

## Here's what S.F.'s China Beach bathhouse will look like after a \$20 million renovation that starts in 2022



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A rendering of planned renovations to the China Beach outdoor facility and bathhouse.  
SWA Group for the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy

San Francisco Bay swimmers Kerry Haworth and Sophia Passin emerged from 54-degree water into 55-degree air and drizzling rain at China Beach cove.

They were in need of a shower to rinse off the salt and a warm place to change into dry clothes, but they weren't going to find either at the run-down bathhouse in front of them.

After glaring at the padlocked building, they scampered up concrete steps to a rooftop sundeck where Haworth unscrewed the top of a plastic thermos and poured the entire contents of her drinking water over her head.

"This is what we have to do to rinse off," she said. "We have no water here. You can't even get a drink or wash the sand off your feet."

The decaying bathhouse, built as low and long as a beach motel, has been completely shut down since its water system failed in 2016. Its spigots are dry, and its joints are rusted. But not for much longer: The bathhouse is due for a makeover starting next year, the first since it was built in 1957.

The two-year, \$20 million project is the marquee improvement planned as part of the 50th anniversary of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area's founding.

The renovation will start with shoring up the retaining wall and terraces that prevent the adjacent cliff from collapsing onto the beach.

"China Beach was built into a cliff. Without these walls, we have no beach," said Claire Mooney, vice president for park places and innovation at the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy.

That infrastructure project will be followed by the refurbishing of the bathhouse interior and exterior picnic areas.

"Oh, my God, it will be amazing," said Passin, taking a look around. "This whole building is rotting."

China Beach is said to have gotten its name from an encampment of fishers who arrived from China during the Gold Rush era and took refuge in the sheltered cove. The beach was eventually taken over by the city, which built the bathhouse as a swimmers' locker room with hot showers and changing stalls. It was transferred to the GGNRA in 1977 and is maintained and operated by the National Park Service, which receives funding for programs and services through its nonprofit partner, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy.

The first \$10 million for the renovation was privately raised by undisclosed donors, and the second \$10 million came in a federal matching grant.

Heavy construction is expected to start in mid-2022 and will include accessibility improvements to the parking lot. The only way to reach China Beach is to park at the top and either walk down the service road or down 100 steep steps built into the sand.

The beach is hard to find, and its regulars are intentionally disorganized compared to Dolphin Club swimmers on the east side of the Golden Gate. China Beach swimmers have grown accustomed to hiking up the hill in wet clothes, strewing salt and sand all over their cars on the drive home due to the lack of a place to rinse off, dry off and change out of their bathing suits.

"Water people are water people," said Haworth, who drives across town from her home in Noe Valley four times a week. "We're going to swim no matter how cold."

Few swimmers like to stop and chat when they are shivering and shaking after coming out of the water. But Mooney and her staff managed to survey 800 of them during a series of visits in 2017. Beachgoers were asked how often they came. How they got there. Favorite thing to do. And: What most needs to be improved and why?

The takeaway from the surveys: "In general, folks that use China Beach regularly love the place as is," Mooney said.

The bathhouse will be renovated starting next October. Amenities of old, like private shower cubicles and a heated locker room, won't return due to concerns over staffing limitations, electricity bills and environmental sustainability. But there will be indoor restrooms with stalls large enough for changing, and unheated freshwater in the outdoor showers.

"Even water that you think of as cold is warm when you get out of the ocean," said Mooney. The other takeaway is the return of flush toilets in bathrooms inside the bathhouse to replace the uninviting plastic outhouses there now.

As the only significant structure on the San Francisco shoreline within the GGNRA, the bathhouse is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, and a formal nomination process is in the works.

The exterior will be completely restored and repainted before the interior becomes headquarters of the GGNRA Ocean Rescue Patrol, which was relocated to Fort Funston when the bathhouse infrastructure failed.

The patrol unit is expected to return to its lookout tower when the renovation is finished in 2023. The beach will remain open during construction.

"A shower would be nice, and it would be nice to be able to rinse the sand and salt off your fishing gear," said Blake Pearson, who paddles out to crab pots he keeps off the shore.

But like many China Beach regulars, he's wary that the anticipated renovations will draw crowds that could spoil the beach's tranquility.

"This is a precious spot, and if you fix it up it will attract more people," he said. "So it's the yin and the yang."

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