a look at historical ships such as an 1891 schooner at Hyde Street Pier, and as you paddle into the open part of the bay, you'll have an impressive view of the Golden Gate Bridge.

HIKING ANGEL ISLAND

I'm always surprised when I encounter someone who has lived in San Francisco for most of their adult life and yet has never ventured north across the bay to Angel Island. They all make excuses. They say they didn't know it was open to the public. I tell them that it's actually a state park. They say they didn't know it was there. Well, the brass-colored peak of Mount Livermore is hard to miss while you're driving across the Golden Gate Bridge or strolling along Fisherman's Wharf. They say they don't know how to get there without their own boat. The Blue & Gold Fleet ferry takes passengers to the island



» **The archery range at Golden Gate Park is located in a lovely meadow.**

up to three times a day (service dates/times vary seasonally).

I try to regularly make it to the park for outdoor recreation, or a snack at the Angel Island Cafe and Cantina, which is typically open March through October. The cafe provides a stellar view of the sailboats and bay at Ayala Cove, and the menu ranges from ceviche to the Cove Burger (including bacon, grilled onions, provolone cheese and a special sauce), which can be paired with a California craft beer such as a Lagunitas IPA.

Angel Island is full of adventures, but my favorite thing to do on the island is simple: I love to hike there. Starting just past the ferry dock, three trails are available for different levels of hikers. All three of these trails will give you incredible views of the bay, including the Marin Headlands, Mount Tamalpais, Alcatraz and the Golden Gate Bridge.

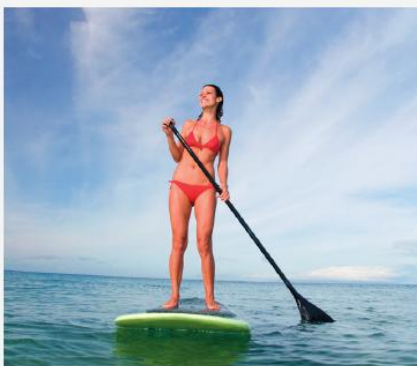
The Perimeter Road (open to hikers, bicyclists and park vehicles, but no private vehicles, and with a speed limit of 15 mph) is the easi-

est walk, at about 5 miles in a loop around the island. Bikes, including electric bikes, are available for rent from the Angel Island Company bike shed near the ferry landing. The climb is gradual, with just a 200-foot elevation gain. It's easy to forget that you're close to the San Francisco city limits until you come around a bend and glance to the south to take in the gleaming skyline.

Keep a careful eye on the water between the island and the Golden Gate Bridge as you meander down the path. Harbor seals might peek

MORE ADVENTURES

- **Bouldering Glen Canyon:** Experienced rock enthusiasts shouldn't miss a chance to boulder in Glen Canyon (sfrecpark.org/destination/glen-park), a sprawling urban canyon filled with native vegetation. There are plenty of easier routes, as well as more-challenging routes around the canyon's crags. You can also get in a nice approximately 2-mile hike on the Creeks to Peaks Trail prior to doing a bit of scrambling.
- **Kiteboarding the Bay:** If you have two or three days in the city and you want to take advantage of the wind and waves, the Kite415 kiteboarding school (kite415.com) offers a beginner's course with land and



water lessons to get you up on a board.

- **Rock Climbing Beaver Street Wall:** Climbers will want to bring their top rope gear and check out the Beaver Street Wall in Corona Heights Park in the heart of the

city's Castro District. Not for the fainthearted or novices, this 5.9 to 5.12 difficulty, 45-foot-tall cliff is a fairly technical climb for advanced climbers. However, spectators are welcome, and watching the action just might prompt you to take an indoor climbing lesson at the Mission Cliffs climbing gym a few miles from here.

- **SUP at Pier 40:** Take a scenic glide to see the San Francisco skyline and get a full-body cardio workout with a standup paddleboarding adventure straight off Pier 40 along the Embarcadero. For newcomers to paddleboarding, City Kayak (citykayak.com) offers introductory lessons. Check the website for dates and times. —J.P.



SF RECREATION AND PARK DEPARTMENT



» **Youngsters practice at the Golden Gate Park Archery Range.**

their heads up to cast a flirtly glance at you. And also look down around the path itself. One of the best-kept secrets on the island is usually right beneath your feet. If you're lucky, you might spot the elusive Angel Island mole, a subspecies of mole found only out here, or you

might notice the little hills the moles make. Don't worry if you have a family member or friend who isn't into doing the walk. Angel Island Company also offers a Segway tour and an open-air tram tour, both along the Perimeter Road. Intermediate and experienced hikers might choose the Sunset Trail (2 miles and 800 feet of elevation gain) or the North Ridge Trail (also 2 miles and 800 feet of elevation gain) to the top of Mount Livermore. Both hikes typically take a couple of hours. You can combine them in a loop for a little more variety. The peak's summit has picnic tables perfect for taking in the view while you enjoy a lunch, with bot-

tled wine, that was prepared to go by Angel Island Cafe. For an overnight stay, you can reserve one of the island's 10 campsites via reservecalifornia.com. It's recommended to book six months ahead for Saturdays and for all days when school is out.

ARCHERY IN GOLDEN GATE PARK

Just a couple of blocks from the ocean, so close to the sea that a breeze will blow the smell of briny water toward you, is a tranquil meadow with nine archery targets. This is the archery field located right in Golden Gate Park. The park archery range is BYOB (bring your own bow). You can rent equipment, including a bow, six arrows, an arm

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TO ME, THE RANGE LOOKS LIKE SOMETHING OUT OF THE HUNGER GAMES. I CHAT WITH SPORTY LOCAL YOUNGSTERS TAKING TARGET PRACTICE THERE ON A SATURDAY MORNING.

guard and a hip quiver, from the San Francisco Archery Pro Shop, just 10 short and very walkable blocks away, on Balboa Street. The shop also offers private lessons by appointment, with equipment provided, at the Golden Gate Park range.

To me, the range looks like something out of *The Hunger Games*. I chat with sporty local youngsters taking target practice there on a Saturday morning. “I started archery after reading *The*

Hunger Games,” one preteen girl, in a thick Katniss-style braid, tells me as she expertly aims her arrow at the bull’s-eye. “I’m very good now.”

Before or after letting arrows fly, you can send golf balls soaring on the park’s nine-hole course, tucked among cypress trees, just a few blocks from the archery range. The standard weekend rate has been \$23, and with club rental for \$15, although the rates are scheduled to increase this summer.

The park’s many outdoor attrac-

tions, complementing cultural sites such as the de Young Museum and the California Academy of Sciences, also include gardens and casting pools. The Golden Gate Angling and Casting Club offers a free public casting clinic, with loaner rod provided, the second Saturday of each month. In addition, rentals of rowboats, electric boats and pedal boats are available at Stow Lake, one of the park’s 10 lakes. ✂

Jo Piazza is a Bay Area freelance writer and best-selling book author. For more about San Francisco-area recreation, see sftravel.com.

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