



Discover blasts from the past and present day stars at Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum in San Francisco, a city bursting with a dizzying array of fun family activities. PHOTOS: CURT WOODHALL

## FAMILY TRAVEL

# A GOLDEN GATEWAY TO FUN FOR KIDS AND YOUNG AT HEART

From tricks to treats, San Francisco dishes up the delights, *Mhairri Woodhall* writes.

Slipping down the winding, candy floss-pink tubular slide, I can't help but imagine Alice tumbling through the rabbit hole.

"What took you so long?" squeals my daughter when I finally land in a graceless heap at her feet. She's already gripping a massive ice-cream sandwich and vibrating with delight.

"This is only the first room," she yells in a high-pitched frenzy. "And, we're allowed to eat as much as we want!"

San Francisco's Museum of Ice Cream is a mind-blowing mashup of Willy Wonka's chocolate factory and the Barbie dream house. Picture a maze of kitsch confectionaries and over-the-top props like unicorns, frosted-cookie carnival rides and a swimming pool filled with rainbow sprinkles. It's an insulin-spiking, sugar-spun wonderland that sparks astonishment and insurmountable joy in children and Instagram-crazed millennials.

Watching Brooklyn bounce through utopia, I curse myself for opening the trip with this museum; as outdoing a space solely dedicated to ice cream is high impossible. Thankfully, extravagant attractions designed to inspire curiosity are plentiful in San Francisco. The only challenge is narrowing down the vast array into an achievable itinerary.

First, I suggest forgoing a rental car (parking costs are steep) and stay central. I booked the Westin St. Francis on Union Square. The ideal location, in the heart of the city, makes touring on foot easy — even with a seven-year-old in tow.

I was genuinely surprised by our room. The newly refurbished heritage property has the luxury feel of a Ritz-Carlton but boasts a Westin price point. From Union Square, we could walk to many of San Francisco's family attractions including the Children's Creativity Museum, which magically merges art and technology for a unique, hands-on learning experience.

The plan was to visit in the morning, before our Sunday brunch at the Palace Hotel. However, after two hours we'd only seen the puppet theatre, building blocks and animation station on the first level. Bribing our daughter with brioche French toast, and promising to return after brunch, we strolled over to the Palace for pork-belly Benedicts and mimosas in the opulent Garden Court. The remainder of the afternoon was spent back at the museum, writing code and programming robots, producing an original song in the music studio,

and exploring the neighbouring Yerba Buena Children's Garden and playground.

Overscheduling — or under-planning — seemed to be the theme of our San Francisco adventure. At the Exploratorium, on the Embarcadero, we arrived unaware of the museum's magnitude. With over 650 interactive exhibits, we really required a full day to adequately tour the sprawling learning laboratory that shines a spotlight on science, art and human perception. Activities cover everything from colour, chemistry, mathematics and electricity to sports, anatomy, cooking and culture.

Having stretched our time there, we grabbed an Uber to the Walt Disney Family Museum, located in the city's historic Presidio park at the Golden Gate. While the permanent galleries, chronicling Walt's early years through to present-day Disney, are fascinating, it was the Mickey Mouse: From Walt to the World temporary exhibition that stole the show for us. We loved examining the original sketches of Mickey and the gang, seeing the first black and white moving

pictures and learning how the iconic mouse became a global phenomenon.

Fisherman's Wharf is another landmark that warrants a full day. The carnival-like atmosphere, complete with buskers and balloon artists, will keep the kids engaged. Highlights for Brooklyn were hamming it up in every mind-boggling, eye-tricking scene at the Museum of 3D Illusions, posing with past- and present-day stars at Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum and creating her own comic book at the Cartoon Art Museum.

For my husband, it was the seafood chowder, freshly shucked oysters and legendary sourdough bread at Bistro Boudin that made the trip. Time your dinner reservation right, and you'll be gifted with a dramatic panorama of the bay and Alcatraz at sunset.

After supper, we completed a quick self-guided tour of the San Francisco History Museum, located in Boudin's flagship building. During the visit, we learned a handful of fun food facts, including how fortune cookies, crab Louie, rocky road ice cream and the Mai Tai were first created in the Bay area.

While the city is known for its inventive and sophisticated culinary scene, indulging in it may feel daunting with kids. Two



Ride a sugar cookie, swim in sprinkles and indulge in an extravaganza of sweets at the Museum of Ice Cream, a utopia for the younger set.

choice finds sure to impress all ages are Le Marais Bakery for Parisian-style flaky sweet and savoury breakfast creations, and the tropical cocktails and Polynesian-fusion fare at Fairmont San Francisco's Tonga Room & Hurricane Bar.

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best bars, thanks to its Tiki-chic decor, flaming torches, indoor lagoon, typhoon-inspired theatrics and rum-laden libations, Tonga welcomes children before 10 p.m. and promises a mesmerizing dining experience.

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