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Hidden Treasure

Explore under-the-radar delights on Treasure Island.

By Rowie Brincks

MEMORABLE STORIES distinguish several islands that dot the San Francisco Bay. Alcatraz, of course, had notorious prisoners and daring escape attempts. Angel Island's former immigration station processed thousands of immigrants between 1910 and 1940; today, the rugged playground accommodates hikers and cyclists. On compact Yerba Buena Island, teams tunneled through shale to connect sections of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge more than 80 years ago.

Treasure Island, a 400-acre artificial island linked to Yerba Buena by road, has its own rich history. It was home of the 1939-40 Golden Gate International Exposition (GGIE), a planned base for Pan Am Clipper seaplanes and a U.S. Navy installation from 1942 to 1997.



CITY ESCAPE

(Clockwise from top left) Locally made merchandise at the monthly market TreasureFest, also a destination for vintage hunters; weekend crowd at TreasureFest; photo booth at TreasureFest; Treasure Island Museum exhibits explore the island's cultural history; Winery SF, a popular celebration venue; vendors serve a mix of food at TreasureFest, including ramen; artisanal jewelry at TreasureFest; dogs are welcome at TreasureFest.



TREASURE ISLAND WINE WALK

For an urban winery experience, explore the tasting rooms clustered on Treasure Island's southern waterfront. Overlooking the bay, they're tucked into venues that range from petite nooks to sprawling industrial spaces to a World War II-era submarine training unit.

"We're kind of a hidden escape. Unless you're local, you don't really know that this is out here," says Bryan Kane, winemaker for The Winery San Francisco. The facility, which has earned accolades for its wines, welcomes guests in a rustic, 3,000-square-foot barrel room.

Nearby, three tiny tasting rooms with a shared outdoor bocce court form the Winemaker Studios collective. Sol Rouge Winery produces wines using California-grown varietals from France's Rhone and Bordeaux regions and pours samples in a cozy, barn-style space. Vie Winery shares its small-batch blends in an industrial-cool interior with beamed ceilings. Sottomarino focuses on Italian varietals and offers its tastings in a former U.S. Navy training vessel. Further inland, destinations like Treasure Island Wines and Conduit Wine also welcome visitors.



PREVIOUS PAGE: ©PROPICT / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM. OPPOSITE PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: COURTESY TREASURE FEST (4); THIS PAGE FROM TOP: COURTESY TREASURE ISLAND MUSEUM; ©CHLOE JACKSON PHOTOGRAPHY

These days, Treasure Island hosts the monthly TreasureFest market (formerly Treasure Island Flea), and it's a hub for sailing, rugby and youth sports. Artists operate in warehouses here, and individuals gain work experience through island-based job training organizations.

Tucked between San Francisco and Oakland, the destination also boasts sweeping views of the Bay Bridge, Golden Gate Bridge and San Francisco skyline.

Across Treasure Island, new restaurants are joining mainstays like Aracely Cafe and Mateo's Hot Dogs and Churros. And, long-term redevelopment plans are slowly reshaping the landscape.

"During decades of military use, Treasure Island was hidden in plain sight. People knew it was there, but you couldn't just visit without a reason," says Treasure Island Museum vice president Anne Schnoebelen.

"Now, we're on a forward-moving path. We look to the inspiration and innovation of Treasure Island's past to understand this movement toward a wonderful future for residents and visitors."

Founded in 1975 as a military museum and later expanded to chronicle the island's wider story, the Treasure Island Museum closed when Naval Station Treasure Island shut down in the late 1990s. For the past decade, museum administrators have maintained temporary exhibits in Treasure Island's Building 1; they also organize an annual lecture series exploring the island's heritage. Fundraising efforts to reestablish permanent galleries are currently underway.

Building 1, a horseshoe-shaped Art Moderne structure, served as the administrative center for the 1939-40 Golden Gate International Exposition. Before jet engines



ISLAND LIFE

(Clockwise from top left) Woods Beer Co.; giant loaded potato at MerSea; view of the San Francisco skyline and Bay Bridge from Treasure Island; outdoor seating at MerSea; restored Pacific Unity Sculpture displayed in front of Building 1; Santarita cocktail with tequila and cucumber puree at MerSea.



transformed modern travel, it was slated to be a Pan Am Clipper terminal for a planned regional airport on Treasure Island. Now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, it's one of three remaining GGIE buildings.

Two hangars set behind Building 1, along Clipper Cove Way, also date back to the world's fair. Woods Island Club, a weekend taproom and beach bar from Woods Beer Co., moved into the Building 2 hangar two years ago. The team brews some signature beers and special releases here during the week. On Saturdays and Sundays, visitors can taste beers in the barrel room or take pints out to the sand, where fire pits, picnic tables and lounge chairs sit in the shadow of the Bay Bridge.

Choosing an under-the-radar location was a leap of faith for founder Jim Woods, who opened his four other beer bars in

more walkable neighborhoods like San Francisco's Mission district and Uptown Oakland.

"We weren't sure how people would react to Treasure Island, since this is really a destination spot, but we've been floored by the response," says Woods. "And, the views over here are second to none."

Grand vistas also appealed to the owners of MerSea, a playful, all-day comfort food spot that opened a mile up the island in early 2018. Co-founders MeeSun Boice and Parke Ulrich, executive chef of San Francisco's Waterbar and Epic Steak, crafted the restaurant using 13 shipping containers outfitted with reclaimed and recycled items. Used military doors and lanes from the former Treasure Island Bowling Alley top communal tables. Herbs grow in salvaged wooden pallets. Empty metal cans are repurposed as silverware holders.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ©SARAH CHOREY (3); COURTESY WOODS BEER CO.

FROM TOP: ©SCOTT CHERNIS/5F TRAVEL; COURTESY TREASURE ISLAND MUSEUM

MerSea's outdoor seating area features bocce courts, putting greens and yard games, creating a family-friendly and dog-friendly destination that buzzes with activity. But, food and fun aren't the only draws.

"One of the most captivating aspects of the restaurant is the view," says Boice. "It's a spectacular bridge-to-bridge span, with the San Francisco skyline in between."

"Along Clipper Cove, you'll find the best Bay Bridge views available on land, and Treasure Island's eastern waterfront offers a unique look at the East Bay hills and the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge," adds Treasure Island Development Association director Robert Beck. "We're in the middle of it all here."

Beck oversees the agency formed in 1998 to oversee economic development and operations on the former Naval Sta-

tion Treasure Island. Crews are working on remediation projects, geotechnical improvements and infrastructure updates in advance of a redevelopment venture that will establish new homes, hotel rooms and commercial space on the island in the coming years. Public transit enhancements will better connect the destination to San Francisco and Oakland, and development plans also call for approximately 300 acres of trails, parks and recreational sites on Treasure Island and Yerba Buena Island.

"The setting here is already quite striking. As we move forward, we'll develop more open spaces and more public amenities that will add to the island's appeal," says Beck. "Treasure Island is central in the bay, and if you're looking for a great shot of the sunset behind the city, this really is the place to be."