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TRAVEL

Sausalito's Simple Pleasures

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The tourist center of Sausalito retains its authenticity while much of the Bay Area undergoes tech-boom redevelopment. (Photo by Sherry Stern)

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It's a gleaming Sunday afternoon and there's a traffic jam in Sausalito. Not to worry though. The definition of congestion in this city is the steady flow of bicycles streaming into town, locals and tourists riding across the world's most famous bridge for a day trip from San Francisco.

The bayside village charms with its blend of small-town pleasures and big-city comforts. The experience is simple: Stroll the cozy town center, window-shop its galleries, grab an ice cream cone at the original Lappert's and, if the fog is willing, soak in views of the big city across the bay.

Even to a frequent Bay Area visitor, Sausalito can seem a bit out of reach. Flying into the city is one thing but getting to Marin County feels like an unnecessary challenge added to a familiar excursion. In fact, the trip from Orange County is a snap if you time your flight to avoid rush hour. From the airport, it's an easy drive and renting a car makes sense. Once on the other side of the Golden Gate Bridge, it's a slight turn and suddenly, Sausalito welcome signs appear. Not out of reach at all.

If you go

The Inn Above Tide: Rooms from \$385, suites from \$845, innabovetide.com

Cibo: Contemporary coffeehouse serving pastries and regionally sourced dishes, cibosausalito.com

Fred's Place: Local favorite for diner food, 415-332-4575.

Fish.: Fresh seafood, 331fish.com

Celebrity chef restaurants: Sushi Ran, sushiran.com;

Copita, copitarestaurant.com

Ferries: Golden Gate

Ferry, goldengateferry.org; Blue & Gold Fleet, blueandgoldfleet.com

Sea Trek: Kayaks, stand-up paddleboards for rent (\$25 an hour); and tours from \$75 for adults, seatrek.com

Those bicycles eventually leave, boarding the ferry for a carefree return. Good news for those of us who get to stick around a few days. We take comfort in a town that retains its authenticity, removed from the bustle of the Bay Area and San Francisco's nonstop alterations in the wake of the tech boom.

Sure, housing prices and remodeling in Sausalito are California-crazy, but its soul clings to what it has always been: a tight-knit town of 7,000 residents, dotted with artists, locally owned restaurants, colorful houseboats, singular shops and an active marina.

This makes Sausalito perfectly situated for a visit that's relaxed or active, low-key or cosmopolitan. Or whatever combination suits you.

One surprise in such a small town is the choice of first-rate accommodations. Among the best is The Inn Above Tide, a boutique hotel that often tops travel magazine best-of lists. "Above Tide" in the name is literal. All 31 rooms and suites hang over the water, each with

a balcony that boasts breathtaking views from San Francisco to Alcatraz to Berkeley to Angel Island. The combination of intimacy, prime location, impeccable décor and attentive customer service makes it a special getaway. Customize as you'd like, such as ordering an in-room massage and opting for the complimentary room-service continental breakfast.

Once settled, you will be tempted to while away the time on your dock, soaking in the scene. But eventually it's time to eat. If you're yearning for a singular dining experience, you won't have to look far. Sausalito is refreshingly chain-averse.

For an espresso, grab a patio seat at Cibo, a contemporary coffeehouse offering stunning pastries and regionally sourced dishes. Prefer a down-home atmosphere? Fred's Place is a local favorite for its sumptuous diner food. A half-hour walk along the waterfront is a colorful stroll. Treat yourself to lunch at the end at Fish, one of those casual restaurants with specials written on blackboards and picnic tables inside and out. It's very much an old-time feel, but the menu shades modern, loaded with sustainable seafood and organic produce. Try the oversized crab roll or the grilled fish tacos.

For dinner you wouldn't be disappointed with two restaurants from Bay Area-celebrity chefs. Thirty years after it opened, Yoshi Tome's Sushi Ran still earns plaudits from patrons and critics. There's no question that whatever is on the menu is fresh, probably from Tokyo, and bright. Newer to the scene is Copita from PBS chef Joanne Weir, who puts a modern spin on her Mexican food. Starting with the tuna tostadas topped with chipotle and wasabi aioli. Then ask what is in season.

At some point, all that staring at the San Francisco skyline can make you yearn for a visit to city. Don't hold back: It's quite effortless by riding either of the two ferry lines – Golden Gate Ferry or Blue & Gold Fleet.

Boats, just steps from Inn Above Tide, leave regularly for two prime spots: that tourist standby Fisherman's Wharf or the foodie heaven of the Ferry Building. The first gives you a well-worn San Francisco experience and is a must for first-timers. For everyone else, head to the Ferry Building, the landmark food hall. You'll be tempted by cheese shops, bread stores, butchers, exotic ice cream stands and impeccable coffeehouses. You'll want to eat at any number of restaurants such as Hog Island Oyster Co. or Boulettes, both get high marks.

Head back to Sausalito for the evening or take advantage of San Francisco's public transportation and see a play, the opera or a symphony concert.

Back in town, Sausalito is ideal for strolling and checking out the boutiques. Beyond that, the fit-minded can find plenty of options.

If it's not too chilly, you can hit the water. Centrally located Sea Trek offers kayaks and stand-up paddleboards for rent. Or to really explore the bayside (sea lion sightings are common), join a guided tour or arrange a private one for your family.

What else to do? Well there's always a bicycle to rent and a path to explore. If you can't beat those wheel-to-wheel traffic jams, join in.