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5 Fun Day Trips From San Francisco

You don't have to travel far to find some of the greater Bay Area's best day destinations.



Carmel-by-the-Sea is full of art galleries, shops and quiet residential streets with appealing houses.

By [Jenna Scatena](#)

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[San Francisco](#) certainly has enough attractions to keep even the most active traveler entertained for days on end. But that doesn't mean a trip to San Francisco has to be confined to the city limits. Venture beyond the [Golden Gate Bridge](#), and you'll be rewarded with some of California's most masterful wine-and-dine experiences, or head south for iconic beaches and scenic drives. Whichever direction you choose, there's no wrong turn.

St. Helena

If you like wine, then [Napa Valley](#) is an ideal destination an hour north of San Francisco that you simply can't miss. With approximately [475 wineries spanning bucolic Napa County](#), oenophiles will have no trouble enjoying a wine-fueled itinerary. However, all the options can be overwhelming, so experts recommend zeroing in on one city.

"Central Napa can be pretty commercial, so go a little further north to St. Helena for more hidden gems," says Jennifer Kirkland, guest services manager at the [Inn Above Tide](#).

[Read: [The Best Hotels in San Francisco.](#)]

A visit to St. Helena's [Hall Wines](#) is filled with award-winning classic varietals. With a glass of velvety cabernet in-hand, you can stroll the impressive grounds, which are strewn with large photogenic installations made by international artists.



Hall Wines

Four miles up California state Route 29 (known locally as Highway 29), [Ehlers Estate](#) pours splashes of organic wines in its rustic and historic tasting room, by appointment only.

For lunch, hit up St. Helena's quaint downtown. Local favorite [Goose & Gander](#) is a wine country

public house with a leafy patio and stellar California fare. It's the perfect spot to regroup between tastings.

"A word of advice," says Kirkland. "Don't ruin your evening because of day drinking. Pace yourself. Three wineries in a day and lunch is enough. Always get a driver if you want to try a lot of wines."

Santa Cruz

One of California's classic coastal gems, [Santa Cruz](#) is known for its list of exciting attractions, popular surf



Santa Cruz Arboretum

culture and quirky activities.

After a less than two-hour drive down state Route 1 (known locally as Highway 1), you can start your day at the [University of California](#)

[Santa Cruz Arboretum](#), a botanical research facility and conservatory filled with flowers that range from beautiful to bizarre.

Midday, head to the shoreline where the [Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk](#) boasts retro roller coasters, cotton candy stands and carnival games. Its position along the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary means you have a shot at spotting dolphins or whales in the waters while riding the Ferris wheel.

Make time for a sunset dinner overlooking the Pacific Ocean, a short walk away at the newly refreshed [Aquarius](#), where a thoughtful menu of sea- and land-faring cuisine complements the view. Don't want to drive back to San Francisco? Make it an overnight at the renovated [Dream Inn](#), [A Joie de Vivre Hotel](#) – the only full-service hotel on the beach in Santa Cruz.

Russian River Valley

"Wine country is great, but it doesn't have to be Napa," says Jose Lopez, chief concierge at [Palace Hotel](#), [A Luxury Collection Hotel](#). The Russian River Valley ... "has great pinots and chardonnays. It's much more relaxed and woodsy."

[Read: [5 San Francisco Neighborhoods to Explore on Vacation.](#)]

Whether you anchor a day trip there to wine or water, the Russian River is a playground for the senses. Head up Highway 101 for 56 miles, then follow River Road west, as it cuts into a thick forest of towering redwood trees.

[Russian River Vineyards](#) exhibits the region's varietals in an 1890s farmhouse, complete with a sprawling patio

overlooking the vineyards. It's a great place to orient to the valley while taking in the sights and the wines.

Walkable Guerneville is the gem of the river, chockablock with independent shops and restaurants. Stock up on specialty cheeses, local craft beers and other picnic provisions at [Big Bottom Market](#). In the summer, take your bounty with you across the street to Johnson's Beach, where sun worshipers sprawl on the pebbly shore, occasionally dipping into the chilly river.

Or you can follow the river 13 additional miles to the coast, where the river's mouth opens to the Pacific. In Jenner, a small coastal town, [River's End Restaurant & Inn](#) has ideal sunset views in an intimate setting.

Carmel-by-the-Sea



Carmel-by-the-Sea

Don't overlook the long stretch of craggy coastline south of San Francisco as well. Roll down the windows, turn up the music and wind your way 120 miles down Highway 1, to the storybook enclave of Carmel-by-the-Sea. Similar to Highway 1's northern section, this route features plenty of points of interest

worthy of a stop.

"As you move south of the city itself, it's almost Mediterranean," says Keith DiBene, chief concierge at [Hotel Vitale San Francisco, A Joie de Vivre Hotel](#). "The road clings to the mountains. Powder blue water. The sand is off-white. ... Water as far as you can see splashing up. The rawness of the coastline. The cypress trees. The sunsets – it's romantic."

At Pacific Grove, detour for a leisurely cruise along the famous 17-Mile Drive. Follow it past rocky outcroppings, coastal flora and fauna, beyond the iconic [Lodge at Pebble Beach](#), and connect back to Highway 1, just north of Carmel-by-the-Sea.

[Read: [6 Can't-Miss San Francisco Museums.](#)]

Carmel-by-the-Sea is full of art galleries, shops and quiet residential streets with appealing houses. DiBene recommends dinner at [The Restaurant at Mission Ranch](#), Clint Eastwood's restored California farmhouse serving Monterey County specialties like grilled artichoke and pan-seared sea scallops in an upscale pastoral setting.

West Marin via Highway 1

For an adventure suitable for all ages, cross the Golden Gate Bridge and follow Highway 1 through West Marin – an expansive trove of natural beauty, meandering trails and picture-perfect coastal vistas.

"It's not as developed as the rest of the Bay Area – it's sacred land. ... It's not the city, that's for sure. Highway 1 is its own destination," says Nancy K. DuBois, chief concierge at [Cavallo Point](#). The road traces the Northern California coast through salty beach towns, rolling pastures and Point Reyes National Seashore. It's the epitome of the adage, the journey is the destination.

Rachel Ward, editor at Where San Francisco magazine, says, "Stop at as many places as you can along the way ... [and experience] a little adrenaline rush on the winding parts of the road that hug the cliffs."

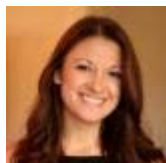
Her picks for the best pit stops? Stinson Beach, Bolinas and Point Reyes. Then refuel with oysters at [Hog Island Oyster Co.](#) and local cheeses at [Cowgirl Creamery](#). Or get them to go and make it a picnic day at a local spot, like Limantour Beach, home to shorebirds and harbor seals at varying times of the year. It's a place where you virtually can't go wrong.

To experience more of what San Francisco has to offer, check out the [U.S. News Travel guide](#).

TAGS: San Francisco, travel, vacations, food and drink



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Jenna Scatena writes about San Francisco for U.S. News & World Report. Her work has appeared in *Afar*; *BBC Travel*; *San Francisco Chronicle*; *Sunset*; *Travel + Leisure*; *Marie Claire*; *O, The Oprah Magazine*; *Vogue*; *Self*; *Delta Sky*; *Mr Porter*; *Via*; and *C California Style*, and her stories have been anthologized in *The Best Women's Travel Writing Volume 9 (Travelers' Tales)* and *An Innocent Abroad (Lonely Planet)*. You can follow her on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

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