

We live in **FINANCIAL TIMES®**

[Click here to take our survey and enter the prize draw ▶](#)



**ARTS & WEEKEND
TRAVEL**

[FT Home](#) > [Arts & weekend](#) > [Travel](#)

No flowers in your hair

By Rahul Jacob

Published: November 2 2007 17:06 | Last updated: November 2 2007 17:06



Sit in Grace Cathedral in San Francisco on a weekday evening and you may witness a silent army laying siege to the altar. They arrive alone or in pairs with mats rolled under their arms and it is only when the instructor arrives that you realise that a yoga class is about to begin.

Only in San Francisco? Perhaps, but the idea of using a sacred space for yoga seems a stroke of genius, even in this most liberal of churches. In a nearby chapel, there is a triptych by the artist Keith Haring, completed just weeks before he died of Aids, along with symbols of the world's religions from Jainism to Islam.

This informality persists even in San Francisco's City Hall, which boasts a dome higher even than the Capitol in Washington, DC. Any visitor can walk into the anteroom to the mayor's office – in fact a candidate for the mayoral election this month wants the doors taken off the mayor's office. When a lady stopped me on the second floor, I assumed she was going to turn me away. Instead, she pointed me in the direction of his office 50m away and encouraged me to come back for a proper tour of the building. I was distracted by the bust of George Moscone, mayor from 1976 to 1978, when he was assassinated. The inscription below his bust read: "San Francisco is an extraordinary city because its people have learned to live together with one another, to respect each other ... it's the reason why the citizens who live here are the luckiest people in the world."

People have been making pilgrimages to this city, believing its residents the luckiest in the world, on and off since the Summer of Love in 1967. This perception may have been urban myth as reality, however: Joan Didion's reporting from that summer's epicentre, the Haight-Ashbury district in San Francisco, suggests many hippies of the time were neither hip nor happy.

Her 1967 essay begins with a Portland mother's plaintive posting on Haight Street requesting information about a missing son and ends with a three-year-old starting a fire in a communal house of hippies: "They didn't notice Sue Ann screaming at Michael because they were in the kitchen trying to retrieve some very good Moroccan hash, which had dropped down through a floorboard damaged in the fire." Forty years on, I left San Francisco before a weekend concert commemorating the summer of 1967. Forty years on, the concert, like that of another mayoral candidate who sang "Blowin' in the Wind" to kick off her campaign, seemed like a commemoration out of context.

San Francisco, the capital of the counterculture, appears to have slipped into prosperous middle age. The city's poet laureate Armistead Maupin was quoted recently as saying what the country needed was not gay ghettos such as the Castro, but a gay retirement centre. Indeed, one of the first gay couples I encountered were slowed down as they made their way through a gallery because one of them needed a Zimmer frame.

In Maupin's latest book, *Michael Tolliver Lives*, the hero complains about the small-town politics of some of those who flock to the Castro today. One corners Tolliver with a petition in hand to complain that the F streetcar for tourists was scheduled to have a new stop at Castro and Market: "They just can't do this," he cried. "This is the centre of our spirituality." After a visit to the Castro, with its mushrooming upmarket clothing shops selling underwear for \$40, this satirical passage rang all too true.

In nearby Berkeley, where I remember almost every stop sign 20 years ago having the word Reagan emblazoned on it, and where demonstrations on Sproul Plaza calling for disinvestment in South Africa were commonplace, there were now daily queues of 45 minutes to get an ice cream cone at Ici. It was a kind of Marie Antoinette metaphor for our food-obsessed times.

Perhaps we are all middle-aged now, even on our campuses. A recent article in The New York Times Magazine that wondered why the campus no longer played a central role in political life began by recalling how Ronald Reagan ran for governor of California in 1966 by railing against the deviance of Berkeley. The article concluded that it was inconceivable today that a race for governor would revolve around a debate about campus life.

Give or take the occasional burst of anarchy before a G8 summit, demonstrations are increasingly an anachronistic mode of political protest just about everywhere. We may hold forth passionately enough on the war in Iraq but London, for instance, has seen only one huge demonstration against it. Global warming is a *cause célèbre* everywhere but few of us are willing to fly or drive less.

This apathy was the subject of a photo series entitled "Old News" in San Francisco's City Hall

[Jobs](#) [Business for sale](#) [Contracts & tenders](#)

SEARCH

- [Tax Professionals](#)
- [Ernst & Young](#)
- [Regional IT Leader, Sub Saharan Africa](#)
- [IFC](#)
- [Head of Buying](#)
- [Gifts and Toys](#)
- [Human Resources Director, Retail](#)
- [UK Mobile Media Company](#)

RECRUITERS

FT.com can deliver talented individuals across all industries around the world
[Post a job now](#)

RELATED SERVICES

- [FT Bespoke Forums](#)
- [UK annual reports](#)
- [Market research](#)
- [Growth companies](#)
- [Corporate subscriptions](#)
- [Luxury Travel brochures](#)
- [FT Newspaper subscriptions](#)
- [FT Fine Wine Plan](#)
- [FT Diaries](#)
- [FT Bookshop](#)
- [FT Conferences](#)
- [FT Syndication services](#)

in late August. In one, a copy of the San Francisco Chronicle that told of another round of mayhem in the Middle East last summer during the Israeli attack on Lebanon provided the backdrop as a mother took her two girls to the park. Didion was presciently speaking for us all in an essay entitled "On the Morning after the Sixties", written more than three decades ago: "If I could believe that going to the barricade would affect man's fate in the slightest, I would go to that barricade and quite often I wish I could."

For San Francisco, part of this descent into middle age is not just the result of the passage of time, however. Many young people from all over the US are still attracted to the liberal, laid-back lifestyle that San Francisco espouses but they often no longer find jobs there. After the dotcom bubble burst, the number of people in their 20s in the city fell by nearly 40 per cent between 2000 and 2005 while less expensive cities nearby, such as Oakland and Sacramento, saw their populations swell by tens of thousands. As it happened, I was driven through the Twin Peaks area by a 32-year-old MBA from the University of San Francisco, whose tour of his old neighbourhood was tinged with nostalgia; he was leaving the following week for a job in Chicago after having quit his previous job in the city in December.

Indeed, this always underpopulated city of less than 1m appears to be hollowing out, overshadowed by its dynamic hinterland of Silicon Valley. (Google deserves to be applauded for doing its bit to reverse the flow, providing buses to transport 1,200 employees from in and around the city to its headquarters in Mountain View.) The emptiness of parts of San Francisco can border on the eerie. When I walked past the Transamerica building a little before eight one evening, I saw the street cleaners already hard at it, using powerful water hoses to scour the sidewalks. I imagined this centrepiece of the skyline completely empty, a rocket launcher for friendship missions to outer space, perhaps.

At times like these, San Francisco seems a city built by Lewis Carroll, not a metropolis at all, but an upside-down fairy tale about one. There was a plan mooted after the earthquake of 1906 for a unified city design – eventually jettisoned in favour of getting the city up and running quickly – and one can't help sympathise with that effort. What remains is a garage sale of architectural styles. The de Young museum's expensive reincarnation in what looks like copper mesh scaffolding must be among the most extraordinary. Then there is the famous zigzag of Lombard Street, but there are also half a dozen streets at least that are more obstacle course than practical road, where cars are confronted with upward inclines of 25 to 30 degrees. And the fog that envelops large parts of San Francisco makes the city disappear and reappear with the force of a hallucination. The Golden Gate Bridge is almost certainly one of those contraptions in the theatre that are lowered and retracted at will.

But look at the Transamerica Pyramid from another angle and it seems a beacon for the rest of the world. This city and its hinterland have always been about values rather than just numbers. As John Markoff argues in his book, *What the Dormouse Said*, the counterculture gave us the personal computer, which grew out of organisations as diverse as the Homebrew Computer Club, which would generate companies such as Apple Computer, and the Stanford Artificial Intelligence Lab. People who were influenced by the tumult and values of the 1960s were suspicious of the mainframe and saw the PC as a democratising (as well as a mass-market) product.

The start-ups of Silicon Valley are now multibillion-dollar enterprises but they remain at their core more egalitarian than companies elsewhere. Their "campuses" are role models for Indian and Taiwanese companies as far away as Bangalore and Hsinchu. Work often matters for its own sake, not just because it leads to a rung on the corporate ladder. The counterculture is also now part of the mainstream. If San Francisco is noticeably no longer young, it still fuelled a mostly successful movement for gay rights and women's rights and played a role in fostering environmentalism and the slow food movement in the US. That is quite a curriculum vitae for any city to boast. The idealism of Stanford and Berkeley dates back to visionary presidents of these universities in the 19th century, the historian Kevin Starr notes, who felt that California as a society needed to be "worthy of its natural resources". In the past few decades, the area's companies and universities have reached out to Asia in a way no other place has. A month before I travelled there, the United Nations secretary-general Ban Ki-moon returned to the city, visiting a 90-year-old woman just outside San Francisco who had hosted him for eight days when he was a student who travelled there from South Korea.

Even the casual visitor cannot help but notice the city's egalitarian instinct and a generosity in casual interactions that is almost pastoral. At the \$160 a night Hotel Rex, full of bright colours and books left in corridors, front office staff are encouraged to list their favourite places in the city and why they like living there: "Eat" said one simply and I couldn't help agreeing. When I checked out, I was thanked "for wearing that lovely shirt". It was "Spare the Air Day" and the city was offering free rides on public transport so I took a bus down to the Ferry Building. As I got off, the glamorous driver told me she wished the city would do it every Friday because it was good to have a fuller bus.

Arriving for lunch at 2.30pm at the modern Vietnamese restaurant, The Slanted Door, I expected to be turned away as I would have been in London or New York at a similarly feted venue, but I was told I still had time to order off the lunch menu and sit at the bar with its postcard-perfect views of the bay. When I left, the bartender unhurriedly wrote down a list of recommended Napa Valley reds and warned me away from the region's oaky chardonnays.

Just outside the Ferry Building, an open-air dinner party seemed to be taking shape. Tables were brightly decorated, a mariachi singer was in attendance and the scene was generally so festive that some tourists enquired if they could come back later. It turned out to be, of all things, a corporate off-site meeting, a team-building exercise that involved picking cuisines out of a hat and then cooking dinner.

I went to the Weinstein Gallery on Geary Street a little later to look at its museum-quality Chagalls and a small collection of Picasso ceramics. The staff were so friendly that I felt duty-bound to declare that I was not a collector. No matter – a woman, who turned out to be the director, got into an animated chat about Tibet and Calcutta anyway.

I boarded the aircraft that night reluctantly, promising myself that I needed to come back to

San Francisco for longer visits for the same reason that the hippies of yesteryear travelled to India – because they believed that it was good for the soul.

Where to go, eat and stay in San Francisco

Locals call it El Drisco and trill the R. It sounds like they know some elite Spanish superhero that you don't. But what they're actually talking about is where you should stay: the now renamed Hotel Drisco, in Pacific Heights. When I first moved to San Francisco, I lived there for a month. Stay at least that long if you can. If you can't, choose the Campton Place hotel right off Union Square, the Ritz Carlton near Nob Hill or the new St Regis downtown, **writes Holly Finn**.

The nearby Presidio used to feel like the ascetic army base it was. Now, it's one big at-ease eatery. Have a coffee at Perk Presidio, sloppy joes at Presidio Social Club or a French salad at La Terrasse, with its sideways view of the Golden Gate Bridge.

For more views, go to the de Young Museum, by architects Herzog & de Meuron, in Golden Gate Park. You'll kick yourself or someone else if you miss James Turrell's "Three Gems" skyscape, in the garden, or Chiura Obata's mesmeric "Lake Basin in High Sierra" in the Barbara Bohannon Carleton room. Arrive before 4.30pm before the museum's tower closes, take the lift to the top and look in every direction – including towards the California Academy of Science next door. The nearly \$500m "green" project by Renzo Piano should be the first museum to earn the highest Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification. It opens next year.

When it comes to food, if you want something self-righteous (organic), have lunch at Lettus. Meanwhile, it's amazing what chef Daniel Patterson can do with pig at Michelin-starred Coi. My pork was drizzled with sauce made from plum reduction and tobacco essence. It was like smoking again but in a nutritious way.

Out here, people such as Patterson have an idea and make it happen (other places, they have an idea and go to the pub). Four companies founded by locals are particularly go get 'em: Elizabeth W for beautiful lavender sachets, linen bags and sweater folds for the trip home; Recchiuti for cryingly good Fleur de Sel chocolates; Qi for an exotic tea-based brandy that tastes like an English country weekend, only without the mud, and Cordarounds.

The last is a manly cult whose tagline says it all: "Finally, horizontal corduroy." Start buying the men's trousers and reversible smoking jackets, with their discreet red cord tag, and you'll need deprogramming to stop.

Hotel Drisco, tel: +1-415 346 2880; www.jvdhotels.com/drisco
Campton Place, tel: +1-415 781 5555; www.tajhotels.com/camptonplace
Ritz Carlton, tel: +1-415 296 7465; www.ritzcarlton.com
St Regis, tel: +1-415 284 4000; www.starwoodhotels.com/stregis
Perk Presidio, tel: +1-415 746.5456
Presidio Social Club tel: +1-415 885 1888; www.presidiosocialclub.com
La Terrasse, tel: +1-415 922 3463; www.laterrassepresidio.com
De Young Museum, tel: +1-415 863 3330; www.thinker.org/deyoung
Lettus, tel: +1-415 931 2777; www.lettusorganic.com
Coi, tel: +1-415 393 9000; www.coirestaurant.com
Elizabeth W, tel: +1-415 351 2800; www.elizabethw.com
Recchiuti at the Ferry Building, tel: +1-415 826 2868; www.recchiuti.com
Qi, tel: +1-415 437 2250; www.qispirits.com
Cordarounds, tel: +1-800.694.9491; www.cordarounds.com
 Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2008

[Print article](#) [Email article](#) [Order reprints](#)

[del.icio.us](#) [reddit](#) [Digg](#) [Facebook](#) [stumbleupon](#) [Yahoo!](#)

MORE ARTS & WEEKEND

[Enduring love](#)

[The strange case of Brian Paddick](#)

[Lunch with the FT: Nassim Nicholas Taleb](#)

['I was unfamous for an awful long time'](#)

[Dreams in black and white](#)

SPONSORED LINKS

[How to advertise here](#)

[Napakabs Online Wine Shop](#)

"10 Best Online Wine Shops" - Food & Wine Magazine.

[San Francisco GMC Dealer](#)

New & Pre-Owned Car Specials. Request a Free Quote & Test Drive.

[Produce 3 Products with 1 Investment](#)

Worm Farming.

[Fashion accessories](#)
[Credit card](#)
[Art](#)
[Food and drink](#)
[Home and garden](#)
[Sport](#)

[FT Home](#)

[Site map](#) [Contact us](#) [Help](#)

[Advertise with the FT](#) [Media centre](#) [FT Newspaper subscriptions](#) [FT Conferences](#) [FT Syndication](#) [Corporate subscriptions](#) [FT Group](#)

Partner sites: [Chinese FT.com](#) [The Mergermarket Group](#) [Investors Chronicle](#) [Exec -Appointments.com](#) [Money Media](#) [The Banker](#)
© Copyright [The Financial Times Ltd](#) 2008. "FT" and "Financial Times" are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd. [Privacy policy](#) [Terms](#)