

BEST WEEKEND GETAWAYS IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

OUR TOP PICKS

Easy access to weekend getaways from San Francisco are one of the very best things about this city, thanks to a strategic location that places SF between beaches, forests and mountains. Head north to find the wineries of Napa and Sonoma, giant redwoods and a rugged coastline. South, you'll discover charming Carmel-By-the-Sea and stunning Big Sur. Also within driving distance: Yosemite and Tahoe, both bucket-list destinations that offer stunning scenery and tons of activities year-round.



BIG SUR

Find unbeatable hiking, exhilarating scenery and a low-key neighborhood vibe at this woody coastal retreat. The iconic drive down the California Coastal Highway (Hwy 1), alone, is worth the trip.

Check out:

Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park (47555 Hwy 1; 831-667-2315), the best-known section of Big Sur, has gorgeous redwood groves and an 80-foot waterfall.

Abandon your modesty for a soak in the clothing-optional hot springs at Esalen Institute, a New Age retreat open to the public by reservation only. In the evening, watch the sunset from the heated patio at Nepenthe, where you'll get views of the mountains and ocean. (Pro-tip: Skip the overpriced food and stick with drinks instead.)



HIGH SIERRA

A hidden treasure trove of old-school Americana, the landscape here is nothing short of incredible, riddled with tall peaks, alpine lakes and some of the tallest trees in the world.

Check out:

The Giant Sequoia National Monument which boasts the densest concentration of *Sequoiadendron giganteum*, the world's largest redwood species. In Sequoia and King's Canyon National Parks, find expansive hiking trails and Moro Dome, a massive granite rock formation that dominates the landscape.



CARMEL & MONTEREY

Carmel and Monterey are neighbors with very different vibes. The charming seaside town of Carmel, packed with art, wine and history, feels downright European. Monterey, the more down-to-earth of the two, is known for its world-class aquarium and history as one of California's most important cannery towns.

Check out:

In Carmel, investigate the historic Carmel Mission, arguably the most stunning of California's 21 Spanish-era missions or hike through Point Lobos State Reserve, where trails wind along the Pacific coast. Afterward, relax at Refuge, a thermal spa featuring hot and cool pools, steam rooms, saunas and fire pits. In Monterey, don't miss the Monterey Bay Aquarium (886 Cannery Row; 831-648-4800 and the adjacent Cannery Row which features boutique shops and wine tastings alongside tidbits from the town's past. From November to February, see butterflies galore at The Monarch Sanctuary (250 Ridge Rd.; 831-648-3100).

Distance from SF: 2 hours 40 mins

Distance from SF: 4 hours

Distance from SF: 2 hours



POINT REYES AND TOMALES BAY

This sleepy fishing town is known for its fresh oysters and natural beauty. Just up the coast, Tomales Bay is lined with tiny hamlets, old-school seafood joints and picturesque farms and wineries.

Check out:

Toby's Feed Barn, a family-owned community center, has a generously stocked general store, farmer's market, yoga studio, art gallery and coffee bar. Go for a hike along Point Reyes National Seashore (1 Bear Valley Rd; 415-663-1835) to watch the elephant seals gather at Chimney Rock, then descend the stairs to the Point Reyes Lighthouse. Get a view from the water with a rented kayak or paddleboard from Point Reyes Outdoors. For a special treat, check out their night-time bioluminescence tour.

Distance from SF: 1 hour 15 minutes

MENDOCINO

A NorCal oasis of untouched treelines, wineries, and sublime farm-to-table dining north of the Golden Gate Bridge. The quaint county namesake, the town of Mendocino, has a spectacular coastline of craggy cliffs and unparalleled Pacific views.

Check out:

Learn about organic farming at Oz Farm, then watch the sunset at Glass Beach.

Distance from SF: 3 hours 20 minutes



NAPA

A hotbed of farm-to-table food, decadent hotels and sun-drenched vineyards, Napa's wine country is a favored getaway for the fog-weary.

Check out:

Castello di Amorosa, known for their Italian-inspired wines and tastings, offers guided tours of the castle and vineyards. The French-inspired chateau at Domaine Carneros Winery, complete with expansive formal gardens, specializes in sparkling wines.

Distance from SF: 1 hour 15 minutes



SEBASTOPOL

Fifty miles north of San Francisco, this city balances its artsy, hippie past with a youthful, vibrant bar and food scene.

Check out:

Drive down Florence Ave, a 14-mile-long outdoor gallery of so-called "junk art" by artists Patrick Amiot and Bridgette Laurent. Dig through rare books, art, furniture and decor at the Antique Society, a quirky collective of 125 dealers.

Distance from SF: 1 hour 30 minutes





LAKE TAHOE

Populated by moneyed ski buffs and chilled-out boarders, this ski hub encapsulates laid-back luxury. In the winter, Tahoe's main draw is its slopes, including Squaw Valley, once the site of the Olympics. In the summer, Tahoe is full of idyllic views, lakeside beaches and a wide selection of outdoor activities.

Check out:

In warm weather, trek to Emerald Bay, a shockingly turquoise inlet ringed by hiking trails, where you can rent kayaks and paddleboards. Tubing or rafting down the (mostly) bucolic Truckee River is a full-on party when the temperatures rise. Rent gear and catch a ride at the river's end from one of a handful of rafting companies like Truckee River Rafting. In the evenings, catch local bands at Moody's, a bar and live music venue in the Truckee Hotel.

Distance from SF: 4 hours

SAUSALITO

On the other side of the Golden Gate Bridge is a laid-back hub for farmers markets, dining and hiking. Even getting there is a treat—either by driving over the iconic orange-hued bridge or via ferry across the scenic Bay.

Check out:

Snag a killer shot of the greater Bay Area and the Golden Gate Bridge from Vista Point on the span's far side. Afterward, learn about the sea lions and other marine mammals that frequent Bay Area waters for free at The Marine Mammal Center or get a taste of what life on the water might be like with a stroll through Sausalito's namesake Homeboat yards.

Distance from SF: 30 minutes



SKYLINE BOULEVARD (HWY 35)

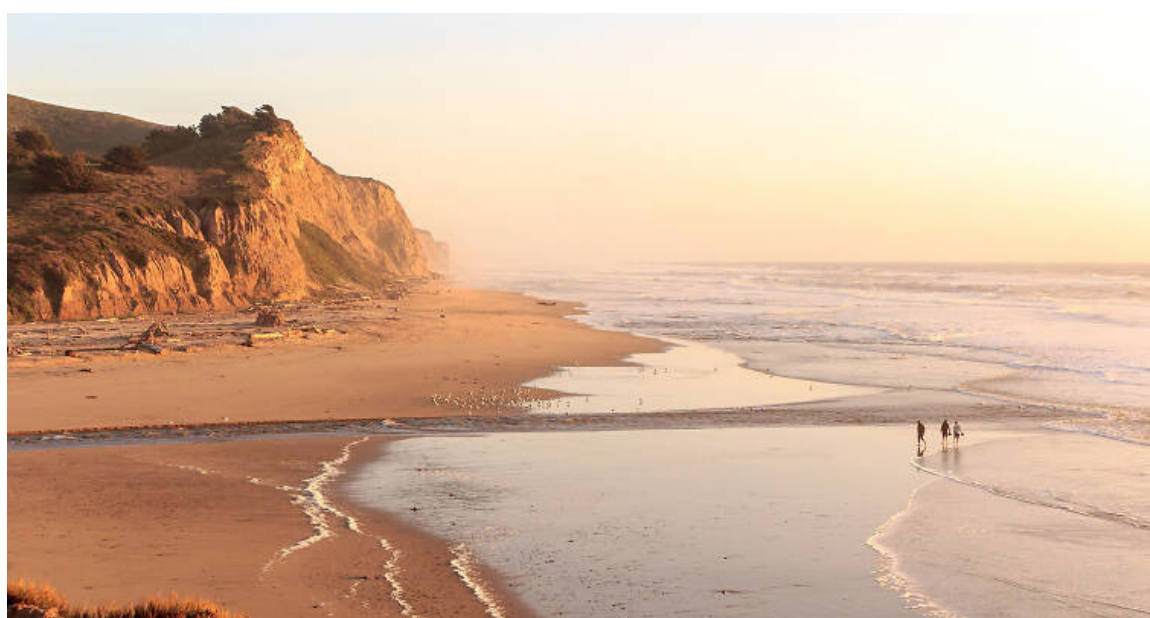
Escape into the cool blue mountains via Skyline Boulevard in Woodside, which offers nature trails, spectacular ocean and valley views and wine-tasting without the traffic. When you reach town, you'll see a wooden cabin in a clearing at the intersection. This is Alice's Restaurant, the place to stop if you like to have your burgers and BBQ paired with the rumble of Harleys. Popular with bikers and cyclists plying the mountain roads, Alice's offers breakfast until 2pm, Texas-style BBQ (brisket and pulled pork smoked in-house) and cheesy (both literally and figuratively) motorbike-themed burgers. This is still the Bay Area, though, so the burgers are made with hormone- and antibiotic-free beef patties, and there's gluten-free beer on the menu.

Distance from SF: 45 minutes

STINSON BEACH

For friendly, laidback beach vibes, venture north to Stinson Beach and Bolinas. These two points, which bookend Bolinas Bay, boast rugged coastline, stretches of white sand and water-based activities. Newbie surfers can book lessons at the 2 Mile Surf Shop, while keen swimmers should look out for Bass Lake, a body of freshwater situated a short drive up Mesa Road followed by a near-three-mile hike (trust us, it's worth it).

Distance from SF: 1 hour





SANTA CRUZ

Beyond the surf and boardwalk amusement park rides that Santa Cruz is best known for are mountain ranges, treetop walks, butterflies and indie bands. The adventurous should beeline for Mount Hermon, where you'll find all sorts of activities ranging from an ecology tour in the trees to a two-hour zipline, railroad riding and Bigfoot hunting. Those who prefer to remain on terra firma (and are visiting during the colder months) should try and catch the impressive butterflies residing in the eucalyptus trees at Monarch Grove, in Natural Bridges State Beach.

Distance from SF: 1 hour 30 mins

POINT LOBOS

With miles of hiking trails across cliffs, coves and forests, plus a rich marine habitat of giant kelp forests and darting sea lions, Point Lobos offers a great day out for photographers, hikers and scuba divers. Park by Cannery Point and start at the Whaler's Cabin (temporarily closed), a museum on the site of a former whaling station displaying the personal effects and diaries belonging to the Chinese, Portuguese and Japanese whalers who once lived here. You'll also see harpoons and learn the grisly process of harvesting blubber. Parts of humpback and gray whale skeletons lie somewhat gruesomely scattered outside. If you're oceanically-inclined, the neighboring Whaler's Cove is the place to scuba dive, kayak or do some stand-up paddle boarding.

Distance from SF: 2hours 30 mins



LOS GATOS

With its affluent tone and charming yet eclectic main street, Los Gatos weekends sees well-heeled locals having relaxed brunches or cruising boutique shops, all at the foot of the Santa Cruz Mountains. If Michelin-starred Manresa feels excessive for the day, drop in at Manresa Bread and take home a loaf of their signature sourdough levain. For lunch or an early dinner, stop in at Oak & Rye, a popular bistro with a wood-fired oven and a rye- and bourbon-laced cocktail list (best with the bistro's pretzel bread, made from 2-year yeast grown in-house). Pull in to the Powell Sweet Shoppe for some old-school candy store nostalgia. Their selection is vast, with beer-flavored jelly beans, bacon candy stripes, an ice cream counter and a cotton candy machine. There's even a screen in back showing Charlie and the Chocolate Factory in front of a row of old movie theater seats.

Distance from SF: 1 hour

GILROY

Gilroy offers outlet bargains in more quaint surrounds. It's also famed for its farmstands and markets, where you can pick up all manner of fresh fruit, vegetables, flowers, juices and preserves—not to mention the famed Gilroy garlic

Distance from SF: 1 hour 30 mins





YOSEMITE

NATIONAL PARK

One of America's first national parks, Yosemite still stuns with the natural beauty of the Sierras. In Yosemite Valley find waterfalls and picture-perfect rock formations carved by millennia of wind and water. In the high country, alpine lakes and granite moonscapes attract a fraction of the visitors in the Valley.

Check out:

Hiking is the name of the game at Yosemite. Adrenaline-junkies will thrive on the iconic Half Dome Trail, the last section of which requires clambering up a near-vertical granite wall using a rope ladder (required advance reservations work on a lottery system). Up in high country, trek to the Cathedral Lakes for an afternoon of swimming and soaking in the sun.

Distance from SF: 3hours 30mins