

CA - San Francisco County - Beaches

Fort Funston Beach and Park FEB 2001 ★★☆☆

Kind: Major beach under GGNRA with sand cliffs and significant coastal strand.

Location: From Skyline Blvd. John Muir Drive expanded shoulder parking at 0.6 mi. south of JCT Great Hwy or main entrance with ample parking at 0.9 mi. south of JCT Great Hwy.

Beach Access: From the main entrance, there is a 'rope ladder' trail which descends steeply through sand about 250' (elevation change) to the beach. Small multi-use (equestrian/foot) paths access the sizeable bluff area south of here. A main trail extends north from parking into the upper Fort Funston area. From the John Muir Entrance, a second trail descends from the cliffs but requires more hiking to reach. From the end of Sloat is a long parking area which is often full. This 'flatlands' approach requires a 0.8 mi. beach walk to get to where the cliffs begin. The best way to access the best beach is from the main parking area. Note however, that in spite of its huge capacity this lot can also fill up on a popular day.

Facilities: Main Entrance: Handglider staging/assembly area, vault toilets (plus handicapped), water, phone, paved trails.

Cost: No fee. Large parking area at main entrance. Open sunrise to sunset for the Fort Funston park area. Main parking is gated.

Dogs: The upper Fort Funston area has developed a huge tradition for dog walking. It is perhaps the most dog-dense trail in the city. Dogs are posted on-leash here, but in reality this is not enforced and dogs are off leash everywhere. The beach area is paradise for dogs and is recommended as the premier off-leash location in the city.

Fort Funston is especially noteworthy in terms of its interesting coastline features, both man made and natural. That it exists within San Francisco, so close to the urban sprawl seems both a blessing and a curse. A blessing obviously, because it is wonderful to have such an astonishing area so close by, and a curse because the area receives such heavy use that it is destined to be in need of heavy protection measures by GGNRA to keep it from being 'visited' into complete oblivion. Considering how much traffic the upper area of Fort Funston receives, especially from dog owners and their pets, it is actually pretty impressive how the area looks today. This was once, not long ago, a sublime example of *dune strand* habitat when almost all of that type of habitat had been destroyed locally by the presence of San Francisco itself. Perfect, pristine dunes of soft, light, small grained sand arching in and around stands of low, windblown cypress trees. Dune grasses, native plants, and large areas of ice-plant, but mostly those incredible sand dunes, made it so wonderful and so exciting to explore. It was an island, a *large* island. This kind of thing had been largely wiped out in the Sunset District, along Ocean Beach and in the Presidio (with minor exceptions). Dune strand habitat is today considered endangered and to be coveted *all up and down the California coast*. Special recent attention to restoration at the Presidio in this regard demonstrates this locally. The evolution of upper Fort Funston, naturalistically, was that it was being trampled to death *because* it was such a fun area to roam through, and much damage has been inflicted this fragile type of environment. Today it is difficult to find a pristine dune north of the main entrance, but a few can be if one looks hard. GGNRA has taken a pro-active role in helping to restore the area: planting natives, roping off trails to keep the public (and especially their dogs) confined to trails. It is not like it was back in the seventies and early eighties, but the process of restoration is generally a slow one, and sometimes not even possible.

Another aspect sublimely intriguing in the recent past but today much more limited, was the exploration of the various battery ruins scattered about like satellites, and especially the central mother structure, *Battery Baker at Fort Funston* constructed 1938. This was, and is, a two winged concrete monstrosity recessed into the dunes to camouflage it against incoming warships which were predicted likely to attack the U.S. mainland from Japan. The structure had enormous long corridors which in the absence of any electrical lighting, was almost completely pitch black. They adjoined many side rooms which were truly lightless, the kind of place where many a dare was proposed and carried out. Most amazing was the *sound*. Absolutely unbelievable refraction and echoes could be achieved in this highly charged space, filled with imagined ghosts from the past. No other accessible bunker in the San Francisco area, and there are many, was so extensive and deep as this one. It was quite macabre, scary, exciting and wonderful. It was inevitable, either due to some unfortunate event or through speculation along those lines, that the interior was to be completely sealed off with great steel doors. This 'sealing off' has been the case for all sizeable battery ruins within the GGNRA domain as a matter of policy, and it is easy to see why. They are in fact dangerous for a number of reasons: falling injuries, tetanus from rusted metal, ticks from ceilings,

ambush, getting lost, ghosts, junkies, whinos, gangs, and just the sheer scarieness of utter darkness. Today, the battery remnants that exist around the area continue their dive into oblivion. Sinking, cracking, being buried in blowing sand, and simply falling off the cliffs to the beach below. Walking along Fort Funston Beach is actually one of the most dramatic ways to encounter them, plunged into the beach, all having fallen from about 200' above.

There are other things that Fort Funston is quite distinct and special for. The handgliders and *hang* gliders (where one sits under a parachute with arm controls) are a unique culture that has sprung up here. The terrain is ideal: a long sandy beach for miles in either direction under a long raised bluff of friendly terrain substantially higher than the beach and set away from the main road and any buildings. The staging area for the central launch point is at the main parking lot where a plot has been set aside for assembly and disassembly. There is no need to search for a metaphor to describe the sight. Handgliders in flight are like prehistoric birds floating luxuriously on the breeze up and down the strip about 200'-400' overhead. There are so very few local places which have all the ideal conditions like here at Fort Funston that the phenomenon is essentially unique to this spot in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Another very intriguing feature of this area are the bluffs extending south of the main parking lot. This 'no mans lands' dense with bushes and low trees extends towards Daly City into the distance for miles and may appear at first to be essentially unexplorable. But the fact is, it is passable through an extensive network of small trails like a great net of invisible strands cast willy nilly towards the south. It is the closest thing to true wilderness which still exists in this area and is quite exciting. The traditional (and phenomenal) dune strand habitat spoken of earlier does not really represent this landscape, but what it may lack in that regard it makes up for with other things. First and foremost is that it allows the opportunity to *truly explore* the natural landscape in a relatively secluded way to remain alive. This is one of two places where this is true in San Francisco. The other is more limited, but exists along the cliffside habitat between Land's End and the Sea Cliff District. The area will stretch seamlessly into San Mateo County, finally ending somewhere around John Daly Blvd in Daly City. It reveals some wonderful botanical ecosystems relatively undisturbed and a great range of marvelously secluded spots. The only consistent traffic it receives is from equestrian use based at the Olympic Stables near John Daly Blvd. Lines of horses passing through tend to stay to the most western trail which follows the cliff edge.

Finally, and most notably of all, is Fort Funston Beach, a continuous stretch of beachline which connects northerly to Ocean Beach and southerly to Burton Beach. It is a beach which goes on 'forever' or more precisely, 4.6 miles to Mussel Rock in Pacifica. A formidable 'staircase' made of rope and logs descends about 250' (elevation change) from the main parking lot at Fort Funston down to the beach through soft sand (it can be considered a difficult climb to get back up on). The beach is amazing from so many points of view. Photographically it is stunning and filled with interesting possibility. Geologically it is fascinating. Biologically it is the best S.F. beach for prolific seabird activity at the wave line, especially sandpipers, as sandcrabs are so abundant here. The list goes on and on. It is *the* most wonderful place to let dogs run free in San Francisco. It has by far the greatest preponderance of ruins, from old pier remnants to collapsed battery ruins from the cliffs above to continuously operating storm drains adorned in graffiti to the point of being magnificent in that regard (from an artistic point of view). Rock formations emerge periodically from the sand and are usually interesting.

Perhaps the most amazing feature are the cliffs which back the beach. Ranging in height from 10' to perhaps 400' at the high point in Daly City, these cliffs bear the most astonishing patterns and textures, combining loosely packed sand with tightly packed sand above a substantial layer of virtually pure clay which contains the water table. Below that harder rock forms emerge in an ever changing evolution of layers, all sheared off in cross-section at the cliff face. The various forms that these combining strata can form is fascinating. One special feature which can periodically be seen is the water at the water table boundary pouring right out of the cliff face and dribbling down the clay which contains it. All these amazing features combine with the fact that the beach is sparsely populated, and the farther one wanders away from the main access point, the more it approaches total seclusion.

One aspect of this beach which is sometimes disappointing is that the extent to which this beach is wide and dry is highly variable. This is a flat beach with shallow insertion into the sea, similar to Ocean Beach. The break zone is an enormous landscape of frothing water extending hundreds of yards out into the sea with 4-5 wave breaks being common. It is therefore sensitive enough to tidal differences

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that the beach can range from being high and dry to non-existent, especially during storms. This is something to keep in mind. The only thing the beach is not good for are tidepools. It is excellent for collecting beautiful stones (it is non unusual to find fossils) and shells, and is usually free of kelp. Its greatest qualities are its a) fantastic cliffs, b) extensive potential for various ruins and c) great explorable expanses. All in all, it carries the highest recommendation for a San Francisco beach.

Best Features: Number one rated beach in San Francisco. Vast, explorable, interesting area above the ocean. Beachline has interesting cliffs which create physical separation from the city. Fantastic cliff forms. There is no fee and there is ample parking at the main entrance. The popularity of hand gliding adds to the area as they are visually interesting themselves when in flight. The beachline extends for 4.6 miles to the south.

Worst Features: Access back to the parking lot *from* the beach is strenuous. The beach can be so variable in width as to not be reliably accessible at all times. Battery Baker has been sealed off from all public access to the interior of the structure. The area can be crowded near the main entrance and the smaller parking area at John Muir Drive is often full. Massive dog walking and general heavy use of the upper park can be a detriment to the quality of the natural experience. The sensitive *dune strand* habitat at upper Fort Funston is in the process of restoration but has been seriously impacted over the years by heavy use. The area is commonly windy to the point where the cold and/or flying sand are an irritant.

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