



THE WILD SIDE OF NORTHERN SAN FRANCISCO

OUTDOOR ADVENTURE ITINERARY FOR THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA

Northern San Francisco and Marin Counties boast expansive outdoor landscapes, perfect for travelers seeking both adventure and relaxation. Redwood forests, dramatic coastlines, headlands and lovely beaches are within an hour of downtown San Francisco.

WHEN TO VISIT

The greater Bay Area is a year-round destination. Each season offers a slightly different experience. Here's what to expect throughout the year.

Spring (March–May)

Fresh air, wildflowers, and fewer crowds

- **Weather & Temperatures:** Mild and comfortable, with highs around 55–65°F. Spring rain in March and early April. Cool mornings with occasional coastal fog.
- **Nature & Views:** Wildflowers peak in March and April along the coastal trails. Lively creeks flow through the green hills and forests.
- **Crowds & Overall Feel:** Moderately busy, especially on weekends. A great season for hiking and exploring before peak summer tourism.

Summer (June–August)

Cool coastal and warm inland days and peak travel season

- **Weather & Temperatures:** Cool near the coast with highs around 58–68°F; warmer inland areas may reach 75–85°F. Rain is rare, but fog is common along the coast.
- **Nature & Views:** Dry, golden hills inland and dramatic coastal scenery. Fog creates moody views that often clear later in the day.
- **Crowds & Overall Feel:** Busiest time of year. Expect lively towns, full parking lots, and popular attractions at capacity.

Fall (September–November)

Warm days, clear skies, and gorgeous landscapes

- **Weather & Temperatures:** Often the warmest and clearest season, with highs around 65–75°F. Fog is less frequent, and rain typically arrives late in the season.
- **Nature & Views:** Golden landscapes, excellent visibility, and long, comfortable days for outdoor adventures.
- **Crowds & Overall Feel:** Calmer after Labor Day. One of the best times to visit for fewer crowds and ideal conditions.

Winter (December–February)

Quiet trails, swollen waterways and dramatic coastal scenery

- **Weather & Temperatures:** Cooler with highs around 50–60°F. This is the rainiest season. Fog is less common than in summer.
- **Nature & Views:** Hills turn green again after storms. Powerful waterfalls and creeks.
- **Crowds & Overall Feel:** Light crowds outside of holidays. Ideal for peaceful hikes, storm watching, and a slower-paced visit.



NAVIGATING THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA

Getting to the Bay Area

- **By Air:** The main airports are San Francisco (SFO), Oakland (OAK), and San Jose (SJC). All are within 30–60 minutes of San Francisco, depending on traffic. SFO is the most convenient for coastal Marin destinations.
- **By Car:** From San Francisco, cross the Golden Gate Bridge into Marin County in about 30–45 minutes (allow extra time for traffic). Coastal destinations like Stinson Beach and Point Reyes include slower, scenic, winding drives.
- **By Ferry & Shuttle:** Ferries connect San Francisco to Sausalito and Larkspur. Shuttles or rideshares are needed to reach trailheads, beaches, and inland parks.
- **By Train:** Amtrak's Capitol Corridor and Caltrain serve nearby towns, but a car is usually required to reach most outdoor destinations.

Getting Around the Bay Area

- **Car Rentals:** The easiest way to explore Marin County, the coastal beaches, and nearby parks.
- **Biking:** Popular along coastal and urban routes. Weather and hills can be challenging.
- **Shuttles & Rideshares:** Useful for short trips from ferries, trailheads, or towns; apps like Uber and Lyft are widely available close to the city.
- **Walking:** Ideal for city and town exploration in San Francisco, Sausalito, Stinson Beach, Point Reyes Station.

WHERE TO STAY

Choosing the right home base(s) shapes the feel of this trip.

Options include:

- **Stinson Beach:** A relaxed coastal town with direct beach access and close proximity to hiking trails.
- **Point Reyes Station:** A small rural town located near the entrance to northern Point Reyes National Seashore, a great overnight option for Day 2 into Day 3.
- **Mill Valley:** Convenient for Muir Woods and Mount Tamalpais, with easy access to Marin Headlands.
- **Sausalito:** Waterfront lodging with ferry connections and scenic bay views.
- **Presidio / Northern San Francisco:** Ideal for car-free exploration and direct access to Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

WHAT THIS ITINERARY INCLUDES

This multi-day itinerary balances active adventure with unhurried exploration.

Experiences include:

- Coastal hikes and scenic headlands
- Old-growth redwood groves
- Quiet beaches and small coastal towns
- Historic sites and preserved landscapes
- Water adventures including swimming kayaking and paddle boarding
- National Park Lands
- Practical planning notes for access, parking, and timing



TRIP PLANNING ESSENTIALS

The 5 day itinerary can be adapted into a shorter vacation or individual day trips.

Important Tips

- Layered clothing is essential; fog and wind are common year-round
- Bring reusable water bottles, snacks, and sturdy walking or hiking shoes
- Check shuttle schedules for Muir Woods and the [*Presidio GO Shuttle*](#) if traveling car-free
- Download trail maps or PDFs in advance; cell service is limited in the parks
- Stay on marked trails and follow posted regulations
- Practice [*Leave No Trace*](#) principles throughout the entire itinerary

SEASONAL WILDLIFE HIGHLIGHTS

- Whale Watching: Gray whales migrate December–April
- Elephant Seals: December–March at Point Reyes
- Birdlife: Shorebirds & raptors year-round; spring & fall migrations
- Land Wildlife: Observe deer, elk and coyotes from a distance

TRAVELING WITH DOGS

- Dogs are not permitted on most hiking trails, including Muir Woods, Mt. Tamalpais & Point Reyes
- Leashed dogs allowed in designated areas (parking, some beaches, Golden Gate region)
- Always check posted regulations before arrival

LEAVE NO TRACE

- Pack out all trash, including fruit peels; carry reusable bottles & containers
- Stay on designated trails
- Respect wildlife; observe from a distance & do not feed
- Leave rocks, plants and historic items in place

TRIP ESSENTIALS

- Layered clothing for fog and wind
- Water, snacks, sturdy shoes
- Download and print maps before you go
- Camera & binoculars for wildlife



5-DAY TRIP OVERVIEW

Day 1 – Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA)

Explore coastal trails, historic sites, and sweeping views on both sides of the Golden Gate Bridge where city and nature meet.

- Area: San Francisco & Marin County
- Experience: Coastal trails, beaches and preserved military sites
- Activity Level: Moderate
- Notes: A perfect orientation day with both longer hikes and short scenic walks

Days 2 and 3 – Point Reyes National Seashore

Venture into a wild stretch of coastline defined by rugged trails, flowing creeks, dramatic cliffs and abundant wildlife.

- Area: Western Marin County
- Experience: Wilderness hiking, waterfalls and coastal wildlife viewing
- Activity Level: Moderate–Strenuous
- Notes: Early start recommended on Day 1; Combine the 3 Adventure options for 2 full days of exploration

Day 4 – Stinson Beach & Coastal Exploration

Slow the pace with beach time, seaside charm and optional hikes along the Marin coast or into Mt. Tamalpais State Park.

- Area: Marin Coast
- Experience: Beach walks, town exploration, and optional trail segments
- Activity Level: Easy–Strenuous
- Notes: Flexible day—ideal for rest, swimming, or adventurous hikes

Day 5 – Muir Woods National Monument & Marin Headlands

Wander beneath towering old-growth redwoods then return to the rolling headlands for historic landmarks and panoramic ocean views.

- Area: Mill Valley & Mount Tamalpais foothills; Golden Gate National Recreation Area
- Experience: Peaceful trails through Redwood groves & a bit of history with dramatic views
- Activity Level: Easy–Moderate
- Notes: Parking or shuttle reservations required during peak season at Muir Woods; early arrival avoids crowds



DAY 1: GOLDEN GATE NATIONAL RECREATION AREA

The Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA) is a vast network of protected lands woven together by water, hills, and history rather than defined by a single boundary. Stretching across both sides of the Golden Gate Bridge, it connects San Francisco's historic military sites and coastal bluffs with Marin County's headlands, beaches and rolling hills. The bridge links these landscapes—but it's the surrounding trails and shoreline where time tends to slow.

Adventure 1: Coastal Trails & Beach Access

Region: Marin County (north of Golden Gate Bridge)

Trail Stats:

- Muir Beach - Coastal Trail - Fox Loop
- 6.6 mile loop, Moderate
- Elevation Gain: 1,742 ft
- 3.5–4.5 hours

Trailhead & Parking: Muir Beach Parking Lot, 100 Pacific Way, Muir Beach, CA 94965

Fee: Free trail access

Best Time & Season:

- Early morning or late afternoon for a sunset finish
- Weekdays quieter
- Spring (wildflowers), summer (busy), fall (warm & clear), winter (quiet & dramatic)

Clothing & Gear: Layered clothing, sturdy shoes, water, snacks, sunscreen

Amenities: Vault bathrooms

- Muir Beach parking area
- Halfway point on the trail loop at the Tennessee & Coastal Trails junction

Pets: Allowed on 6' leash per [B.A.R.K. Ranger Code](#)

Map and Details: [Beyond the Golden Gate Bridge](#)

Adventure 2: Bridge Views & Short Coastal Walks

Region: San Francisco (south of Golden Gate Bridge)

Trail Stats:

- Coastal Trail from Battery East to Baker Beach
- 4 mile out and back, Easy
- Elevation Gain: 623 ft
- 1.5-2 hours

Trailhead, Parking & Transit:

- [Golden Gate Bridge Visitors Center](#), Golden Gate Bridge Plaza San Francisco, CA 94129
- Street parking and lots; GGB Zone is closest to Trailhead and public restrooms
- [Presidio GO Shuttle](#)

Fee: Free trail access and Presidio GO Shuttle; public transit and parking fees

Best Time & Season: All day, all seasons

Clothing & Gear: Layered clothing, sturdy shoes, water, snacks, sunscreen

Amenities: Public restrooms on [Golden Gate Bridge Plaza](#) and [Baker Beach](#) Parking Lot

Pets: Allowed on 6' leash; Voice-controlled dogs permitted off-leash on Baker Beach

Map & Details: [Beyond the Golden Gate Bridge](#)



DAYS 2 & 3: POINT REYES NATIONAL SEASHORE

Point Reyes National Seashore protects one of the most expansive and untamed coastal landscapes in Northern California. Home to the Phillip Burton Wilderness, the park spans forested ridges, open grasslands, sand dunes, and rugged shoreline, with more than 150 miles of trails and abundant wildlife. Enjoy full exploration days of dramatic scenery, solitude, wildlife sightings and coastal beauty.

Suggested Schedule:

Day 1:

- Adventure 1 (details below)
- Bear Valley Visitor's Center, Point Reyes Station
- Sunset at North Beach; parking lot (85 spaces)
- Spend the night in the region: within the park at [Limantour Lodge](#), or in surrounding towns such as Point Reyes Station and Inverness

Day 2:

- Adventure 2 (details on page 7)
- Adventure 3 (details on page 7)
- Sunset at the Lighthouse

Point Reyes Visitor Centers at a Glance:

- Kenneth C. Patrick: 1 Drakes Beach Road Inverness, CA 94937
 - January–April & June–December; 10 am–4 pm, weekends only
- Point Reyes Lighthouse: 1 Drakes Beach Road Inverness, CA 94937
 - Thursday–Monday, 10 am–4 pm
- Bear Valley: 1 Bear Valley Road Point Reyes Station, CA 94956
 - 9:30 am–5 pm daily; includes food, maps, shuttle info
- For updates, check the [park website](#) or call the office with questions 415-464-5100

Adventure 1: Coast Trail to Alamere Falls

Trail Stats:

- Palomarin Trail - Coast Trail - Wildcat Beach
- 13.6 mile out-and-back, Moderate–Strenuous
- Elevation Gain: 2,034'
- 6–7 hours; Option: finish before 2 pm & drive 65 minutes to Adventure 2, Point Reyes Peninsula

Trailhead & Parking: Palomarin Trailhead Lot (75 spaces), Mesa Road, Bolinas, CA 94924

Fee: Free trail access

Best Time & Season:

- Morning 7-8 am; Check [tide tables](#) to plan start time
- Weekdays quieter
- Spring & summer (wildflowers), fall (warm & clear), winter (wildlife)

Clothing & Gear: Layered clothing, sturdy shoes, water, snacks, sunscreen

Amenities: Vault bathrooms

- Palomarin Trailhead parking area
- Halfway point at Wildcat Beach camping area

Cell Service: limited

Pets: Not allowed; [Pets At Point Reyes](#)

Map and Details: [Point Reyes National Park: Hike to Alamere Falls](#)

SpaceBetweenAdventures.com



DAYS 2 & 3: POINT REYES NATIONAL SEASHORE (CONT.)

Adventure 2: Tomales Point Trail

Trail Stats:

- Tomales Point Trail
- 9.5 mile out-and-back, Moderate–Strenuous with encouraged trailhead trek to McClures Beach, an additional 1 mile out-and-back trail
- Elevation Gain: 1,207'
- 4-6 hours; including stops for views

Trailhead & Parking: Parking lot (20 spaces); overflow parking at McClures Beach Trailhead (25 spaces); Pierce Point Rd, Inverness, CA 94937

Fee: Free trail access

Best Time & Season:

- Weekdays quieter
- Spring & summer (wildflowers), fall (warm & clear), winter (less people)
- Wildlife: Tule Elk (August-October), Gray Whales (winter migration), Humpback Whales (summer), birds (year-round)

Clothing & Gear: Layered clothing, sturdy shoes, water, snacks, sunscreen

Amenities: Vault bathrooms near parking at McClures Beach Trailhead

Cell Service: Limited; download maps before arrival

Pets: Not allowed; [*Pets At Point Reyes*](#)

Map and Details: [*Point Reyes National Park: Tomales Point Trail*](#)

Adventure 3: Point Reyes Lighthouse Region

Drakes Beach View Point, 1 Drakes Beach Road Inverness, CA 94937

- Wildlife: Elephant Seals December–March
- Road open 10 am–4 pm; parking lot (300 spaces)

Chimney Rock Trail:

- Parking lot (20 spaces)
- 1.8 mile out-and-back, Easy
- Elevation Gain: 160 ft
- Binoculars recommended for whales & seals

Point Reyes Lighthouse Visitor Center, 27000 Sir Francis Drake Blvd, Inverness, CA 94937

- Parking lot (38 spaces + 3 ADA spaces) and road side parking
- Open Thursday–Monday, 10 am–4 pm
- Views of ocean & wildlife (seasonal: whales)

Fee: Free trails and Visitor Centers

Clothing & Gear: Layered clothing, sturdy shoes, water, snacks, sunscreen

Amenities: Visitor Centers with restrooms, water, maps, & exhibits

Pets: Not allowed; [*Pets At Point Reyes*](#)

Map and Details: [*Point Reyes National Seashore: Chimney Rock Trail Region*](#)

ELK VIEWING GUIDELINES

- Observe from a distance, moving slowly and speaking quietly.
- Stay on trail. For your safety never move between a calf and cow, 2 bulls or a bull and the group.
- Do not feed elk or any wildlife.
- Leave antlers in the wild. They are a source of calcium for rodents & deer.



DAY 4: STINSON BEACH & COASTAL EXPLORATION

Stinson Beach blends relaxed coastal town energy with easy access to scenic trails and wide stretches of sand. Nestled between the Pacific Ocean and Mount Tamalpais, it's an ideal place to slow down, recharge, or mix beach time with optional hiking. This day can be as restful or as active as you want.

Adventure 1: Beach & Town Exploration

Beach:

- Wander the ~3 mile coast
- Relax on the beach
- Swim, paddleboard or kayak in the ocean
- Surf or windsurf on the waves
- Watch wildlife: shore birds throughout the day & stealthy deer in the dusk hours

Town:

- Explore the small village
- Pick up beach snacks at the local market
- Enjoy a hearty meal at the [*Parkside Cafe*](#) or lighter fare at the [*Breakers Cafe*](#)
- Rent a kayak, wetsuit, surfboard or bicycle at a local outfitter

Parking:

- Stinson Beach lots; seasonal fees may apply
- Minimal spots at restaurants and shops
- Parking area included with overnight lodging

Amenities: Public restrooms, picnic areas

Adventure 2: Hike in Mt. Tamalpais State Park

Choose an easy hike from town along the Dipsea Trail to the Stinson Tree and harness childlike joy while riding the swing hanging from its branches. Or lace up the hiking boots and trek to Cardiac Hill and beyond, completing a long loop on Mt. Tam.

Trailhead & Parking: Walk from town or drive into the State Park for the trailhead of choice.

Fee: Free trail access; State Park lots cost \$8 per day for parking

Best Time & Season:

- Park hours 7 am to sunset year round
- Early start for 10+ mile loops
- Weekdays quieter
- Spring & summer (wildflowers), fall (warm & clear), winter (cool & comfortable)

Clothing & Gear: hiking clothes (layers), shoes and gear

Amenities: Water, snacks and restrooms in town

Cell Service: Available in town and on the beach; limited in areas on the hiking trails

Pets: Are not allowed on trails, dirt roads or in the back country

Leave No Trail: Mushroom collecting is prohibited; cultural and natural resources, such as rocks, plants and animals, are protected by law and must not be disturbed.

Map & Details:

- [*A Coastal Detour Worth Taking: Stinson Beach*](#)
- [*Mt Tamalpais State Park*](#)
- [*AllTrails Maps of Stinson Beach & Mt. Tamalpais State Park*](#)



DAY 5: MUIR WOODS NATIONAL MONUMENT & MARIN HIGHLANDS

Begin the final travel day walking among the old-growth coastal redwoods in Muir Woods National Monument. Following the forest trek, return to the Marin Highlands for sweeping views of the ocean, San Francisco and the rugged coastline below. Visit historic military structures along the hiking path.

Adventure 1: Muir Woods

Trail Stats:

- Trail Loops: Choose .5 to 5+ mile loops
- Elevation Gain: Minimal–Moderate
- Difficulty: Easy–Moderate

Transit & Parking: [Parking and shuttle reservations](#)

Fee: [Park entrance and parking fee](#)

Best Time & Season: Morning or late afternoon; open daily, 8 am to sunset

Clothing & Gear: Layered clothing, sturdy shoes, water, snacks, sunscreen

Amenities:

- Visitor center, 8 am until 30 minutes before sunset
- Water, restrooms, gift shop, cafe

Cell Service: Limited

Pets: Not allowed; [Pet Policy](#)

Map & Details:

- [Muir Woods: Finding Stillness Among Giants](#)
- [National Parks Service, Muir Woods Suggested Hikes](#)

Adventure 2: Marin Headlands & Historic Military Sites

Trail Stats:

- Rodeo Beach Trail, .5 miles out&back, 108 ft elevation
- Battery Mendell Path, 1.7 miles out&back, 75 ft elevation
- Point Bonita Lighthouse: 1 mi, 138 ft; open the 3rd Saturday of the month
- Battery Loop (O'Rorke, Smith Guthrie & Alexander), .7 mile loop, 66 ft elevation

Trailhead & Parking: Multiple lots

Best Time & Season: Sunset for dramatic views; spring for wildflowers

Clothing & Gear: Layered clothing, camera, binoculars, walking shoes

Amenities: Scenic overlooks, picnic areas, vault restrooms; No water available

Cell Service: Limited

Pets: Allowed on 6' leash per [B.A.R.K. Ranger Code](#)

Map & Details:

- [AllTrails Map of all 4 trail options](#)
- [Golden Gate Park Conservancy: Battery Loop](#)
- [National Park Service: Point Bonita Lighthouse](#)
- [Historical Marker Database: Battery Mendell](#)

**ENJOY YOUR ADVENTURE & REMEMBER:
LEAVE WHAT YOU FIND
TAKE HOME PICTURES & MEMORIES**