

## SAN FRANCISCO: THE CITY THAT NEVER SLEEPS (OR DOES IT?)

Everybody knows the old saying that 'you never really know a person until you live with them'. Well, this also applies to visiting other countries, because I have always had an idea in my head about what kind of city San Francisco would be. I have seen various pictures in holiday brochures of the Golden Gate Bridge, Fisherman's Wharf and of course, the famous Powell and Mason line Cable Cars. Not only is the city about the famous landmarks and sites everybody has heard of, to me it was about a whole lot more and I do not think that anybody truly knows a place until they have lived in the heart of it for more than two weeks. Regretfully, I only spent two weeks in the city, and I felt as though there was still plenty I had to learn about it.

People always seem to associate the state of California with plenty of sunshine, hardly any rain and generally being a warm if not hot climate. I was no different. Therefore, when I stepped off of the aeroplane and felt a cold blast of wind as I walked through the courtesy tunnel, I was fairly shocked. I did not expect to feel the cold whilst I was in California, but that was just the beginning of unexpected things to come. In all honesty I should have begun my travels with an open mind, but I thought I knew what San Francisco would be like and through fault of my own I did not expect anything else. I had visited the United States on three separate occasions before I decided to embark on San Francisco and I had never actually travelled to the western coast of America so this was new territory for me. There is supposed to be a clear divide between the East and West coasts of America and

thus knowing this, it was up to me to distinguish what these factors were. The fact that I had been to the country before certainly helped me a lot, especially at the airport. Many visitors from Europe who have not visited the United States before, would be alarmed at the amount of questions security ask whilst getting their passport stamped. This just goes to show that the American's do not just let anybody into their country and they have got to be certain that everybody who has not got a visa to live and work in the country has visited for recreational purposes only. I know that security has been stepped up since the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, but when the passport control officer asked me, 'Why are you visiting the USA?', 'How long will you be staying?', and 'Have you visited before?', it made me feel like a criminal for being in their country. At the time I felt like I had been interrogated for no reason, but looking back on it, I see that it was only for my increased safety whilst I was visiting that they had to ask those questions and they did ask everybody.

Ever since I can remember, I have always thought it was only the English that constantly talked about the weather. I was not expecting to hear about it non-stop whilst I was in San Francisco. However, I soon found out the reason behind it; I was actually visiting the city in the hottest weeks it had ever seen, I could not believe my luck. The cold blast of air I had felt whilst stepping off of the plane must have been the air conditioning, I breathed a big sigh of relief as I realised that the California I had been dreaming of might actually become a reality.

I had booked into a youth hostel for the first three nights of my stay and having never stayed in one before I really had no idea what it would be like. As soon as I

realised the taxi had pulled up outside the hostel, I began to worry. It looked nothing like the pictures I had seen on the internet, it was situated in a desolate street and a man was sitting on the steps outside with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. I honestly would have used all my spending money to stay in a respectable hotel for the rest of the trip if it had meant that I did not have to stay in the hostel. However, I was persuaded to give it a try for one night and I was given the chance to decide what to do after that. Keen to get out of the hostel I went for a walk on that first night to get an idea of how far we were from all the places I wanted to visit. To my horror, it seemed that nobody went for walks in the city, especially not at night anyhow. We were not staying far from Market Street, which is the main street in the city and it literally spans from one end of the city to the other and eventually ends at the Ferry Building next to the Bay Bridge. Having read about Market Street whilst doing my research, I was glad I was staying within walking distance, because that is the street where you can catch the streetcars and the BART (Bay Area Rapid Transport), which is the equivalent to the London Underground. Knowing that I was within walking distance of all the major transport links made me feel better and I decided that the next day I would take the Cable Car to Fisherman's Wharf and see what that had to offer.

The Cable Cars are the only vehicles of their kind still in operation and are considered to be National Landmarks. Travelling on a Cable Car was at the top of my list of things to see and do whilst I was visiting San Francisco, therefore it had to be one of the first things I did. Seeing the city the next day, when the sun was beaming and more people were walking the streets made all the difference. I just could not believe how many homeless people there were on the streets though,

with all of their worldly possessions packed into a shopping trolley they wandered up and down market street begging for money. Compared to London and New York, it seemed to me that San Francisco had a serious problem with the amount of homeless people living on the city's streets. It was not until the end of my trip that I found out, that the council of San Francisco actually gives each and every registered homeless person four hundred dollars a month, so that they can afford shelter and food. Although, hardly any of the money the city gives them is actually spent on shelter and food, it goes on alcohol and drugs, which is not helping anybody. There has been uproar from the public about the situation and there have been many petitions to stop the council from giving the homeless any more money.

I soon began to realise that even though I was in California, I was still in a city and all cities have their good parts and their bad parts, even more so the tourist attractions and the lived in areas. At that point I was ready to be a tourist with the rest of them, so I headed to Powell Street for a ride on one of the famous Cable Cars. It was a beautiful day so I sat on an outside seat and I did not have to fight for it and I soon realised why. I could not believe how steep the hills actually were, at one point we were so high up that I could see Alcatraz Island all the way at the bottom and the red cables of the Golden Gate Bridge just rising above the buildings in the distance. As the Cable Car descended down the hill, it went at a fairly high speed and I certainly felt the wind as it blew against us. The driver pointed out famous sites along the way, such as Chinatown on the right hand side, the famous Lombard Street as featured in many movies and then finally we came to our destination that was Fisherman's Wharf. Built in 1900, Fisherman's Wharf is

the most popular tourist attraction in San Francisco. I was not disappointed in the least when I finally arrived. I think the smell of crab and other seafood delights probably hit me before I had actually reached the Wharf, but that was just part of the experience at being there. Fisher man's Wharf was heaving with tourists, it was an unusually hot day and it seemed as though everybody had had the same idea. I had not expected the place to be so big; there were so many different piers I was not quite sure which one to visit first. However, it was soon decided that we should visit the San Francisco museum at Pier 45, which was also home to the US submarine USS Pampanito. The museum was no ordinary museum, since it was made out to look like an old Victorian arcade. It was crammed full of old wooden machines that worked if a quarter was dropped in and once the money had been collected the machines would come to life, considering the age of the contraptions it was quite amazing that they still worked. Unfortunately the trip around the USS Pampanito was not scheduled for that particular day so we then headed on to Pier 39. This was a thoroughly modern area of Fisherman's Wharf and to me it seemed as if it had only been designed with tourists in mind. According to the guidebook, Pier 39 is San Francisco's number one attraction and I can actually see why the book would say this, since it certainly does have a lot to offer to keep both adults and children entertained. There were the usual boutiques and memorabilia stores and of course no American city would be complete without a famous Hard Rock Café, but the one thing that could have kept me entertained for hours was just around the corner. I could not believe my eyes when all I could see there in the water right in front of me was more than one hundred sea lions sunbathing on floating rafts. It was like nothing I had ever seen before, not even Sea World could compete with the sea lions at Pier 39. It seemed unimaginable that just a few

hours previous and not even 5 miles away I had been alarmed by the amount of homeless people and street beggars, yet there I was staring at over one hundred sea lions housed within a small dock and I was not sure what surprised me the most.

Being Saint Patrick' day the very next day, I prepared myself for a long day. I had heard on the grapevine that the American's love to celebrate on Saint Patrick's Day and I was certain that this one would not be any different. I think that the American people are very open-minded when it comes to culture, race and sexuality, but I found even more so in San Francisco. There are so many different cultures within the city and they even have designated areas of the city in which they live. The obvious one being Chinatown, but the North Beach area is home to many Italian-American's, the Castro area is renowned for its Gay and Lesbian scene, Ocean Beach is known for its Japanese culture and the Irish fit in anywhere in between. That is why it did not surprise me that on Saint Patrick's Day, a day that the Irish would be doing the most celebrating it would seem, the American's were doing their best to outdo them.

After talking to many people who actually work in San Francisco, the current trend is to live elsewhere and travel into work each day. The most popular areas to live are either Oakland, which is over the eight and a half mile long Bay Bridge, or Sausalito that is in the other direction and across the Golden Gate Bridge. Having taken a trip over the Golden Gate Bridge and seeing the city from a different angle, I could certainly see why it might be tempting to live in the quieter towns and enjoy the hustle and bustle of going to work each morning. It was like entering

a different country as soon as we had crossed the Golden Gate Bridge and drove through Marin County. Even the weather had changed so drastically in that short distance; the temperature must have risen by twenty degrees Fahrenheit at least. We were heading towards the town of Sonoma and Napa Valley for some wine tasting, a far cry from the busy city that was San Francisco. Sonoma is regarded as the birthplace of California viticulture and the wine industry there is closely tied to the Spanish Missionaries that found San Francisco in 1823 and in fact it used to be the state capital for a while. The town itself was built around a square and it looked so clean and pristine, it was hard to comprehend that the city that never stands still was only forty miles away. Back on the road again and heading towards Napa Valley, I just sat there taking in the beautiful scenery, I really could not believe that a place could be so different. The divide between city and country really stood out in California and it was hard for me to decide which I liked the most. Just one main road went from Sonoma to Napa, with huge vineyards either side of the road it was easy to see why it was called 'Wine Country'. The size of the vineyards amazed me; the plots of land and the size of their houses were huge. It really was something I had never seen before, well the English are not really well known wine makers so I suppose there has never been a chance for me to see it. A trip to Napa would not have been complete without a touch of wine tasting so our first stop was at the Sequoia Grove Ranch, a huge working ranch where you can pay five dollars for four tastes; two whites and two reds. The price of wine by the bottle anywhere in California is so expensive compared to England, even the Californian wine; therefore I did not make a purchase. The next visit was to the film director Francis Ford Coppola's ranch, named Niebaum-Coppola. The sheer size of this vineyard was one to blow you away, the elegance and style which pour

out of the buildings is remarkable. It was clear that somebody extremely rich owned this vineyard and it was also a small museum in honour of the film director since there were a lot of exhibits in the hallway. Lots of memorabilia from his films were hung in cabinets around the galleries and this to me made the experience of wine tasting more exciting, just knowing I was visiting in Francis Ford Coppola's vineyard. It seems that the man has a lot to do with the state of California, obviously he has done a lot of work in Hollywood, but with his ranch in Napa and he has also shot one of his films in a downtown San Francisco diner which I visited later on in my trip. The film was called, 'American Graffiti', and was about teenagers growing up in the rock and roll era, but some of the scenes were set in Mel's Diner on Mission Street, San Francisco.

After leaving Napa we headed for the outlet stores. If there were something the American's know how to do properly, it would be shopping. Because, there in the middle of the countryside was a huge outlet shopping mall, with every brand name you could ever imagine at extremely good prices. I thought it was just San Francisco that was built around shopping malls and boutiques, but I was wrong, since even in the country they still have time to build a huge mall. That is what I found whilst being in San Francisco for two weeks, most American's do not like to stay at home, and they tend to go out more. Even after a day at work, it seems that they would rather go out for a meal than cook it at home and this was just the way of life for people in the city. Although according to some locals, American's do not walk anywhere they drive to their destination or they travel on the local transport system. Not me though, I walked everywhere and I did not see the problem with it, I thought at first it may be because of the people on the streets,



but they were no problem to me. I decided that it must be because American's have got used to being lazy and taking the easy option, which in my view was probably more accurate. One thing was for sure; they certainly know good food when they taste it.

That same night I headed into Chinatown for something to eat and I seriously could have been in China for all I knew, even the street signs were in Chinese. It was a very lively place, lights and noise wherever you turned. We were going to a restaurant called the 'House of Nung Ho' and the food was supposed to be out of this world. Whenever I have been to a Chinese restaurant in the past, there has always been a candle of the table, knives and forks wrapped up in a napkin, but when I arrived at the 'House of Nung Ho', I was not expecting it to be a café lit up with strip fluorescent lights. There was even a queue outside for this tiny back street café, a good sign I thought, but I was still a bit concerned that this was not the type of restaurant I had been expecting it to be. Once inside however, we had ordered our food and they cooked it right in front of me, with a bottle of 'Tsingtao' Chinese beer in my hand, I was looking forward to the food. After talking with the owner, he pointed out a framed picture on the wall of Jamie Oliver, the English chef. He had visited the 'House of Nung Ho' and had written a glorious review of the place in the local good food guide, and he was right, the food was delicious and it made me see that first appearances are not always what they seem. I am glad I decided to queue to get into the restaurant; it was well worth the wait.

Unfortunately the good weather looked as though it had passed by the second week and it was clear that I was going to have to find something to do which meant that

I would not be caught out in the rain. It had been suggested to me that I make a visit to the 'Metreon', which is a Sony Entertainment Centre. Home to a twelve screen cinema, an IMAX theatre and several gadget shops and restaurants, it did not even seem possible that I had walked past the building many times not realising what it was. Set within the financial district of San Francisco, the building is fairly inconspicuous surrounded by huge skyscrapers. Yet, once inside the building it is not easy imagining how I missed it. Hundreds of people crowding around games consoles waiting to try out a brand new game, a mile long queue for the cinema and the IMAX theatre, the place was heaving. I had never seen a place so busy, yet from the outside the building did not look like anything special. Those that wanted to escape the hubbub that was going on inside the 'Metreon', were sat quietly in the gardens that surrounded it. The Yerba Buena gardens provide tranquillity for the people who want to escape the noise of the city and just relax for an hour on their dinner break. I was beginning to see a likeness to New York within San Francisco, since the intercultural relations were more or less the same and Central Park offers New York the same sort of tranquillity that the Yerba Buena Gardens do to San Francisco. Yet, all the while that I was making these comparisons and finding similarities between the two, I found that San Francisco is far more relaxed and laid back than New York or any other city that I have visited. I do not know whether it is the people that live there or the way the city is governed, but for some reason laid back nature works for the city. Even the homeless make ends meet, they have their own community and get on with the life they lead, that is the one thing I wish had not bothered me in the first few days in the city. In the end I learnt not to expect anything during my trip, because it always turned out to surprise me and mainly in a good way.

Previous visits to America had led me to believe that the American's were extremely fake and narrow minded, yet whilst visiting San Francisco I saw no evidence of that. Maybe that is where the east and west coast divide tends to lie, since many holidaymakers from Europe mainly visit the eastern coast of America because it is closer. Tourism brings in a lot of money to the United States from Europe and maybe that is why they try so hard in places like Florida and New York to make you feel welcome; but it just comes across as being too pushy and fake. However, a city like San Francisco with its open-mindedness to sexuality, race and religion was going to be entirely different from the beginning and it certainly was. The whole temperament of the city flows like the water around it, calm and gentle yet perhaps a little rough around the edges.

Overall, If I could have changed my trip for the better, I would have become a commuter for two weeks and stayed across from the city and travelled in if and when I wanted to. However, I am glad that I stayed right within the heart of the city and witnessed the good things and the bad, yet most of the time there was hardly any bad. From what I saw of California, I liked very much and would not hesitate to go back at any given chance. I think it is important to see more than one aspect of a country and given the chance I would like to explore the state much more thoroughly, perhaps visiting Steinbeck Country and Yosemite Valley. With enough time and money I think if you really want to explore California it can be done, but finding the above is not easy unfortunately. I recommend that San Francisco should be on everybody's list of places to see before they die, it truly is a remarkable city and if its variety that you want, this place has it.

