



THE IRISH TIMES



ASK JOAN

Your travel questions answered

San Fran to Santiago

We are travelling to a family wedding in San Francisco in May. We have flights booked for a stay of 12 days. We have never visited this side of the United States, so we would like to maximise our experience. All reports lead us to believe it could be a costly experience due to high cost of accommodation and the unfavourable exchange rate. I would really appreciate if you could suggest what we must do and see. We are on a limited budget. – GOC, Dublin.

San Francisco is one of the better US cities for visitors as it has good public transport and is easy to move around. Buy a city transport visitor passport and you can use the streetcars, buses and cable cars. A seven-day passport costs \$40 – see sfmta.com.

The cable cars are a feature of the city and the Powell/Hyde car has great views as you climb up and then descend towards Fisherman's Wharf.

Using the visitor passport you can easily visit popular attractions such as Fisherman's Wharf, the Embarcadero, Golden Gate Bridge, Union Square, Chinatown and more. Alcatraz is well worth a visit, as is Golden Gate Park, especially on Sundays, when it is closed to traffic.

There are dozens of museums in the city – ones to see are the Museum of Modern Art, the de Young and the California Academy of Sciences. Plan your trip with the help of the sanfrancisco.travel website.

As a treat you may like to explore the wine country of Napa Valley. An all-day tour visiting three boutique wineries will cost from \$124 with greendreamtours.com.

Staying a little out of the city centre will also bring down the cost of accommodation. Two-star hotels in May are from €120–€160 a night. See VRBO.com for self-catering properties and use the price

filter to find the best-value rentals. You will be looking at about \$100–\$150 a night for a studio or one-bed apartment.

There are a few homestay.com rentals in San Francisco where you stay with families – that can work out costing much less.

I am planning to go solo on the Camino de Santiago during the Easter holidays. Many people have advised me to go alone and book accommodation along the way – “You’ll be grand” etc. I am wary of doing that my first time. Can you recommend a company I could book with and go as part of a group? – CG, Sligo.

At certain times of the year you can be hopeful of finding a bed each night, but I hear from the companies involved in planning Camino de Santiago trips that Easter is a busy time. Many Spaniards will be walking the pilgrim route.

This year Easter is also early and the chances of poor weather are higher. As you are travelling on your own I would suggest you book accommodation. Companies that specialise in the Camino include caminoways.com, followthecamino.com and maptravel.ie. There may be groups you could join, though walking the Camino on your own is perfectly fine. You will meet people along the way.

For example a week walking the most popular French route, from Sarria to Santiago de Compostela, with luggage transfers and half board costs from €697 in hotels from Caminoways. You can pare this back by having breakfast only and carrying your own luggage.

Staying in pilgrim hostels, called refugios or albergues can be much cheaper. You can obtain your pilgrim passport from Ireland and more information at caminosociety.ie.

Send your queries to jscates@irishtimes.com