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**TRAVEL**

# The Presidio in San Francisco Presents a Fresh Face

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Heads Up

By **BONNIE TSUI**

The Army turned over the Presidio in San Francisco, the “guardian of the Golden Gate,” to the National Park Service in 1994. But many visitors today (and even longtime city-dwellers) aren’t familiar with the former military post’s status as a national park, or the fact that it hosts San Francisco’s only overnight campground, set in a high shady grove at the edge of the Pacific, or that it has 24 miles of public trails zigzagging through a fragrant 300-acre forest of eucalyptus, cypress and pine.

The Presidio, fresh off a major revitalization, is setting its sights on being rediscovered. Last fall, its historic social hub, the Presidio Officers’ Club, reopened as a cultural center, state-of-the-art archaeology lab and exhibition space, following a three-year \$30 million rehabilitation.

The officers’ club sits among a collection of buildings called the Main Post, now home to new restaurants by the celebrated San Francisco chef Traci des Jardins and the area’s first hotel.

The coming Presidio Parklands project will link the windswept bluffs and ridgelines to the waterfront with 10 acres of new urban green space.

“People are still kind of confused about what the Presidio is,” said Dana Polk, the spokeswoman for the Presidio Trust, which manages the national park. She said that despite all of the Presidio’s perks — the wide range includes a climbing gym, a bowling alley and a trampoline park, as well as a spa — the broader public has yet to

take full advantage of them. “But we’re ready to roll out the welcome mat,” Ms. Polk said.

The park’s nearly 1,500 acres, at the foot of the Golden Gate Bridge, are richly evocative of the past. Its 469 historic buildings — in an impressive array of architectural styles including Italianate, Greek Revival, Queen Anne, Colonial Revival, Mission Revival and Mediterranean — are used for residences, offices and park facilities.

A newly expanded visitors’ center anchors the Main Post, where the Spanish first established a small fort and adobe barracks in 1776. It later became the westernmost military post for Mexico, then the United States in 1846.

Another anchor of the new Presidio is the elegant 22-room Inn at the Presidio, the first in-park lodging. It opened in 2012 in a restored Georgian Revival building that once housed bachelor officers. In early 2017, a second hotel is scheduled to open in an 1895 “infantry row” barracks along the Main Post’s parade grounds.

On a recent Wednesday, Ms. des Jardins’s Arguello Restaurant at the Presidio Officers’ Club swarmed with security detail for Representative Nancy Pelosi, who was having lunch there.

Ms. des Jardins’s other restaurant, Commissary, on the opposite side of the parade grounds, was busy with customers eager to try her bright Spanish-influenced dishes: pâté de cerdo with mustard and grilled bread, and roasted chicken breast with artichoke, kale and chorizo vinaigrette.

It’s also here at the Main Post that the Presidio Officers’ Club has packed its inaugural season with free public programming: weekly concerts, films, talks, guided hikes, children’s archaeological programs and a multimedia gallery with permanent and rotating exhibits on the history and culture of the Presidio.

One colorful display shows the range of contraband hidden by soldiers in barracks walls and excavated in digs: tobacco, flasks, shot glasses, poker chips.

The current exhibition, up through December, spotlights “Operation Babylift,” the rescue effort for Vietnamese children after the fall of Saigon, during which most children came through the Presidio.

During its active Army days, the Main Post also hosted movie stars like Jack Benny, Bob Hope and Veronica Lake. These days, the hope is that the area’s new inn, restaurants and range of historical archives, museums and galleries around the

grounds will make it relevant to a wider audience. But its significant military history is still very much in the ether.

“Friday evenings after work, the club was a favorite haunt for the singles set,” said Joan Skiba, 68, a retired teacher who spent time at the Presidio Officers’ Club with her future husband during the late 1960s.

They were both awaiting deployment to Vietnam, she as an Army nurse and he as a general dentist in the field. These days, they often visit their daughter in the Bay Area, and Mrs. Skiba was excited about seeing the club reopened at last.

“It was the Presidio’s social hub back then,” she said. “It makes me smile that it’s being reimaged as the same thing for today.”

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