



A Walking Tour of San Francisco - Chinatown (Look Up, America!)

Doug Gelbert

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Each walking tour describes historical and architectural landmarks and provides pictures to help out when those pesky street addresses are missing. Every tour also includes a quick primer on identifying architectural styles seen on American streets.

San Francisco's Chinatown, with a start date of 1848, is the oldest Chinatown in North America and the largest Chinese community outside Asia. Chinatown is the most densely populated neighborhood in the city and its streets and narrow alleys are a tightly packed menagerie of buildings with small stores selling everything from groceries to souvenirs. Chinatown retains its customs, languages, places of worship, social clubs, and identity. It has developed its own government and carries on as a "city-within-a-city."

While San Francisco today might seem unimaginable without Chinatown, its residents were forced to fight for the ground several times since its foundation. In the wake of rampant unemployment in the wake of the Panic of 1873 racial tensions in San Francisco flared into full-blown race riots. In response to the violence, the Consolidated Chinese Benevolent Association or the Chinese Six Companies was created as a means of providing the community with a unified voice. One of their first battles was over immigration quotas when the United States government passed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the first of several odious laws targeting the Chinese.

In the rebuilding effort after the 1906 Earthquake city officials saw an opportunity to ship the Chinese to the southern fringes of the city. The Chinese Six Companies thwarted the plan, mostly by agreeing to transform the neighborhood into a westernized tourist attraction. It is that vision of Chinatown that endures today.

Chinatown has captured the popular imagination. Bruce Lee was born here; chop suey was popularized here; Humphrey Bogart solved the intricacies of the Maltese Falcon here. Our walking tour of Chinatown will find temples, fortune cookies and several buildings by one of the most famous women architects in America and it will all start in an open space oft times referred to as "the Heart of Chinatown"...

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