

Protector of the Pacific

Once a military post, the Presidio of San Francisco is worth exploring for its historical significance, but be sure to save time to enjoy the views. **By JOANN GRECO**

Where else can you find a row of what look like traditional red-brick colonial homes backed by the Golden Gate Bridge?" asks Presidio park ranger Marcus Combs. "The variety of architecture here is amazing. We have every type of military architecture from the Civil War to the present." Not only does this decommissioned army base feature hundreds of historical structures, it also boasts 1,500 acres of prime real estate fronting both the Pacific Ocean and San

Francisco Bay. Dating to California's Spanish colonial era, the Presidio was made part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area in 1994 and offers attractions and topography like no other. Acres of pine- and eucalyptus-scented forests merge into coastal wetlands, a military cemetery overlooks a municipal golf course, and there's even a beach where clothing is optional.

About 2,500 people actually live on the site, and the detritus of everyday life—plastic patio chairs and tricycles—dots the lawns of its bucolic neighborhoods. As part of a mandate to be self-sufficient by 2013, the Presidio Trust also rents buildings to a handful of businesses, from George Lucas's film studio to nonprofits. Long-term plans call for lodgings, and a home

for the proposed Walt Disney Family Museum. Already, a handful of eateries have opened—including the Warming Hut, a popular bookstore/café—as well as a rock-climbing gym. Such amenities, while welcome, shouldn't detract from the Presidio's two main appeals: its role as witness to a strand of events tracing the development of the United States from 1776 onward, and its spectacular natural setting. Expect to spend a few hours here, beginning at the visitors center to pick up a walking tour guide that includes 12 stops along a one-mile route.



Presidio pluses include (clockwise from top) walking along the pier at Fort Point, reading epitaphs at the Pet Cemetery, and bicycling at top speed.

• **WALK THROUGH HISTORY** The visitors center is located in the former Officers' Club, which, although extensively remodeled over the years, retains elements—most notably, an adobe brick wall—of the base's origins as a fortress established by Spanish colonists in 1776. The two bronze cannons that flank the entrance were once positioned on the harborfront. Cast in Spain in the late 1600s and brought over to the New World, they are among the oldest known cannons in North America.

Less than one hundred years after

its founding, the Presidio—and San Francisco—began growing, thanks in no small part to the California Gold Rush of 1849. At the outbreak of the Civil War, the newly constructed Fort Point stood as a prime example of the U.S. Army's most sophisticated coastal fortifications,

with seven-foot-thick masonry walls. Although the fort never saw action, a visit today gives the sense of its intended role as protector of the shore, and offers a unique vantage point on the Golden Gate Bridge.

In 1915, fresh from the 1906 earthquake, San Francisco was selected to host a world's fair celebrating the completion of the Panama Canal. More than 600 acres of the Presidio's bay-front tidal marshes were filled, and nations from around the world built exhibit halls. The only structure left standing, the domed Palace of Fine Arts, is clearly visible from many parts of the Presidio.

• **PHOTO OPS** The Presidio of San Francisco abounds with natural settings, but Crissy Field offers some of the best. The meadow once served as

the base's landing strip—where crowds greeted early daredevils like stunt flyer Lincoln Beachey, and gathered in 1925 to watch as the world's first flight to Hawaii took off. Today it's a playground that offers a beach, perfect kite flying, and restored ecosystems that support 105 different species of shrubs, wildflowers, and marsh plants. For other great photos, the base's Pet Cemetery offers some possibilities, while the undulating hills of white, government-issue headstones in the nearby military cemetery—San Francisco National Cemetery—are quietly moving.