

Land of plenty

Jeremy Tredinnick samples the varied pleasures of cosmopolitan San Francisco before indulging in bucolic diversions in the Napa Valley

San Francisco has many reputations: its pea-soup fog is renowned, its Gold Rush history exciting, its hills and clanking trams iconic, while infamous Alcatraz and the towering Golden Gate Bridge stand prominently apart, but famously part of the whole. It's also one of the most urbane, progressive cities in the US – a magnet for international tourists and tech entrepreneurs (as well as down-on-their-luck Americans), all attracted to its benign climate and a diverse, cosmopolitan population that has resulted in a thriving arts and culture scene spread across a range of discrete, easily accessible neighbourhoods.

The morning I arrive the sun is blazing and there's not a wisp of fog in the air. My accommodation in the city is lofty both in geographic terms – standing near the top of the steep but stylish Nob Hill district – and in its position within the upper echelons of the hospitality sector. The Ritz-Carlton, San Francisco is the city's only AAA Five Diamond-rated hotel, housed in a gorgeous neoclassical edifice that when it was built in 1909, housed the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. Looking down California Street from the hotel's corner, a sliver of glittering water and a slice of the Bay Bridge can be seen between the skyscrapers.

The Ritz-Carlton's interior was renovated a couple of years ago, refurbished with a palette of steel blues and greys representing a weather theme for this city



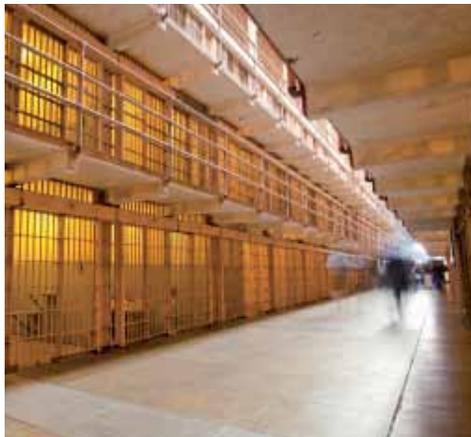
This page from above: Chinatown; inside Alcatraz; and the new Museum of Modern Art
Opposite: A cable car climbs the hill from Fisherman's Wharf, with "the Rock" of Alcatraz in the distance

with its own unique microclimate. Lunch at the hotel's Parallel 37 restaurant is a stomach-bulging affair in the private dining room – Chef Michael Rotondo knows how to entice with seasonal and sustainable produce crafted into contemporary American dishes with a dash of panache.

As the jet lag hits, we retire to the hotel's Spa L'Occitane by the Bay, opened late last year and America's very first spa by the famous Provençal brand. A soothing traditional massage – its origins and ingredients from the South of France – is the perfect antidote to a 16-hour transpacific flight.

A walking tour of the city doesn't have to involve incessant hill climbing. We begin ours on a downhill stretch to Chinatown, North America's first and still its largest. Oriental gateways and hanging red lanterns let you know you're in an Asia-centric district, as do the packed sidewalks and kitschy souvenir shops.

Just south of Nob Hill is the shopping utopia of Union Square, and on the far side of Market Street we make time for the city's newest museum – the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (sfmoma.org) – which opened in May last year. MOMA has quickly become a hotspot for tourists and artistic locals alike; ▶





avant-garde artwork adorns its array of interesting spaces, from high-ceilinged galleries to sculpture gardens and an alfresco area next to a “living wall”.

Back on Market Street we queue for the Powell & Mason cable car that will take us up and over the hills to the north shore. A Citypass (citypass.com) is the way to go here: for just US\$89 you get free bus, train and cable car rides for seven days, free admission to a selection of four top attractions, and a booklet containing great discounts on dozens of sites and cruises.

The cable car clanks and rattles as it negotiates the steep hills – amazingly it still uses hand-cranked wooden brakes – and we alight at the top of a short but absurdly steep and winding section of Lombard Street. Within little more than 100 metres it makes eight hairpin turns through carefully manicured greenery – it’s one of the city’s most photographed landmarks.

The north shore’s Fisherman’s Wharf dining and entertainment district (fishermanswharf.org) buzzes with energy... except at one spot on Pier 39, where dozens of very large Californian sea lions lounge lazily on a handful of floating wooden platforms metres from the pier, bending their muscular necks in all directions, grunting, groaning and barking at each other, the pesky attendant gulls, and seemingly the world in general – a strangely captivating sight that has us lingering longer than we intended.

Any visit to the City by the Bay must include a trip out to “The Rock” – Alcatraz Island (nps.gov/alca), which served as the US’s most infamous maximum security prison for around 30 years in the mid-20th century. Al Capone, Robert “the Birdman” Stroud, Machine Gun Kelly and other nefarious individuals were locked up here, and the audio tape-assisted tour exceeds expectations, narrated by former prison guards and inmates who take you on an evocative journey through the cells and corridors of this forbidding place.

A new day brings a new adventure, as we drive across the famous Golden Gate Bridge and head north, past the towering redwood forest of Muir Woods, towards the US’s most famous wine country. The Napa Valley (visitnapavalley.com) holds the title and prestige of being America’s greatest exporter of fine wines. Labels such as Screaming Eagle or Harlan Estate are globally renowned, but sun-kissed Napa is home to hundreds of wineries offering tasting itineraries that can last a few hours or be incorporated into multi-day tours of top vineyards.

We drive north through the valley’s bucolic landscape, passing broad fields of neatly rowed vines encompassing Spanish-style ranches, and equally neat towns like Napa, Yountville, Oakville and Rutherford. Near the latter we turn up a long, straight driveway flanked by tall palm trees, at the end of which stands an attractive building housing the Round Pond Estate’s cellars, tasting rooms and restaurant.

This page from top: Meadowood Napa Valley from the air; and Round Pond Estate’s restaurant terrace
Opposite page from top left: Grapes hang heavy on the vine; Round Pond Estate’s premium Gravel Series wines; and a cultured game of croquet on Meadowood’s pristine lawns

Under a high, vaulted ceiling with thick wooden beams we meet Tim Byer, who will talk us through the estate’s wines. “Round Pond spreads out over 470 acres [190 hectares] of contiguous valley floor, with lots of soil types,” he enthuses while rustling up a tasty salad for us using Round Pond’s own delicious olive oil. “Eighty-five per cent of our grapes are Cabernet – Cab is king in Napa – and we produce 35,000 cases a year, but we also have one of only two olive presses in the region and our artisanal olive oils are famous.”

Over a supremely fresh and tasty lunch we taste three complex reds and a crisp white, before Tim takes us on a quick tour, stopping off at the olive oil press where I have my first tasting session of olive oil – an eye-opening experience that’s just as intricate as wine tasting. Some of the oils are so pure and strong that I find myself coughing like a first-time smoker,





while others are smooth as butter or infused with fruit essences.

Back at the main building we sample some of Round Pond's best vintages (2012 was a great year), with names like The Vow and Scholar's Gate from the premium Gravel Series, before picking up a bottle or two to take home – along with gift packs of small, round bottles filled with delicious olive oil and piquant red wine vinegar to wow friends and family.

We are a contented bunch as we say our goodbyes and make the short drive into St Helena, where we mooch around the sleepy main street with its mix of art deco and Spanish-style façades that lead into tasting rooms, arts and crafts stores and health-conscious coffee shops. The living is easy here, the weather balmy, the soil bountiful, the food and libations in the restaurants of the highest quality.

Our next stop proves that Napa has far more to offer

than just wine. Meadowood (meadowood.com) is a luxury resort in a stunning location, built into 250 acres (101 hectares) of forested hills and boasting its own three-Michelin-star restaurant, a nine-hole golf course, tennis courts, an all-suite spa, fitness centre with pools... even a croquet lawn. The guest cabins are scattered throughout the rambling property; mine is high up on the hillside, a luxurious wooden suite within the trees with its own outdoor patio, elegant white-painted interior and cosy fireplace. All mod cons are present, but the focus here is on seclusion and indulgence in your surroundings – nature in luxury mode.

Chauffeured cars are available to pick you up and drop you off if you don't want to walk down to the main building and other facilities. I choose to hike along the hill ridge in a large semicircle around the golf course. Signs warn that bears and cougars can sometimes frequent the woods, which adds a frisson of excitement to the mildly exerting walk, but I see only squirrels gathering nuts and birds feasting on berries as I take in the wonderful vistas across the valley and revel in the peace and solitude.

Over a delicious dinner created by estate chef Alejandro Ayala, director of PR Jennifer Chiesa explains the resort's vision: "Balance at Meadowood is key, and when one works hard, one should be able to play hard. We want each guest to feel their time on the estate is theirs to do with as they wish. Many come here simply to rest and decompress from busy and hectic lives, but it's also an ideal destination for incentive corporate trips, directors' meetings, private events and the like. Glens and gardens adjoin all the meeting rooms, and the wide range of on-site activities allows you to take advantage of the beautiful environment for both work and play."

Meadowood puts on a number of events and activities for guests, group teambuilding and incentives, such as cooking or cocktail-making classes, sommelier-led wine experiences, croquet or golf tournaments. We are lucky enough to have a lesson in croquet from the resort's resident pro, Mike McDonnell. Many imagine this game merely as an amusing bit of backyard fun, and while that's certainly one way to enjoy it, there's much more to it should you wish to get serious.

On Meadowood's pristine, putting green-quality lawn, all dressed in regulation croquet whites, Mike coaches us in how to hold the mallet and hit the ball, explains the resort's simplified tournament rules, pours us a glass of sparkling wine and lets us loose... the following hour is a joyous mix of laughter, concentration, competitiveness and clowning. By the time we finish half of us are hooked, pledging to seek out a croquet club in our respective hometowns. We leave Meadowood reluctantly for the drive back to the city, reminiscing already over this land of plenty, and plotting our return. ■