

NEAR AND FAR.

TRAVEL

TRAVEL GUIDE
GREAT GETAWAYS IN AND
AROUND TEXAS

100

ON YOUR TOES

Step up your vacation plans with a trip to a foot-friendly spot. Walking and hiking destinations are climbing on the list of favorite getaways for those who want a closer look at the view from their hotel room. Experience big cities from a pedestrian perspective. Discover nature's bounty up close. And clear your head with a nice, long walk.





Road to the Finish Line San Francisco, Calif.

Poised atop a 32-mile peninsula, San Francisco is a compact city. Despite its famous hills, in fact, it's so condensed you might be tempted to nix the cable cars and walk right through it. But, why walk when you can run? At least that's why 25,000 athletes running in the July 31 San Francisco Marathon. If you agree, join them when you trot along a circuitous hilly trek that takes you over the Golden Gate Bridge, not once but twice, before it ends.

So torturous that the *Wall Street Journal* called it "the race even marathoners fear" and so punishing the event's adopted slogan justifies the race as "worth the hurt," this remains one of the most popular marathons among seasoned runners. The scenic route starts at Embarcadero and then teases participants with an initial easy flat terrain. Here, near Fisherman's Wharf, runners get a whiff of salty sea air that follows them for the rest of the race. Also here, participants break concentration to admire the dream-tinged view. A mishmash of broken sea glass—blue, capped with foamy vanilla, the San Francisco Bay sprawls all the way to Alcatraz. Not a few runners have risked their pace to stop for a moment in awe. But veterans know it just gets prettier.

So steep it might be a mountain, the first hill takes to task all that training. But be afraid. Be very afraid, it gets worse later in the race: more precipitous and more vertical. Jokesters, or maybe well-wishers, have erected signs meant to take your mind off the burn—and the fact you are still technically sprinting through the first quarter of the race. "It could be worse," they say, and you wonder if it could be true.

At the top of the hill you begin the potentially foggy crossing of the Golden Gate Bridge—a glorious moment that gives you a burst of adrenaline. But then, you loop around and come right back. What drives you is the possibility you'll be going down that hill—but don't count on it. Once you cross the second time, you detour and start to climb, a trend that repeats itself for the rest of the 26.2 miles. And so it goes until the finish line, where beer gardens, music and crowds of revelers await to congratulate you. Worth the effort? Absolutely.

As quirky and charismatic as the progressive city that hosts it, the San Francisco Marathon event also includes a half-marathon, a 5K race and a kids' run. Many folks come just as spectators. That's because as the race entertains, so does the city. A patchwork of diverse neighborhoods, San Francisco exudes urbanity, but in a laid-back way. Unafraid to embrace differences, it celebrates them. So find genteel Nob Hill, hip Castro, iconic Chinatown, and trendy Haight-Ashbury. Afire with creativity, San Francisco manifests that spirit in edgy cocktails, experimental and exciting food, thrilling galleries and one-of-a-kind shops. With year-round mild weather, outdoor activities prevail, too. Consider staying on one of the two InterContinental hotels, which are partnering with the marathon to offer their luxury rooms at run-worthy deals.

ONLINE: San Francisco: onlyinsanfrancisco.com
San Francisco Marathon: thesfmarathon.com
InterContinental Hotels: intercontinental.com

Texas Tip

Think it's too hot to marathon in the summer? Think again. Dallas hosts The Hottest Half and 10K on Aug. 14. Visit hottesthalf.com for details.

A Longer Walk with Thee

Innately entertaining and endorphin inducing, hiking takes you up the road less traveled. Consider nature's trails a path to the world, back-road challenges that offer new information and sensory experiences. Hiking also allows for an inner dialogue to encourage personal growth, if you're into that. And even as you wander purposefully down a path, your mind drifts and flows.

Consider picking one day to tromp through unexpected corners. Cast the museum aside and drop the shopping to scramble up a mountain and shuffle down a fern-filled path or along an ancient seawall. Conscious trekking unfurls new facets of a destination.

Even city centers offer places to take that hike. Trekking guides and made-for-visitors hiking day trips abound. Unsure how to sign up? Let your hotel concierge do it for you. Most have a working list of outfitters and proven guides—and some hotels offer hiking or walking programs. Explore a locale thematically: Join a culinary walking tour, ogle celebrity homes or learn about an area's premier architectural treasures. Anecdotes, history and a little black book of local-loving secrets are usually part of the prize.

To really hit your stride, book a hiking vacation. Leave the details and maps to experienced outfitters who can lead you on treks anywhere in the world. A favorite, **Country Walkers Outfitters**, excels in intimate tours that delve deeply into the culture of the destination. For beginners or seasoned travelers alike, its trips wend off the beaten track and examine the locale's distinctive features. You might hike eight to 10 miles a day, but Country Walkers trips offer so much more. Convene with local winemakers, observe wildlife in its natural habitat and meet farmers, craftsmen, villagers, and musicians. Paddle a native-made canoe in Alaska, muse with the locals at an open-air market in Vietnam or imbibe with resident sailors in the Azores. Stay in hotels that celebrate the setting and eat in authentic family-owned restaurants. Sound good? Time to hit the trail.

ONLINE: Country Walkers: countrywalkers.com

Texas Tip

Grab a copy of author Melissa Gaskill's *Best Hikes with Dogs: Texas Hill Country and Gulf Coast*, and set out on the ultimate man's best friend adventure. Texas offers thousands of miles of nature trails. Find one at tpwd.state.tx.us.