

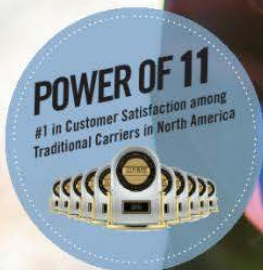
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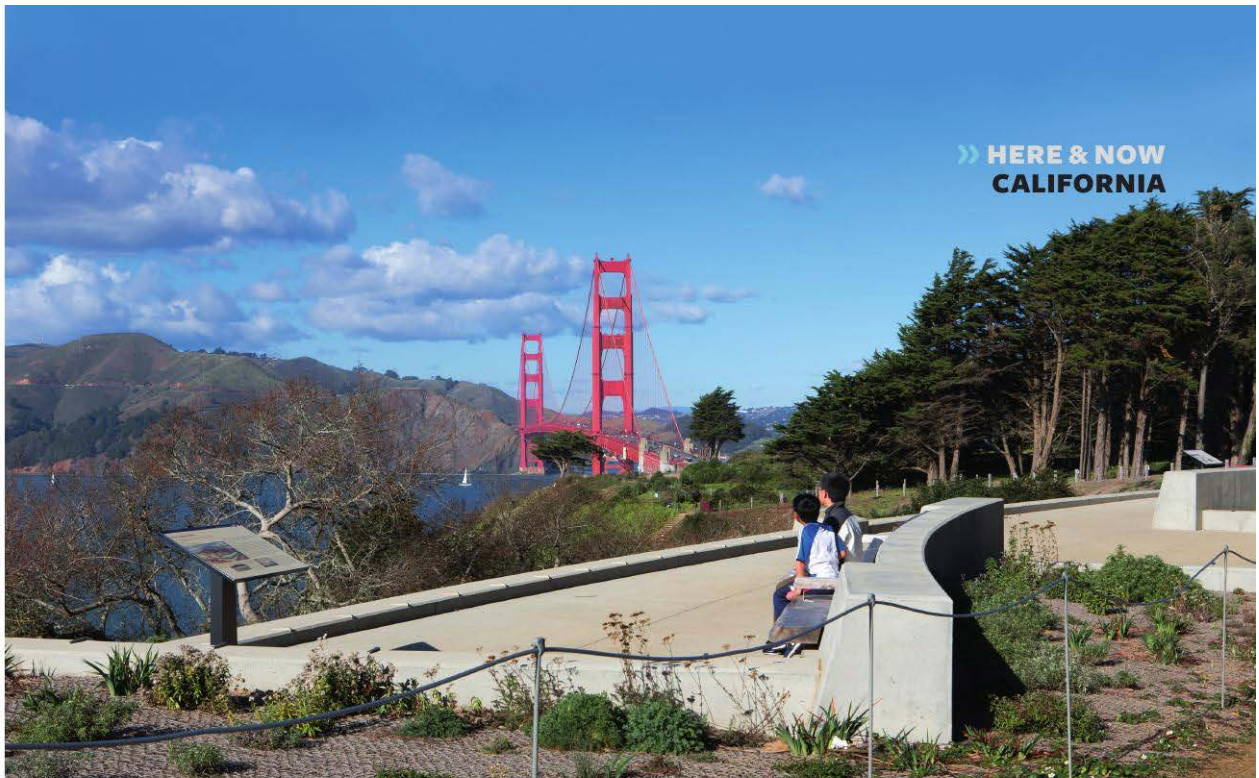
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SAN FRANCISCO'S PRESIDIO TODAY

Grand views and engaging experiences define this area celebrating 25 years as a park

By Renee Brincks

» **Three miles into a hike** on a crisp San Francisco morning, I pause at a crescent-shaped stone terrace overlooking eucalyptus trees and serpentine grasslands. Stairs and gravel paths to my right wind down to El Polín Spring, where native Ohlone communities once gathered and where early-1800s settlers later built adobe homes. Straight ahead, in the distance, sailboats sweep across San Francisco Bay, and a passenger ferry chugs toward Alcatraz Island.

After taking in the view here at the Inspiration Point Overlook, I turn and cross Arguello Boulevard, heading toward a steeplelike cluster of upright Monterey cypress trunks that stretches nearly 100 feet into the sky. This striking work—*Spire*, by the British nature artist Andy Goldsworthy—anchors the southern edge of San Francisco's extraordinary military post turned park, the Presidio.

Starting in 1776, this rugged northern section of the city was a military post for more than 200 years under Mexican, Spanish and American flags. When the

U.S. Army left in 1994, the roughly 1,500-acre Presidio became part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, within the national park system. Today, the Presidio's dramatic urban park space features 24 miles of hiking trails, 25 miles of cycling paths and 10 scenic viewpoints overlooking the Pacific Ocean, San Francisco Bay and the Golden Gate Bridge. And it's all a short drive or a free trip on a PresidioGo shuttle from downtown.

Having explored the Presidio for 10 years, I'm still fascinated by its varied habitats, historical highlights and recreational riches. More than 320 species of birds thrive in the park, and about 60-plus bee species, 30 types of butterflies and 14 native plant communities. The Franciscan manzanita, a native shrub thought, for 70 years, to have been extinct in the wild, was discovered in the Presidio in 2009.

Federal agencies, along with volunteers, continue to restore creeks and watersheds modified during the Presidio's military days. These groups are also



» **The Pacific Overlook, above, is one of several places in the Presidio with excellent views. Andy Goldsworthy's Spire, right, is a unique piece of natural artwork.**

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» **The planned Presidio Tunnel Tops, shown above in a rendering, will include new trails and green space. Modern Mexican dishes at the restaurant Arguello include the tempting Carnitas Tacos, right.**

reintroducing native animals ranging from western pond turtles to chorus frogs to three-spine stickleback fish.

Whether you're strolling the Crissy Field waterfront or tackling the sand-strewn stairs that rise from Baker Beach, the Presidio promises spectacular views. Just off Lincoln Boulevard, near several hiking trails that weave along the park's perimeter at its western edge, the Pacific Overlook offers panoramas that stretch from the wind-swept Lands End area to the Golden Gate Bridge. This vantage point is one of my favorite spots in San Francisco.

Nature isn't the Presidio's only draw. The San Francisco National Cemetery commemorates the fallen on a scenic slope above San Francisco Bay. Galleries at the Presidio Officers' Club, in the central Main Post area of the park, showcase the Presidio's military, archaeological and cultural history. At the northeast end of the Main Parade Ground lawn, the Presidio Visitor Center is packed with maps and interactive exhibits that introduce attractions and activities. Nearby, the Inn at the Presidio and the new Lodge at the Presidio occupy former barracks and offer comfortable options for overnighting in the national park.

Several restaurants in the Presidio welcome guests. Presidio Social Club dishes up seasonal comfort food in another repurposed military structure, while Sessions at the Presidio spotlights craft beers.

Two-time James Beard Award winner Traci Des Jardins oversees three establishments within the park. At The Commissary, she has turned a former mess hall into a fine-dining destination, with Spanish-inspired California fare.



Her restaurant Arguello, in the Presidio Officers' Club building, features modern Mexican fare and housemade tortillas. Her quick-serve cafe Transit offers quality casual foods that include sandwiches, wood-fired pizzas and to-go snacks.

Starting April 7 and running through mid-October, approximately 25 mobile food vendors will return to the park each week (with a rotating lineup) for the seventh season of the Presidio Picnic. This popular event, held on Sundays on the Main Parade Ground lawn, features fried chicken, falafel, noodle bowls and other treats, all prepared by local culinary entrepreneurs.

Within the next few years, 14 newly landscaped acres will link the park's central hub and the city's northern waterfront for the first time in more than 80 years. When the roadway formerly known as Doyle Drive was built as a New Deal project in 1936, it cut across the Presidio between San Francisco's Marina neighborhood and the Golden Gate Bridge. That roadway, which was rerouted through tunnels and renamed the Presidio Parkway between 2009 and 2015, will next be topped with playgrounds, walking paths, picnic spots, gardens and green space designed by the team behind New York City's High Line. This Presidio Tunnel Tops project is expected to open in 2021.

Park administrators will unveil final design plans for the project this summer. It's the latest chapter for this dynamic, under-the-radar urban playground that is the Presidio, and I can't wait to explore it. ✈

Renee Brincks writes from San Francisco.

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