

CA - San Francisco County - Parks/Preserves

The Presidio MAY 2001 ★★+

Type: National Park, 1,480 acres.

Entrance Location: Multiple access points: a) El Camino Del Mar of 25th Av, b) Arguello & West Pacific, c) Presidio & Pacific, d) Broadway & Lyon (pedestrian only), e) Lombard & Lyon, f) last northbound 101 exit just south of toll plaza of Golden Gate Bridge. Hwy 1 and 101 are controlled exit expressways and offer no other access than (f). The most major uncontrolled street penetration is Lincoln Blvd off El Camino Del Mar. Arguello is also recommended. Presidio becoming Lincoln to Halleck to Mason is recommended for Crissy Field.

Facilities: Extensive. A partial listing includes: 9 picnic areas, National Park Service Visitor Center on Montgomery (9a-5p daily, 415.561.4323), Burger King off Lincoln at main Parade Ground, Presidio Golf Course with restaurant and clubhouse (see text), Baker Beach, Julius Kahn Playground, and many historical attractions (see text). The Presidio Trust can be contacted at 415.561.5300.

Fee-Hours: No fee to enter or park anywhere *at this time* (may change). No general curfew noted. 7pm curfew at Bakers Beach but no fee. Fort Point is free but closes at 5pm.

Dogs: Off-leash is good at Baker Beach and Crissy Field. Otherwise The Presidio is not great for dogs off leash. Poison oak, sensitive habitats, few fields, lots of streets.

Depth of Exploration: Numerous visits still only constitute a moderate probe. Not complete. Coast Trail partially explored. Ecology Trail fully explored.

The record for the largest man made park in the world perhaps should be given to the Presidio since every tree here was planted by the military, it is larger than Golden Gate Park, and it is now a National Park. It was in fact the largest tree planting/landscaping project ever performed by the U.S. military and continues to hold that record to the present day. It is an effort that has permanently transformed 1,480 acres of open 'coastal prairie' into a jungle of cypress and eucalyptus. The Presidio has some of the nicest cypress groves in the city, but it should be noted that this is an artificially introduced environment. Also, the Presidio is not by design a park at all. It is a military city, a city within a city, and although park efforts may today focus on the natural habitat, it cannot be denied that a huge aspect of their role is appropriately bound to historic preservation. The Presidio has remained in military use until only recently when the Clinton administration cut it from the list of useful bases. Since funding for conversion to a National Park was problematic and sell-off to private interest was not acceptable to the people of San Francisco, the Presidio has become the focus for an ingenious new prototypal model: a financially self-sustaining National Park. The presiding body is called *The Presidio Trust*, which handles all aspects of the Presidio except the coastal margin. The coastal belt remains under the purview of The Golden Gate National Recreational Association (GGNRA). GGNRA jurisdiction includes Baker Beach, The Coast Trail, Fort Point, Alcatraz Island, etc. The Trusts' plan is quite clever. People can come live in the Presidio as long as their major occupation *is* the Presidio in some regard. Private business will be allowed in to lease, but only those selected to make a meaningful positive contribution to the community as a whole. One of the biggest takers, interestingly, has been LucasFilm Studios. Opportunities for the community to participate in educational and production oriented aspects of this company should be along the lines of what the Trust envisions. It can reasonably be assumed that in general the future looks bright for the Presidio, with no shortage of manpower to maintain, restore, and enhance the park.

Considering the Presidio on its present merits as a park, one is first confronted with a reality that probably served the military well if they were ever to be invaded by sea. The complex is a maze, an amazing maze actually. It is a great opportunity to put the map *away* and allow oneself to get really lost, by car, by bike, but hopefully not on foot. There are some tremendous features here, both naturalistically and historically but most of them are found along the outskirts. Baker Beach is perhaps the second finest large beach in San Francisco (Fort Funston Beach being the first, Ocean Beach the last). The *Presidio Cliffs* at Lagoon Court is chosen as one of the 15 great natural highlights of the city. Fort Point is a Civil War era fort and visual tour de force positioned dramatically under the bridge. The Crissy Field coastal margin has been the focus of wetland redevelopment. The Palace of Fine Arts is an amazing 1915 World Exposition historical landmark which supports The Exploratorium, a fantastic science and discovery museum. The interior of the Presidio is marked by miles and miles of roads and military housing all in the same beige and brick red color scheme. The massive Presidio Golf Course takes up about one-eighth of the entire area. The golf course dates back to 1895 as do many of the battery ruins, batteries designed for attack by sea. Officer housing is generally more recent than this, ranging from the early 1900s to 1953 (except around the central parade grounds where they date back to 1862). Picnic areas exist at El Polin

Spring, Julius Kahn Playground, Rob Hill (elevation 384'), at Mountain Lake, under the Golden Gate Bridge Visitor Center, and at Baker Beach. The nicest table settings are at Baker Beach, followed by Crissy Field and El Polin Spring. One can expect grills wherever there are tables.

The most beautiful and dramatic areas in all the Presidio are the coastal cliffs and bluffs between Baker Beach and the bridge, but there is an extremely rare occurrence of serpentine grassland inland at Inspiration Point along Arguello. Serpentine grassland, although not scenically spectacular, is ecologically spectacular and on the brink of disappearance in the Bay Area. Serpentine deposits create a mineral content hostile to invasive annual grasses which allows pockets of original native bunchgrasses and other rare wildflowers to thrive. This patch of grassland is the centerpiece of the Ecology Trail (2.14 miles) which is discussed further on.

In summary, the finest areas in the Presidio are as follows from a moderate (but not complete) probe. The coastal overlook from Lagoon Court as well as paths down to the rugged beaches here. The new Crissy Field and Golden Gate Promenade along the north waterfront to Fort Point. Fort Point itself for its dramatic positioning under the Golden Gate Bridge. The Palace of Fine Arts, both as an architectural wonder of huge archways and for the wonderful lake around it with swans and a fountain. An excellent map of the Presidio is available free from the Visitor Information Center around the central parade grounds on Montgomery (open daily 9a-5p).

Areas distinctly not nice (presently) are Mountain Lake which is in desperate need of attention, The Ecology Trail which is not pretty and is difficult to follow, and the Coastal Trail between Baker Beach and Battery Dynamite because it stays too close to Lincoln Blvd.

Overall Best Presidio Features: Huge area has some of the most beautiful cypress groves to be found in the city. The coastal section is rugged and extraordinary. Historically relevant with military structures from the Civil War to the present with battery ruins. Recently established as a National Park. Elaborate network of roads will wrap two times around the moon when put end to end and are fun to explore. Incredible wetland restoration at Crissy Field, based on a grant from the Walter Haas Foundation.

Overall Worst Presidio Features: Without a military interest, the area can fail to inspire. Overall the natural environment has been so radically altered from its indigenous state that it has less natural appeal than many other parks, except for the coast areas. Not strong for its picnic areas, the best being Baker Beach. Mountain Lake is not very nice. Biking is difficult in the Presidio because of steep grades.

Baker Beach: Access off Bowley. Two parking lots can easily fill on weekends. Picnic tables with grills around parking area, water, no fee, close at 7pm. For more on Baker Beach, see *Beaches: Baker Beach*.

Fort Point: General area (parking lot, etc.) closed sunset to sunrise. Fort open to public until 5pm, closing promptly at that time. The structure is closely supervised by a custodial staff of park rangers. There is no fee. Fort Point is extremely windy and a tourist magnet. There are historical displays on-site, including military uniforms and periphernalia in cases. A fantastic aspect here is the Golden Gate Bridge as it rises up over the fort.

[Fort Point was constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers between 1853 and 1861 to prevent entrance of a hostile fleet into San Francisco Bay.

The fort was designed to mount 126 massive cannon. Rushed to completion at the beginning of the Civil War, Fort Point was first garrisoned in February of 1861 by Company I, 3rd U.S. Artillery Regiment. The fort was occupied throughout the Civil War, but the advent of faster, more powerful rifled cannon made brick forts such as Fort Point obsolete. In 1886 the troops were withdrawn, and the last cannon were removed about 1900. The fort was then used for storage and training purposes for many years.

Between 1933 and 1937 the fort was used as a base of operations for the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge. During World War II, Fort Point was occupied by about 100 soldiers who manned searchlights and rapid-fire cannon mounted atop the fort as part of the protection of a submarine net strung across the entrance to the Bay.

Fort Point is the only third system brick fort on the west coast of the United States. It became a National Historic Site on October 16th, 1970.]³

Crissy Field: On May 6, 2001, Crissy Field officially kicked off its grand re-opening after nearly two years of redevelopment. This very comprehensive restoration has focussed on an impressive 'recreation' of sandy coastal strand habitat. The park is said to mimic a return to how the area was back in Ohlone indian times and is very much like a museum recreation, similar to what has been done in Strybing Arboretum with habitat recreations. This wetland 'museum' includes

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a meticulous treatment of 0.8 mile of shoreline, restoring it to sand dunes covered with a great variety of indigenous plants. It also includes a quarter mile long tidal estuary with a sandy island that birds are instantly adopting. The effort has been so masterfully executed that it appears a perfect recreation of an untouched state. To keep it this way, restored areas are permanently quarantined with rope barriers. The necessity of this is exaggerated by the intense popularity of the new Crissy Field. A pedestrian promenade passes through the length like a great gravelly-sand freeway over asphalt. It is packed with park commuters, and intervalled with benches, plaques about the history, and beach access points (required). As a part of San Francisco's recent past, Crissy Field has spent its life as undeveloped open space which served the city as the great gathering place for 4th of July fireworks displays. Before that, it was merely an area the navy could find little use for. The renovation today reflects a new understanding and appreciation of the importance of coastal wetland as part of the ecosystem. This importance is as a filtering interface with watershed that keeps the environment clean. This was not widely understood until recently, and historically marsh has been viewed as useless and exploited for landfill. This particular renovation is more aesthetic than functional, but mirrors other projects all around the bay to restore significant areas of bay marsh.

Crissy Field also has a long beach, large grassy fields, and picnic areas on the west end. Mason St. runs alongside and now bears three extra lanes in addition to two traffic lanes. There are two bike/skate lanes and a pedestrian lane above curb. The gravelly 'promenade' is separated from Mason by about 400'. The grassy areas have a bushy, low maintenance grass which is difficult to run on. The area is usually too windy for frisbee but excellent for kites. Dogs on leash. The beach runs the entire 0.8 mile strip. It is bland but very clean and of course with an interesting channel view.

Palace of Fine Arts: The following historical comment on the architect comes from: www.exploratorium.edu/palace/. ["The task of creating a Palace of Fine Arts for the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition fell to the architect Bernard R. Maybeck, then fifty years old and known for his innovative ideas. Setting to work on this new project, he chose as his theme a Roman ruin, mutilated and overgrown, in the mood of a Piranesi engraving. But this ruin was not to exist solely for itself to show "the mortality of grandeur and the vanity of human wishes Although it was meant to give delight by its exterior beauty, its purpose was also to offer all visitors a stimulating experience within doors."]

Truly, Maybeck's vision has been achieved with regard to the incredible arched doorway spaces which dominate not only the central dome, but also the flying wings of colonnades. This tour de force of space should be experienced first hand. It is also inspiring photographically, although difficult to photograph well. The surrounding lake is also beautiful, and reflects the main rotunda in the water. It is a testament to creativity and what can be accomplished given the talent, the will and the resources.

The Exploratorium: "The Museum of Science, Art, and Human Perception" Museum Hours: Summer (Memorial Day to Labor Day): Open 7 days a week, 10a - 6p, Wednesdays to 9p. Winter (Labor Day to Memorial Day): Open Tuesday through Sunday, 10a - 5p, Wednesdays to 9p. Closed Monday. Closed holidays. General Admission: Adults - \$9.00, Students (over 18 with ID) - \$7.00, Seniors (65+) - \$7.00, People with Disabilities - \$5.00, Youths (ages 6-17) - \$5.00, Children (ages 3-5) - \$2.50, Children under 3 - FREE. Visit: www.exploratorium.edu/about/index.html.

The Ecology Trail: (2.14 mi.) G2-4S2F2-3B2M3P1

The centerpiece of the Ecology Trail loop is a tiny patch of Serpentine Grassland located at Inspiration Point. This makes it ecologically interesting as one of the most endangered ecosystems in North America, on the brink of extinction, and remaining in only two tiny places Bay Area wide. Still, as a scenic nature trail it is just not very good, and it is extremely difficult to follow. There are perhaps a million forks, junctions, alternate paths and transition areas, none of them marked. It is difficult not to get lost and hardly worth the effort. Still this is perhaps *the* a major hiking trail in The Presidio aside from the Coastal Trail which is also not very good, and so its detailed path is recorded in events. Probably the nicest features exist along the western section not far from the parking area at Inspiration Point. Here there is the *Serpentine Habitat* field, highly coveted and protected by fences. The virtually vanished habitat is said to support the rare *Presidio Clarkia* (*Clarkia franciscana*) and *Marin Dwarf Flax* (*Hesperololan congestum*). There is also the rare *Franciscan Manzanita* occurring in the Presidio. Restoration efforts have an uphill battle to say the least. North from the parking lot is an unusual redwood grove and good opportunity to explore into the bush with little poison oak. Poison oak is *abundant* in the Presidio in general however,

so beware. The rest of the trail is almost more interesting for things like El Polin Spring picnic clearing and the Lovers Lane section, which is claimed to be the oldest path remaining essentially as it once was back in the time of the Civil War. Otherwise eucalyptus, dusty sand, trying desperately to not lose the trail.

Events for the Ecology Trail (from Inspiration Point): *in lieu of a detailed map*
0.0: spur descends from parking area to a loop over the serpentine field (this loop is not actually the Ecology Trail but go right anyway).
0.16: cross junction (go left, other options lead to the street and Julia Kahn).
0.28: trail (right) cuts up to Julie Kahn, stay straight.
0.39: cross junction (both left and right are the Ecology Trail), go right.
0.57: El Polin Spring: recessed picnic clearing, 6 tables, extensive grills, access also from MacArthur St, continue via stairs climbing to south.
0.64: Dirt parking area for Julie Kahn off Portola. Softball field, basketball, tennis courts. Continue left bordering softball field, straight ahead goes to street.
0.75: path to right, stay straight
0.81: cross junction, take left fork
0.92: join Lovers Lane trail, go left
1.39: cross Sumner and MacArthur, straight
1.46: cross Bernard and Presidio, follow Presidio
1.53: cross Funston, go left
1.70: trail resumes conspicuously at gate
1.73: trail junction, go left
1.79: parking area on left with gate off Barnard, continue straight
1.94: good opportunity to penetrate into bush
2.08: fork, rejoin serpentine loop, go right
2.11: spur up to parking area, go right
2.14: parking area

The Presidio Trust website indicates the existence of more trails here than The Ecology and Coast Trails which can at least be considered the two main hikes. Trust plans for future trails include the following statement: [The GMPA identified the potential for 11 miles of hiking trails and 14 miles of bicycle routes throughout the Presidio. A Presidio-wide trail planning effort is to begin late summer 1999 and run twelve to eighteen months; the planning effort will be a partnership between the National Park Service, the Presidio Trust, and will seek the involvement of interested individuals and trail organizations. The existing designated Presidio hiking trails includes the Ecology Trail, Lover's Lane, Bay Area Ridge Trail (BART), Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail, Coastal Trail, and Bay Trail. Issues to be addressed will include: trail accessibility, diversity of trail types, multi-users issues, site restoration and trail obliteration, linkages between important Presidio features, signage and mapping, the enhancement of regional trail linkages, sustainability, and establishment of a trails stewardship program.]⁴

Presidio Cliffs: High above the thin strips of beach which base the tall cliffs north of Baker Beach, there is an ocean lookout parking area close to the bridge. The parking lot is not evident from Lincoln Blvd and is therefore little known (*access via Lagoon Court*). The view to the bridge and across the Golden Gate is perhaps the most impressive in existence. There is a network of interconnecting trails which scale down the cliff and one of them provides access to these remote beaches, thin strips of smooth sand amidst Faustian, vicious rocks. This area is windy and beautiful. It exists amidst a number of camouflaged battery ruins. This spot is one of the 15 chosen highlights of San Francisco.

Presidio Golf Course: [The historic Presidio Golf Course is a challenging 6,477-yard, par 72 public course located in the heart of San Francisco, just 10 minutes from downtown. Originally built in 1895, the course was established on a U.S. Army Post by a group of civilians and open only to military personnel and members of a small private club. The golf course was opened to the public in 1995, soon after the army installation closed and the property was transferred to the National Park Service. It has quickly gained a reputation as one of the finest public courses in Northern California. Information on the course and tee times is available 24 hours a day at 415.561.4653 and at www.presidiogolf.com. To book banquets and group events, call Colleen Daly at 415.561.4661, ext. 206.]². Visit: www.presidiogolf.com/

Mountain Lake: Mountain Lake is a curious name for this body of water located next to the point where Park Presidio Blvd becomes expressway. The lake can be accessed from street parking at 11th Av near Lake St or from a pedestrian path at Arguello and West Pacific (this path is actually a continuation West Pacific Av). The lake is scheduled for a renovation effort which will greatly benefit it. At the time of this survey (1999) the lake resembles those found in Golden Gate Park. It is dirty and mostly surrounded by eucalyptus and tule reeds which seem more to choke the shore than contain it nicely. The south shore has a mild

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beach which is exploding with seagulls. It is an excellent place to come to feed bread crumbs to birds. There is also a picnic table at this beach. Mountain Lake is about 550' across on its longest axis.

¹ From: www.exploratorium.edu/palace/

² From: www.presidiogolf.com/

³ From: *The GGNRA Park Service*, www.nps.gov/fopo/index.htm

⁴ From: *The Presidio Trust*, www.presidiotrust.gov/

Crissy Field grand opening May 6, 2001: www.crissyfield.org/