

# Discover San Francisco's Spectacular Presidio



By [Renee Brincks](#)

**The military post-turned-national park has a fascinating history and contains some of the city's best attractions.**



Aerial view of The Presidio. (©Presidio Trust)

A patchwork of eucalyptus groves, freshwater creeks, wildflower-splashed sand dunes and coastal prairie covers [The Presidio](#), a former military post and modern-day national park in northwest San Francisco. Part of the [Golden Gate National Recreation Area](#), this 1,491-acre playground appeals to a wide audience with its rich history and architecture, vast natural diversity and exciting recreational activities.



Military troops in 1909. (©Robert W. Bowen Family)

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Native Ohlone people hunted and fished on the Presidio's windswept shoreline before Spanish soldiers settled there in 1776. Their adobe structures above the Golden Gate established a fortress (called a presidio) that fell under the Mexican flag in 1821 and, by 1846, was occupied by American forces. The Presidio remained an important outpost after California statehood in 1850, eventually expanding to serve as a major West Coast military hub.

The U.S. Army transferred the property to the [National Park Service](#) (NPS) in 1994, after the base closed. The park service and the [Presidio Trust](#) now partner to manage 991 acres of open space and more than 700 buildings that house residents, nonprofits, businesses and the charming Inn at the Presidio, housed in a 1903 building, which opened in 2011.

"People are surprised by the size of this park," says Presidio Trust spokesperson Dana Polk. "They are surprised to find so many hidden nooks and crannies. Just exploring is part of the fun."



"Wood Line" installation by nature artist Andy Goldsworthy. (©Brian Vahey)

Exploring starts with 24 miles of trails and eight scenic overlooks that provide postcard-worthy views of the [Golden Gate Bridge](#) and San Francisco Bay. Three installations by nature artist [Andy Goldsworthy](#) grace the park, inspired by 300 acres of pine, cypress and eucalyptus trees planted there in the late 1800s. The Presidio also draws outdoor enthusiasts with gems such as [Baker Beach](#), [Presidio Golf Course](#) and [Rob Hill Campground](#). Perched atop the park's highest point, it is San Francisco's only overnight campsite.



Crissy Field marsh. (©Parks Conservancy)

[Crissy Field](#), the lush parkland outlining the Presidio's northern waterfront, is a

local favorite. Today, visitors will find picnic tables, beaches and kite-friendly grasslands, plus a climbing gym, trampoline center and nearby bike rentals. But, just 20 years ago, the former airfield was all asphalt and abandoned military buildings. Through an ambitious renovation project supported by community donors and volunteers, the [Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy](#) (GGNPC) and the park service transformed the industrial area into a recreational treasure.

Crissy Field's rebirth shaped other post-to-park restoration initiatives in the Presidio.

"We have the opportunity to re-wild the Presidio, bringing nature back in high-density areas," says Lew Stringer, Presidio Trust supervisory restoration ecologist. He helped revamp Crissy Field while working for the GGNPC and NPS, and he currently manages efforts to remove military infrastructure and restore native plants and wildlife in the Presidio.



Batteries to Bluff Trail. (©Presidio Trust)

Stringer calls the park "one of the last great harbors of biodiversity in San Francisco," citing some 330 native plant species that grow there – including the rare Franciscan manzanita, which was thought extinct until a biologist rediscovered it along Doyle Drive in 2009. Naturalists have partnered with the [San Francisco Zoo](#) to reintroduce western pond turtles to the park. Visitors can also view in-progress environmental restoration along Mountain Lake, near the park's southern boundary, and in the Tennessee Hollow watershed.

An exhibit opening in late 2015 will further spotlight the Presidio's changing landscapes. It will be one of several displays in the newly renovated Presidio Officers' Club (open fall 2014), a former military social center built around one of two remaining adobe buildings in San Francisco (the other is Mission Dolores). The refurbished education and event space also houses the Presidio Heritage Center, which traces park history. In conjunction with the Officers' Club reopening, the Presidio Trust is expanding its free history, music and art programs.







Off the Grid Picnic at the Presidio. (©Off the Grid)

History buffs can learn more by viewing the park's ongoing archaeological digs or taking guided and self-guided Presidio tours. (Access maps and schedules via the park's website or visitor centers.) After a history lesson, some head to the [Walt Disney Family Museum](#) to explore the famed animator's life through interactive exhibits and original art. In front of the museum, on the Main Post Parade Ground, [Off the Grid](#) gathers food trucks for two summer-season favorites: Picnic in the Presidio on Sunday afternoons, and the Thursday evening Twilight in the Presidio.

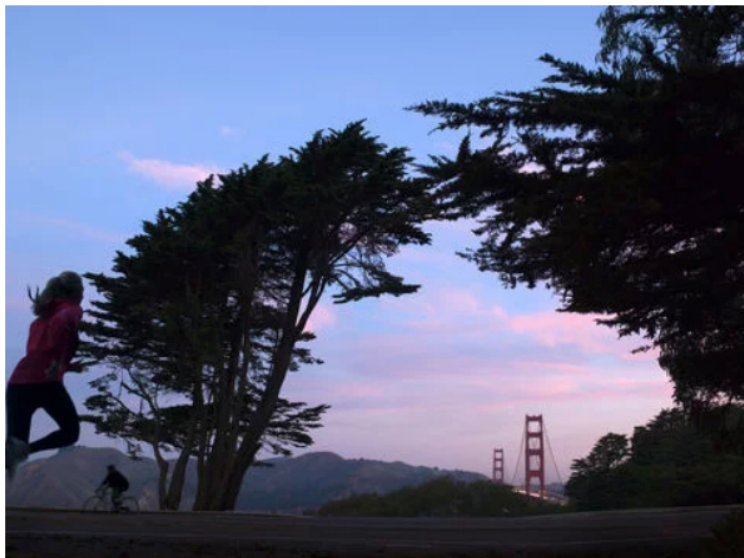


Tapas at the park's newest restaurant. (©The Commissary)

Other dining options include [Presidio Social Club](#), an upscale comfort food restaurant near the Lombard gate, and several coffee shops and cafes. The Presidio Trust partnered with James Beard Award-winner Traci Des Jardins on [The Commissary](#), a buzz-worthy bistro that opened in May 2014. Housed in a former mess hall, the restaurant serves Spanish and California fare and features furnishings made with wood salvaged from park restoration projects.

Reinvention continues to draw guests to this ever-evolving corner of San Francisco.

"Crissy Field is heavily visited, of course," says Polk, "but the coming year is when the rest of the Presidio really rolls out the welcome mat for the public."



## GETTING THERE

The [PresidiGo Shuttle](#) (free during non-commute hours and on weekends) serves the Presidio's most popular sites plus some downtown San Francisco stops. Within the park, two shuttle routes run on continuous 30-minute loops in the Presidio Hills and Crissy Field areas, connecting with San Francisco and Marin County via [MUNI](#) and [Golden Gate Transit](#) buses.

Vehicle parking is also available throughout the Presidio; look for signs that outline hours and payment details.



Crissy Field. (©Mason Cummings/Parks Conservancy)

## PRESIDIO PARKWAY

A major Presidio road project is replacing a 78-year-old freeway with tunnels that channel traffic toward the Golden Gate Bridge – and 10 acres of new parkland on top. Construction on the Presidio Parkway, which moves traffic out of site and reconnects Crissy Field with the rest of the Presidio, is scheduled to wrap up in 2016. Five firms are competing to design the resulting public space that will then enhance one of the world's largest urban national parks.



Renee Brincks

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