

The biggest, best walk â?? and bath of a lifetime.

Description

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Tina Martin

SENIORBEAT GUEST COLUMN â?? I love San Francisco, and I love to walk. So when a friend told me about a group walk tracing the 32-mile perimeter of San Francisco, I decided to try it. This was in March of 2023. We would start at the Ferry Building, loop south, west, north, and return to the Ferry Building by nightfall.

When I tell people about this walk, theyâ??re both impressed and horrified â?? and so am I! Even when I did the last 110 miles of the Camino de Santiago in Spain, I never walked 32 miles in a single day. I wasnâ??t sure I could do it, so I gave myself permission to quit if needed. Stubbed toe? Side stitch? Iâ??d stop.

I knew Iâ??d need to stay hydrated, but the groupâ??s practice was to maintain a three-mile-per-hour pace and not wait for stragglers. So, I decided to â??pre-hydrateâ?• at home, then get to the Ferry Building early to use the facilities. We were leaving at 8 a.m. sharp, so I planned to catch a streetcar from West Portal by 7:15 and arrive around 7:45.



Martin caught up with the group just as they were heading out on their walk. (Photo by Tina Martin)

That morning, I drank about four cups of water and downed a blender-full of smoothie â?? almond milk, bananas, kale, and tahini. Fortified, I arrived at West Portal only to find that the fare gate wouldnâ??t take my Clipper card. I crawled under, but a Muni official informed me there would be no trains until 8 a.m. â?? the exact time the group was leaving. Fifteen minutes later than my planned restroom stop, I was still bursting with six cups of water and a quart of Smoothie.



Heronâ??s Head Park, a 22-acre open space set in an estuary, is popular for its birdwatching and eastern views. (Photo by Robin Evans)

Fortunately, a bus was coming. I arrived at Embarcadero Plaza at 7:58, just as the group of 27 was posing for a photo. By the time I crossed over from Harry Bridges Plaza, they had turned east and begun the walk.

â??I like the peopleâ??

I was last in line and afraid to duck into the restroom. Thankfully, my friend â?? the one whoâ??d recommended the walk â?? broke away with me after five minutes, so I could find a public toilet along the waterfront. I peed fast and furiously, but by the time we got out, the group had disappeared. We went too far inland but caught up when they stopped at Heronâ??s Head Park. Our rest time was cut short because it was used for catching up. Not a propitious start.



A portion of the Visitacion Valley Greenway (Photo courtesy of San Francisco Beautiful). Below, the Java Beach Cafe (Photo courtesy of javabeachcafe.com)



Your Watermark

We walked south along the Embarcadero, past AT&T (Oracle) Park, through Mission Bay and Dogpatch, then Bayview/Hunters Point and Candlestick Point. At one point, Raphey (Ralph Holmes), one of the leaders, asked, â??Are you enjoying the walk?â?•

â??Enjoying isnâ??t quite the right word,â?• I said. â??But I like the people, and Iâ??m glad weâ??re doing this.â?•

Iâ??d walked many of these areas before â?? some via the Crosstown Trail â?? but never all in one day. Rest stops were in unattractive spots, where some walkers grabbed junk food while younger ones plopped down on curbs. I preferred walking to stopping; getting down low and getting back up was harder than the miles.

From Visitacion Valleyâ??s beautiful Greenway â?? connected gardens spanning several blocks â?? we continued to McLaren Park. Then past Lake Merced, Fort Funston, and the sand dunes of Ocean Beach. We stopped at Java CafÃ©. The owners kindly let us sit with our sandwiches from Gusâ??s on Noriega; they werenâ??t equipped to feed such a big group.

I was the oldest walker, but two friends in their 70s were in the group â??often ahead of me. I stayed with the group for the first 26 miles. But I lost them when I stopped to deal with what I thought were pebbles between my toes. Blisters.

When something goes wrong

Then I tripped over the strap of my bag. In that split second, I thought, â??Now itâ??s my turn.â?• I know too many people my age whoâ??ve had devastating falls. Strangers rushed to help me up. â??Are you alright?â?• they asked. My hands were skinned and bleeding slightly, but nothing serious.

As I climbed steps near Lands End, a young woman in a small group turned back toward me. â??Are you sure youâ??re alright?â?• she asked. She offered me her arm. After we climbed, she handed me some water.

â??This is what I love when something goes wrong,â?• I thought. â??People are kind, and it reaffirms my faith in people.â?•



Walkers take a snack break. (Photo by Tina Martin)

I told her I was on mile 26 of a 32-mile walk, and that usually I *love* my walks â?? but not this one. I liked the group, but the walk itself was punishing.

â??This is type two fun,â?• she said. â??The kind thatâ??s only fun after itâ??s over and you can look back.â?•

I thanked her for her kindness â?? and insight. Then I called my son, Jonathan. He was with his girlfriend in Calistoga, so I wasnâ??t surprised when I got his voicemail.

â??Jonathan, this is your mother. Iâ??ve lost my group, and I just fell and am bleeding a little, but Iâ??d like to finish the walk on my own. Iâ??m just a little lost, and itâ??s starting to get dark, so I was hoping you might be able to direct me.â?•

No answer. I trekked on.

My kind friend Janet called periodically to check on me. I was fine, but my iPhone battery was dying. At one point, I reached one of the walk leaders, who suggested I take an Uber to catch up with the group. NO WAY.

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Climbing the stepts at Fort Mason. (Photo by Tina Martin)

I kept walking â?? through Sea Cliff, Bakerâ??s Beach, around the Golden Gate Bridge, through Crissy Field, and on to Fort Mason after sunset. I was alone now. Just me and my shadow on the Fort Mason steps.

Surprisingly, I felt safe and began to enjoy myself again. The northern edge of San Francisco is breathtaking at night â?? the lights, the bridge, the water. I passed the Youth Hostel, then saw Aquatic Park and Ghirardelli Square glowing ahead. I took photos, grateful I still had a battery pack.



San Franciscoâ??s northern waterfront at night. (Photo by Tina Martin)

I did make mistakes â?? wandering into a no-exit area near the Yacht Club and having to backtrack, something I didnâ??t relish in my state of near-exhaustion.

Fishermanâ??s Wharf looked different in the dark. I trudged on, knowing the Embarcadero would lead me back to the Ferry Building. The finish line was close.

â??Endurance test passedâ??

When I arrived, about 15 walkers were already there, sitting at a table at Gottâ??s Roadside, smiling in spite of their fatigue. Janet didnâ??t see me at first â?? she assumed Iâ??d given up. I grabbed a veggie burger at the Grotto, while others called Ubers and Lyfts. I opted for BART to Daly City and the #28 bus home to Parkside.



Martin arrives at last to join the rest of the group at a restaurant at Fishermanâ??s Wharf. (Photo by Tina Martin)

At home, I drew a bath â?? the best bath of my life â?? and collapsed into bed.

At 5 a.m., the doorbell rang. Who could that be? I called out, in my deepest voice, â??Whoâ??s there?â?•

â??Itâ??s Jonathan,â?• my son said. â??We were worried about you.â?•

I let him in. â??The last we heard, you were lost and bleeding, and it was getting dark. I called, I texted, I emailed, but you didnâ??t respond.â?• His girlfriend had driven him over so he could check.

We laughed at the drama of it all, but I felt a glow. I had passed my endurance test for the city I love.

â??Iâ??m so glad I did this,â?• I said. â??And I never want to do it again.â?•

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1. All Posts

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