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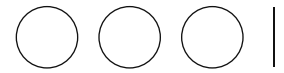
BAY AREA // NATIVE SON

# S.F. has one of the most spectacular sites in the world, but it's often overlooked



**Carl Nolte**

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1 of 4



Fort Mason is part national park and part a center for interesting nonprofit organizations.

Carl Nolte/The Chronicle

Here's some free advice: Whenever the city gets you down, take a walk in the park. I found a new favorite the other day — Fort Mason, which is part national park and part a center for interesting nonprofit organizations. The past is under your feet at Fort Mason, and a vision of the future is on display at a bayside restaurant that promises “coffee and cocktails surrounded by ideas, books and mechanical wonders.”

Fort Mason also offers some interesting Victorian buildings, grand green lawns, three or four restaurants, a couple of museums, a big festival pavilion on an old pier, a community garden where high school students and neighbors grow flowers and vegetables, and an Off the Grid gathering every Friday night advertised as “California’s largest food truck festival.”

All of this is at the northern edge of San Francisco, with the bay on one side and the city on the other. The Golden Gate is not far away, and when the wind is right and the fog drifts in, foghorns are a kind of background music. It's one of the most spectacular sites in the world.

Fort Mason is divided into two parts: Upper Fort Mason and Lower Fort Mason. Upper Fort Mason is a series of very old and somewhat newer military buildings, a military post of the old school and part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, run by the National Park Service. Lower Fort Mason, at the foot of a bayside bluff called Black Point, is Fort Mason Center, a public-private partnership.

Even on a beautiful spring weekday, Fort Mason is seldom crowded; it's a bit off the grid, a gem hidden in plain sight. I have been guilty myself of not paying attention, lured by grander places such as Golden Gate Park or neighborhood parks closer to home. But I had an errand in the neighborhood the other day and an idle afternoon, so I took a closer look.

I came in by an unpretentious route — the 49-Van Ness/Mission Muni bus.

I went into the park from Van Ness Avenue and Bay Street and strolled over to the old general's residence. When San Francisco was the most important military post on the West Coast, the commanding generals all lived there in style with a ceremonial cannon on the front lawn and a splendid view out back.

The mark of the military is all over Fort Mason. The Spanish Army put up the first fortifications in 1797 at a bluff overlooking a windswept anchorage near a rocky headland called Black Point. It was called Battery San Jose. It was more symbolic than anything else: the cannons were old even then, but the Battery San Jose and the nearby Presidio of San Francisco were the northern edge of the vast Spanish empire that

stretched from San Francisco to the tip of South America.

European rule, of course, meant the end of a way of life for native people who lived nearby for thousands of years. As a reminder, a Native American group has its headquarters in Lower Fort Mason.

The whole fort is made for strolling. It has gentle slopes and lawns. I strolled through a large community garden, described by the city people who tend it as “a small oasis nestled in an urban environment.”

Some older people were digging away in one plot, and some students from Galileo High were at work on another, where they were growing mustard, oregano and other vegetables. Ilia Flores, who goes to Galileo, had a simple description of an afternoon in the garden. “It’s nice,” she said. “It’s nice.”

West of the community garden are rolling meadows that lead down to Lower Fort Mason, which is a classic example of transforming what once was one of the most important military bases in the country to public use.

The whole shoreline here is lined with piers and warehouses, handsome two- and three-story buildings with red tile roofs. The piers were first built as home ports for the Army’s transport service that took soldiers to the Philippines, at first during the 1898 war with Spain and later to fight a war against Filipino rebels who resisted American rule.

During World War II, the piers and warehouses at Fort Mason became the principal West Coast staging area in the Pacific. More than 1.6 million men were shipped to the Pacific in the war, along with 23 million tons of cargo.

Many of the soldiers, sailors and Marines who sailed out the Golden Gate

from Fort Mason lost their lives in the service of their country. But many others, who first got a glimpse of the Bay Area during wartime service, came back to live in the area and set off a postwar boom.

Now the old military port is home to restaurants and museums. I stopped by Greens, the noted vegetarian restaurant, for a bowl of soup and a glass of wine. It has big, glass windows and a view of sea lions and a yacht harbor.

Next door is Interval, the futuristic restaurant run by the Long Now Foundation, an organization dedicated to long-term thinking of the future and the next 10,000 years. Chronicle wine critic Esther Mobley put Interval on her list of the region's top bars. "There's no bar quite like Interval," she wrote.

The showpiece there is a device called an Orrey, a mechanical model of the solar system, all gears and planets and the feeling of time passing.

Later I visited Rathaus, a German restaurant, the Italo American Museo and an art store.

What the critic said about Interval applies to all of Fort Mason. There's no place quite like it.

*Carl Nolte's columns appear in The San Francisco Chronicle's Sunday edition. Email: [cnolte@sfchronicle.com](mailto:cnolte@sfchronicle.com)*



Written By  
**Carl Nolte**

Reach Carl on

Carl Nolte is a fourth generation San Franciscan who has been with The Chronicle since 1961. He stepped back from daily journalism in 2019 after a long career as an editor and reporter including service as a war correspondent. He now writes a Sunday column "Native Son." He won