

San Francisco

A tolerant, all-inclusive atmosphere is just one of the factors that make San Francisco such a hit with international students, while the seemingly endless array of entertainment opportunities is an added bonus. BETHAN NORRIS finds out more about the city's appeal.

Modern San Francisco is greatly influenced by its bohemian past, which is one of its key attractions for visitors. Thousands of tourists flock to the city every year to experience its contemporary vibe, which has its roots firmly in an alternative culture propagated since the 1950s. World “scenes” such as the Beat generation, epitomised by the writer Jack Kerouac in the 50s, the hippy Summer of Love in the 60s and the emerging gay scene in the 70s and 80s all originated in San Francisco, giving the city a reputation for inclusiveness and innovative creativity that still exists today.

Emmy Okazawa-Bortolin from Geos says that the city's “open environment” is one of the factors that attracts international students in their droves. “San Francisco is one of the oldest, most beautiful and most culturally diverse cities in America,” she says. “It is a place where people of all colours, nationalities, religions and beliefs can feel completely accepted and respected for who they are.”

Kris Warner, Academic Director of Aspect San Francisco, agrees that the city is “one of the most liberal and open-minded cities in the USA” and explains that for this reason it is an excellent destination for language travel students. “They are free to be themselves while enjoying all that life in an American city has to offer,” he asserts.

With such a reputation for alternative culture, the city has big expectations to fulfil and according to



once compared the city to a theme park. “Walking around the city from neighbourhood to neighbourhood felt to her

Merry Sturtz, from EF at Mills College in Oakland, students can indeed find infinite opportunities for entertainment in their free time. “There is no limit to the attractions that students can explore,” she says. “Museums, libraries, film festivals, universities and cultural experiences from the broad tapestry of San Francisco's diverse populations all provide the students with a limitless choice of experiences.”

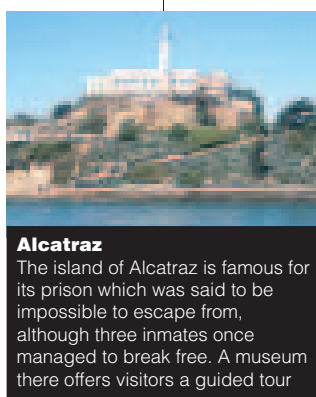
Sturtz refers to San Francisco as a “city of neighbourhoods” and it is this characteristic that gives the city its unique flavour. The city is made up of small enclaves, such as Little Italy, Chinatown, North Beach,

Russian Hill, Nob Hill, Pacific Heights, the Embarcadero, Fisherman's Wharf, Castro and the Mission, all of which are characterised by distinct ethnic or cultural differences. Okazawa-Bortolin says, “Each one of these districts has its own style, feel and charm.” She says that one of her students

like walking through the different sections of Disneyland. Each district has its own flavour and atmosphere and it is hard to believe that they are all in the same area,” she says.

Apart from local attractions, San Francisco is also famous for a number of world-renowned sites. “Most students do not miss the chance to go to Alcatraz, take a cruise on the bay, walk or cycle across the Golden Gate Bridge and take a ride on a cable car,” says Marianne Vaccaro from Converse International School of Languages. Other key attractions include Haight Street, famous for the “flower power” of the 60s; Twin Peaks, providing a panoramic view of the city, the TransAmerica Pyramid, located in the financial district; Lombard Street, the most crooked street in the world; and Union Square, located in the heart of the city with many stores and speciality shops.

With so many tourist sites and attractions to visit, it is fortunate that San Francisco also has an extremely efficient and diverse transport system. “The transportation system in San Francisco is excellent,” claims Okazawa-Bortolin. “There are buses,



Alcatraz

The island of Alcatraz is famous for its prison which was said to be impossible to escape from, although three inmates once managed to break free. A museum there offers visitors a guided tour



The stunning vista of Golden Gate Bridge (main picture)



Financial District

San Francisco's financial district is rated as one of the top four financial centres in the USA. At 343 Sansome St, visitors can view the skyscraper skyline from a 17th-floor rooftop park

subway trains, street cars, ferries and of course, cable cars, all of which are accessible with a one monthly pass. In San Francisco, people say 'everything is 20 minutes away'."

Due to the city's location, on a small

peninsula surrounded on three sides by water, ferries are a common and popular form of transport. Sturtz says that students can catch a ferry from Oakland, where the school is situated, to "the heart of the city by

the bay". She adds, "Travel by ferry also takes the visitor to quaint villages, such as Sausalito and Tiburon."

One of the more unusual aspects of San

Francisco, which students have to adapt to, is the city's diverse weather patterns, which are caused by its position by the sea. Cool summers, mild winters and a disposition for fog are characteristic of the city, as well as the presence of micro-climates that make it difficult to predict the weather in other parts of the city. As Warner explains, "It can be foggy in the marina, rainy and cool in



Agent viewpoint

"Students are always interested in going to San Francisco as it is one of the most important cities in the USA. All the newspapers and magazines say something about this wonderful city. Teenage students love the beaches and pubs while the older ones prefer to walk around and check out all the beautiful views. During the day, our students go to school and at night they like to go to pubs. Our students have never had any problem in San Francisco but each day it is more difficult to get a visa to the USA."

Rodrigo Pereira, SIC Travel Agency, Brazil

"Students want to study in San Francisco because the weather is warm, like in Colombia, and there are places that they really want to visit. In their free time, they go to nearby beaches and different parts of the city. The only problem now is the visa. Our students need to go to Bogota to try and get it, but it is more difficult each day, and expensive too."

María Helena Franco, Internacional de Estudios, Colombia

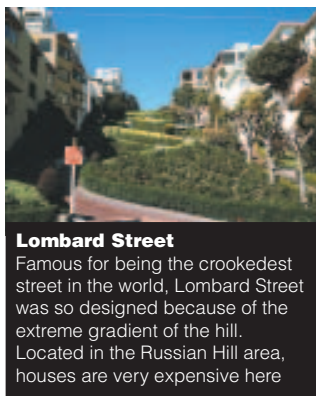
"After New York, San Francisco is the most popular US city for students because it is safe, the people

are really friendly and students have lots of opportunities to learn English in different ways. Some places are very popular with students and tourists alike, such as Golden Gate Park, Union Square, Columbus Ave and Chinatown. California's natural environment is also one of the things [students] enjoy. Unfortunately, tickets to go to the USA are much more expensive than to travel to Europe. Sometimes, for this reason, students change their minds and don't go."

Rita Delgado, Centro Internacional de Línguas, Portugal

Golden Gate Park, mild and sunny in Chinatown and hot and dry in East Bay. City residents have long since learned to always carry a jacket and to dress in layers depending on their commute!"

Festivals and parades play a central role in the life of the city and the local community has discovered many and varied reasons to indulge in city-wide celebrations. The distinct cultural and ethnic differences represented within the city's limits are responsible for many regular events, al-



Lombard Street

Famous for being the crookedest street in the world, Lombard Street was so designed because of the extreme gradient of the hill. Located in the Russian Hill area, houses are very expensive here

though others have rather more obscure roots. Some of the more popular events in and around San Francisco include the Fringe Festival, Bay to Breakers (a costumed walk), the Gay Pride Festival, the Spring Cherry Blossom festival, the Halloween Festival, the Burning Man festival (which is held in the desert), the Gilroy Garlic Festival and the Mustard Festival.

As well as these, numerous other jazz, food and art festivals abound and Warner testifies, "Dur-

ing the summer, there may be two or three festivals on the same weekend."

With so much going on in the city and the open nature of local people, language schools underline that it is very easy for students to fit in. To illustrate this point, Warner relates a story about one of his students who started chatting to a group of people playing bongo drums in Golden Gate Park and ended up buying her own drum.

"Throughout the rest of her time in San Francisco, on weekends when she was free, she met up with them in the park and continued to practise along with developing the friendship. It is very easy for students to make friends in San Francisco."

□ PHOTOGRAPHS: JAMES DAVIES