

# Tales of the city

JAMES INNES WILLIAMS LEFT HIS HEART IN SAN FRANCISCO

**H**IDDEN AMONG THE MANY collages and photographs plastered across the walls of Vesuvio, a bar at the heart of San Francisco, I spotted a quote by Paul Kantner of the Sixties' psychedelic rock group Jefferson Airplane. It read, 'San Francisco: 40 square miles, surrounded entirely by reality.'

I'd spent a day wandering among the neighbourhoods and districts that make up the city, and now, beer in hand, I couldn't help but agree with his slogan. There was an atmosphere here that was decidedly different from other American cities.

For one thing, its weather is most beguiling. Its geography – on a hilly peninsula, surrounded by the Pacific Ocean and San Francisco Bay on three sides – means that it has a weather system all its own, notorious for producing a fog that hangs over the city in the morning before it is

whipped away by afternoon winds. But more than that, it is the people of San Francisco that really set the place apart. The number of different sub-cultures in various districts makes the city seem schizophrenic.

I was staying in the Phoenix Hotel, a small, simple affair just beyond the fringes of both Downtown and the Civic Centre, in a kind of no man's land. Originally a 1950s motel, it is now San Francisco's 'rock hotel', graced by the likes of David Bowie, Nirvana and Norah Jones, to name but a few. Two floors of rooms surround a courtyard scattered with surreal sculptures and an outdoor pool with a mural on its floor. For those that come to bask in the San Fran vibe, there is no alternative.

Spurred on by my night there, I headed down to Haight-Ashbury, the crossroads that once formed the epicentre of the hippie movement,

to see where the love affair with sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll had begun. The streets were lined with independent stores that sell used clothes, tie-dyes, jewellery and bongos, but the authenticity had been lost. Smiling tourists, punks, hippies and literati ambled along, clutching Starbucks coffees. Reality was creeping in.

Even so, Haight Street was something to behold. The Victorian houses were gloriously decorated in vibrant colours, lamp-posts were a vivid concoction of flyers and posters, everyone was smiling – heck, even the buses were decorated with flowers. And when I delved a little deeper, in the used record and book stores, I found things hadn't changed so much. They were still staffed by the same friendly owners, some in their twilight years, who were here in the heyday. These



PICTURE: MARCO PAOLUZZO



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PICTURE: JAMES INNES WILLIAMS

are the gentle people that Scott McKenzie sang about in 1967, when he suggested that you go to San Francisco with flowers in your hair.

A cable-car took me up to Fisherman's Wharf in the afternoon. The fishermen had mostly left since lending their name to the northern waterfront, and it was now a tacky tourist crowd-puller. "Hurry, hurry, hurry, now boarding. Alcatraz, Golden Gate Bridge. See the home

piers, the huddle of breakdancers, and the sight of brave locals swimming in the harbour. A walk along the harbour wall yielded spectacular views; in one direction the Transamerica Pyramid, in the heart of the Financial District, dominated the city's skyline; in the other, the Golden Gate Bridge was slowly being shrouded by evening mist.

The skyline enticed me back into the city. I headed toward the

Francis Ford Coppola wrote the script for *The Godfather*. It continues to serve the best espresso, hold performances of opera on Saturdays, and attract people to write their novels and scripts while the strong smell of coffee beans lingers in the air. Meanwhile, the City Lights Bookstore, which had a major role in publishing the works of the Beat poets, has retained its legacy of anti-authoritarian politics and insurgent

## The sign read 'San Francisco: 40 square miles, surrounded entirely by reality'

of Al Capone. Only \$10," called out the cruise boat captain at one end. At the other sat Pier 39, home to the most gimmicky of tourist shops and restaurants. A street musician sang 'Only fools rush in', but the irony seemed lost on the crowd.

The best attractions here were the Bush Man (a local who hides behind leafy branches and startles passers-by), the colony of 300 sea lions that live on platforms floating between

Transamerica Pyramid, straight down Columbus Avenue, to North Beach. Home to the city's Italian community, the European atmosphere drew the 1950s Beat writers to the area. Though the Beats who turned the city into a guiding light for other counter-culturalists have since left, the area retains its links to the past.

Among the pastry shops, eccentric bars, superb restaurants and dreamy hotels I found Caffe Trieste, where

thinking – its top floor continues to be well stocked with well-known and lesser-known works by the writers and thinkers of the Beat movement.

As I sat next door in Vesuvio, among the pork-pie hats that line the bar, discussing the purpose of life with bar-flies eager to meet today's curious tourist, I surveyed the scrapbook history on the walls and concluded that this city's Bohemian spirit would not be kept down.

**In pictures (from left):** Busy traffic crosses the famous Golden Gate Bridge; an elegant shop mannequin gazes out onto Union Square; one of the city's renowned cable-cars descends California Street; one of many murals in San Francisco, this one a seascape in the Tenderloin area; the noisy sea lion colony at the end of Pier 39 relaxes; the Transamerica Pyramid provides stark contrast to the Chinatown bustle.



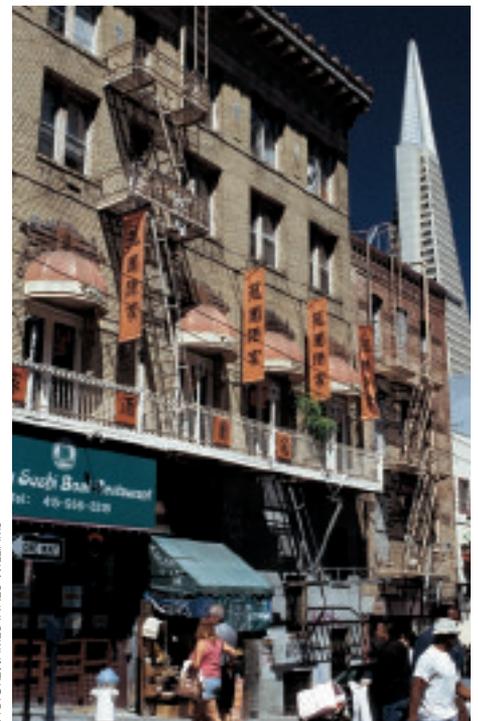
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## When to go

San Francisco boasts one of the most stable climates of any city in the world, with temperatures hovering around 15 degrees all year. But beware the heavy fog that rolls into the Bay to suffocate the city. A huge variety of festivals are held each year, including Chinese New Year, Japantown's Cherry Blossom Festival in April, and the massive, raucous Gay Pride street party in June.

## Find out more

### Websites

**www.sanfrancisco.citysearch.com**  
A huge site with guides, maps, suggestions, reviews, phone numbers – everything you need to know.

**www.sfstation.com** A local listings and ticket-sales website for concerts, films, restaurants and more.

### Books

**TALES OF THE CITY** The first of Armistead Maupin's classic tales of this city, follows eight San Francisco characters through the 1970s and early 80s.

**THE JOY LUCK CLUB** Amy Tan's novel about four Chinese women and their daughters, new to the city in the 1940s, who meet to play *mah jong* and tell stories. Some brilliant prose and wonderful insights.

**THE SILVERADO SQUATTERS** Robert Louis Stevenson offers vivid descriptions of San Francisco's nineteenth-century splendour, as well as the peculiar atmosphere of an abandoned Gold Rush settlement.

## second opinion

### RUDYARD KIPLING

"San Francisco is a mad city – inhabited for the most part by perfectly insane people whose women are of a remarkable beauty."

## first person

"So you've seen the Golden Gate Bridge, Alcatraz, Haight Ashbury and Sausalito.... If you fancy taking a short drive north, over the Golden Gate Bridge, you'll find another side of America, where people greet each other in the street, kids leave their bicycles on the sidewalk, and the town's only fire engine stands shining in the afternoon sun beside the Stars and Stripes. Welcome to the sleepy town of San Anselmo. It's a quaint and quirky mixture of old money and liberal thinkers. You can meet some of them at Bubba's diner, where the conversation is as good as the food. The charming local shops sell all kinds of antiques and curiosities, and are ideal for a leisurely browse." *The WEXAS Americas team can be contacted on 020 7838 5984.*



**MARCUS SEPTEMBER, AMERICAS SPECIALIST AT WEXAS**

## Where to stay

**CLAREMONT RESORT & SPA** A relaxed haven of swimming pools and spa treatment rooms nestling in the Berkeley hills, 19 km from downtown San Francisco and close to the Berkeley university campus.

**THE CLIFT** A high-design and high-concept hotel in the heart of the theatre district. Proportions of scale have been played with inside the grand lobby, where an enormous chair upholstered in antique tapestry takes pride of place. The hotel also houses the post-modern Redwood Room bar, a venerable San Franciscan drinking hole.

**HOTEL BOHEME** An intimate hotel in the heart of North Beach, decorated in art deco style. It's full of character and features gauze-draped canopies covering queen-sized beds, as well as black and white photographs of local heroes hung on the burnt orange walls.

**MARK HOPKINS INTER-CONTINENTAL** This grand hotel at the top of Nob Hill was once a haunt of writers and movie stars. It now has a more corporate atmosphere, but retains its charm. The Top of the Mark cocktail bar affords wonderful views across the city.

**W HOTEL** Part of the Starwood group, this modern and comfortable hotel has great views of the Bay Bridge and is situated in the revitalised Soma district, right next door to the Museum of Modern Art and the city centre.

**ARGONAUT** Located down on the waterfront, this intimate boutique hotel has a nautical-themed and modern décor.



## Top sites

- ① **ALAMO SQUARE** Catch impressive views from this park, whose panoramic vistas of the entire city – including the row of fastidiously restored Victorian houses known as the Painted Ladies – are quite gasp-inducing.
- ② **CHINATOWN** Sample *dim sum* in one of the many restaurants, or wander along Grant Avenue to admire the brightly coloured balconies and search for souvenirs.
- ③ **MISSION DOLORES** Worship at the simple church and oldest building in the city, dating from 1791. It survived the fires that followed the 1906 earthquake.
- ④ **GOLDEN GATE PARK** Explore the lungs of the city, stretching three miles from Haight-Ashbury to the beach. It's home to museums, Japanese tea gardens, windmills and even buffalo.
- ⑤ **ALCATRAZ** Visit the isolated island prison, now a museum but once home to America's most famous criminals, including Al Capone, Machine Gun Kelly and the Birdman.