

San Francisco Journal

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Friday, March 9

It's 3 a.m. Wow, I haven't seen this side of sunrise in a while. I have to get up. I have to get to the airport. The ticket agent said if I don't get on the 6 a.m. flight, I won't make it to San Francisco. Onward!

I get to the airport with an hour to spare. I put the car in the daily lot and wait for the mandatory shuttle. Three minutes pass ... five ... eight ... where is that damn shuttle? Finally, the guy waiting with me gets fed up. He decides to cross the construction debris-filled lot and find out what the heck is going on. I'm thankful for him as I watch the minutes continue to tick away.

Shortly thereafter, a shuttle arrives. The guy is on it. I sit down across from him. He motions his head toward the driver and with quiet fury says, "I had to wake him up." My eyes bulge. I tell him how glad I am he walked over. I probably wouldn't have done it with 50 pounds of luggage at dark thirty. As we move through the lot and pick up the dozen or so other passengers that have accumulated at the different stops, I wonder if they have any clue how close they came to having a most disastrous morning.

To the gate. I get a seat on the plane with no problem. To ATL, then to SFO. Smooth flights with plenty of room to spare. Though I didn't get a first-class seat, I had no trouble going on a buddy pass. Aren't people flying Delta? Never mind, I'm not gonna question my good fortune.

I land at SFO at 10:30 a.m. (Pacific Time) Mom and Martha aren't supposed to get to the hotel until around 6 or 7 p.m. I've got all day and nothing to do. Better work on that. I drop my luggage at the hotel and grab a visitor guide, the badge of all proud tourists. I find a tour company and book something for 2 p.m. In the meantime, I grab a BLT and a piece of pie at a local diner: The Pinecrest. It was recommended by a homeless guy who said they let him wash their windows for food. So I figured I'd support 'em. And yes, there are tons of homeless people in SF. I've never been panhandled so much in my life.

After my lunch, I have a few hours to kill before the tour bus arrives, so I walk around downtown. Our hotel is on the border of the Downtown/Union Square districts. Fortunately, I stuck to the Downtown side first, since Union Square is basically SF's version of the Magnificent Mile. (For those not familiar, a huge, homogenous and super-fabulous shopping area replete with shops such as Saks, Crate & Barrel, Handbags 'R Us, whatever.) I would've been disappointed to just find that.

But the route I took was cool. I found a take-out Indian restaurant, lots of little tobacconist shops, a number of ethnic delis, and the piano bar where they filmed scenes from *The Maltese Falcon*. Finally it's time to meet the bus.

The tour was nice. I got my bearings in the city and saw things I didn't even know were there. I was also reminded of the thing I most wanted to do there — besides eat — which was to visit Alcatraz. More on that later. Here's a list of the things I saw on the tour:

- The Palace of Fine Arts (where they filmed parts of “The Rock”)
- The Presidio. This area goes on and on. It's most of what used to be the military base, but it's now part of the recreation area and the former officers' homes are going to be rented to non-profit organizations, etc.
- The house where they filmed “Mrs. Doubtfire.”
- Twin Peaks. We drove to the top and got out for some lovely views of the city and the bay.
- The Cliff House. This is the restaurant that overlooks the cliffs and a coast dotted with monolith rocks.
- The Golden Gate Bridge. Though admittedly, I never rode over the bridge I saw it from the base and other angles.
- The botanical gardens at Golden Gate Recreation Area. I liked this because it had a Primitive Garden, a Biblical Garden and a Fragrant Garden.
- Postcard row. The view you see in all the movies. I remember it best from “So I Married an Axe Murderer.” Most people remember it from the beginning of that TV show “Full House.”
- The Castro Theater. Gay icon and screener of classic movies. They recently showed a sing-along version of “The Sound of Music.” How fun!

Just driving around the streets was amazing. The architectural diversity was phenomenal. I mean, the homes were all similar and packed in, but they all looked totally different — and gorgeous! I can see why people want to live there. Except for the cost, of course. Real estate is the number three industry behind tourism and banking. Oh, and don't forget the earthquakes.

I also learned a few things. The most interesting to me was the fact that the word “alcatraz” means “pelican” in Spanish. Apparently, there were many alcatrazes on the island when it was first set upon by the Spanish-speaking explorers. The name stuck.

After four hours, the tour was over. I was dropped back at the hotel just in time to meet up with the ski group. Dinner! I met up with the seven others; everyone was very nice. I also got a look at the room I'd be sharing with Mom and Martha. Tiny! Two beds but barely enough room to move around. Though a full-service hotel, space is a premium in SF so it was a tight squeeze.

Mom and Martha (and the others) had spent the day in the wine country. They said it was gorgeous. They'd had a big lunch, but everyone was ready for a dinner. I cleaned up quickly and prepared to go out. The gang decided to visit Fisherman's Wharf. It was a nice night, cooler than us Floridians were used to, but pleasant. We took the streetcar to the wharf, which was just a few blocks away.

Upon arrival it was determined that a majority of folks wanted to do the tourist thing and have a helping of clam chowder in a sourdough breadbowl. We did so at Pier 39, the most touristy of the piers. Though it was only about 9 p.m., just about everything was closed. We stopped into a chocolate shop for dessert and then headed back to the hotel. I had been up for nearly 24 hours and I was quite punch drunk. Plus, I bought a chocolate covered caramel/marshmallow bar at the chocolate shop. Sugar rush and sleep deprivation, not a good combination. It was definitely time to crash.

As it turned out, everyone decided to go to bed. I figured they'd go out for a while longer, but I guess not. It seems everyone was eager to get the most out of Saturday since that was the only full day they would have in the city, and only a handful of the group had ever been to SF before. A number of my fellow newbies took a bus tour, as I had, and we all decided it was the best \$30 we could've spent.

So it was back to the hotel. Did I mention it was called the Villa Florence? It was right on Powell Street in a primo location. We could walk to the most desirable districts, as we did the following morning.

Saturday, March 10

7 a.m. and we're up and at 'em. Mom, Martha and I showered quickly and headed out to breakfast. Mom also put in another call to my stepsister Ellen. We were planning to meet up with Ellen and her husband John that day. They've recently purchased a house and we were all eager to see it. But first, we required food.

We happened into Lori's Diner, a fixture that boasts three locations near our hotel. It was amazing. I had a fresh spinach omelet while Martha stuck with a light pastry and coffee. Mom was the rebel. The woman who hardly eats put away a huge piece of cherry pie a la mode. Martha and I were stunned. She cleared the entire plate! Good for her! And then we strode off toward Chinatown.

In Chinatown we mostly browsed the shops. By that I mean, we didn't actually do much actual shopping. I bought a set of chopsticks for my sister's family and a gift for my dad's girlfriend. (Can't say what since I plan to send this along, but trust me, it was neat.) I really enjoyed the walk though, and the people were all so nice.

We went past a playground I'd seen the day before. It stands outside the Chinese cultural center. Its slides and jungle gyms boast pagoda roofs instead of the usual plastic castles and such you expect to see. It was so cool. I made mom take a photograph.

We also walked up to the TransAmerica tower (the tallest skyscraper and the most familiar part of the skyline). Then we were trying to walk to Washington Square; we were consulting our map. A nice local actually stopped to ask us if we needed help. He pointed us in the right direction with a significant degree of sibilance, and we were off. What a great city.

I have to say that everyone in SF really is nice. The locals, the tourists, everyone. It adds a great deal to the charm of the place.

Washington Square is in North Beach, the Italian district, and boy is it. There was so much great food. But we were saving that for dinner. There was one restaurant that

had piqued my interest though. The Stinking Rose, named for its garlicky concoctions, sounded so promising. My tour guide even claimed they served garlic ice cream. It was open for lunch so we stopped in to browse its product shelves. There we found everything garlic from salsa to jelly. And there was even a Stinking Cookbook that featured all the eaterie's signature dishes.

We also peeked in on the Café Niebaum-Coppola. Yes, *that* Coppola. Francis Ford, as you may or may not know, is a renowned vintner. His café boasted an impressive if concise menu. But again, we were holding out for Michelangelo's at dinner.

As we crossed over to Washington Square we found ourselves in the shadow of the church where Joe DiMaggio and Marilyn Monroe had their wedding reception. Joe was a member until his death. It's a lovely place. In the park, there was being held an art show. This of course means sale. Mother and I found a really cool artist who does hand-colored etchings. His name was Alp Ozberker (no typo, I swear). I ended up buying one and Mom bought a set of his notecards. His titles included things like "As the World Turns," "A Hot Dog for a Princess" and mine was "Strangers in the Night." I've inserted a picture of my colorful little monkey below.



Ain't he the cutest thing?

Ellen called and was on her way to pick us up in the park. After stopping for a soda in Mario's Bohemian Cigar Store, we were refreshed and ready for whatever Ellen had in store for us. She arrived and we piled into her Volkswagen and headed for her new home in the Mission District.

Ellen's been married for about a year and a half now. She's recently begun editing at an animation studio about five blocks from home (her commute's better than ours in Orange Park). The studio's called Wild Brain and she really likes it. She and John also have a dog named Roscoe who's two years old. He's a big sweetie.

Their house is cool. Though homes there are narrow, they're very deep. She said hers was built around 1900. They will probably get one or two apartments to let once they've finished all their work — but there is a lot of work! They also have a garden area in the back and a nice deck where they can watch the fog roll in around the Mission.

Speaking of fog, I should mention that we had absolutely no foggy days. I was almost disappointed since SF is so famous for it. But I'm not complaining, we had lovely weather after a reputed six weeks of rainy weekends. Must've come in our suitcases! Mom and Martha also had great skiing weather the entire week prior so all in all it was an ideal vacation.

OK, back to Ellen and John. They took us to a Thai-Asian-Fusion restaurant in the Castro that was amazing. You all know the Castro is the rainbow district right? We had the most competent waiter ever. He was so cool and gorgeous to boot. Not that it matters, but hey, one can appreciate.

I had dim sum, one of my goals, and Martha had Thai, one of hers. It was quite a feast with fragrant beef and noodle dishes, plus a BBQ chicken flatbread to start. Very spicy! My dim sum was a bun combo and three sauces. We all partook. It was all quite delectable.

After lunch we headed back toward the Union Square District and our hotel. Mom and Martha wanted to visit the Britex store. It's four floors of fabrics, buttons and the like. We stopped at Flax, a paper store, on the way. We bought a few gifts and could've spent hours perusing all the nifty merchandise in there. Then we stopped next store at Arthur Schilling's Chocolatier for a truffle. I must say, I normally don't have much of a sweet tooth, but this is exactly what chocolate should always be like. It was incredible. Sensuous. Sweet. Smooth. Silky. All the likely adjectives that come to mind when you think of the concept "chocolate."

As we neared the hotel our feet began to feel the day's journey, so we hopped on the historic streetcar that runs down Market Street, the town's main thoroughfare. I went back to the hotel to rest up for a few minutes. Mom and Martha continued on to the Britex store.

An hour later we were preparing to meet everyone in the ski group, and our friend Iggy, in the lobby of the hotel. Iggy was joining us for dinner and an evening of the infamous SF musical "Beach Blanket Babylon." The musical revue, famous for its parodies of pop culture and social commentary, is a must-see so they say.

Once we were all gathered, we got on the streetcar — the wrong streetcar — and toddled off to North Beach for dinner. Well, once we realized our error we had to hike an extra 10 blocks or so to make up for it. And the hills, dear God the hills! Everyone else had been skiing all week. Iggy and I were invalids comparatively. He recovering from a nasty respiratory infection and me from my mysterious viral infection. Plus, he's 81 years old. It wasn't pretty. But we all made it.

Upon arrival at Michelangelo's, we were pleased to discover Ellen was already there. And they had a table waiting. Since they don't take reservations, our party of 10 was nervous. But we had no trouble.

We were led into a tiny establishment with a generous sampling of art on the walls. Nudes, still lifes, statuary. All there, all lovely. But the most lovely pieces of all were the stained glass lampshades that hung from the ceiling. What a collection! They were gorgeous.

We each gave our orders to the darling Italian woman serving. The restaurant, like everyplace else, was a tight squeeze and we clamored for elbow room as our meals were delivered. I had a spinach-cheese ravioli with tomato cream sauce. It was exquisite, but in my opinion the real treat was the Pasta Michelangelo. This was a tortellini dish featuring a prosciutto cream sauce. This was true divinity. My hesitation to order was a regrettable one, but overall everything was wonderful and you couldn't go wrong. Most people ordered the seafood pasta special.

With our bellies full we walked up the block to the show. We were scheduled to attend at 10 p.m. This turned out to be not such a wise move for me. I found myself feeling more exhausted than exhilarated to be there. Jet lag was kicking in. But I hung in there.

The show was funny. It's famous for its tall hats. And there are some doozies! One featured the entire SF skyline, another the whole cast of the seven dwarfs. Snow White is the star, dontcha know.

Parodied characters included: Prince, Clinton, Hillary, Britney, N Sync, and tons of others. The singing was even more impressive than the hats in my opinion.

After the show my grumpy ass led the group back to the hotel. I wanted to get a cab but they'd all been had by the time we said our good-byes. We got back on the streetcar, but fortunately it was the right one this time.

I wasn't in the room 15 seconds before I passed out. I was soooo tired. I slept 'til nearly 8 a.m. the next morning. Meanwhile, Mom and Martha packed to leave. They had to be in San Jose on an airplane by noon the next day.

Sunday, March 11

Another sunny morning in SF. Mom and Martha are headed out the door once I finally manage to tumble out of bed. My only goal this day was to set foot on Alcatraz. No one else wanted to go, so I saved it for this day all my own.

I called the tour company for the second time in two days. (There's only one tour company that allows you to go inside the prison.) They were still sold out. No tickets until mid-day Monday. At that point I was scheduled to be on my way to Florida. I was disgruntled to put it mildly. I really wanted to go onto the island. I decided to head down to the pier and take my chances. Martha and I both had a hunch that since I was a single, I might have a shot at getting on one of those boats.

I took the streetcar to the Hyde Pier, closer to Ghirardelli Square. I hadn't been to that end of the wharf before. It was a brisk, clear morning. I stopped into the Expo Family Restaurant and loaded up on eggs, juice and crumpets. Afterward, I hoofed it to the Blue and Gold Fleet ticket office. Everyone was clamoring for Alcatraz tickets. They were sold out 'til even later the next day. Drag!

The cashier in the booth was helpful. I opted for a bay cruise that would take me under the big orange bridge and around Alcatraz island. I also asked her if there was a way I could list myself as standing by in case a reservation was cancelled.

“Are you going alone?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Just a minute.”

At that point she walked away. A few minutes later she came back.

“I have a single seat on an Alcatraz boat. It leaves in 10 minutes. Do you want it?”

“Heck yes!” I exclaimed. I was so jazzed. I got my ticket and headed for the loading dock. Once I got there I was privy to discussions of people walking up and down the pier offering double-your-money for Alcatraz tickets. I was feeling lucky. I imagined none of the people transported against their will were ever so excited to go to the island.

It was a 10-minute jaunt across the bay to reach the infamous place. America’s Devil’s Island they call it. Al Capone, Machine Gun Kelly, Birdman of Alcatraz. Many an incorrigible criminal was sent here to do 8-10 years of “rehabilitative” time. It was a sad place. The cells were so tiny. This wasn’t no Oz. And the sights and sounds of SF were only a breeze away in this dismal place.

I spent a couple of hours hiking up the steep island to the cell house; taking the award-winning audio tour; gawking at the accommodations of both prisoners and officers. That day, the on-site guest and author happened to be a child of one of the officers. She’d grown up on the island. I had no idea there was an entire family culture that existed right next to the prison. Amazing.

There’s a lot I could say about the penitentiary’s history, but I’ll spare you the details. Suffice it to say that it’s quite an experience to go there. I was so glad to have had the chance. The park service also has visions of refurbishing some of the unstable buildings. That way they can expand the areas on the island that visitors can tread upon.

The cruise back was absolutely stunning. The bay was filled with sailboats and windsurfers. The wind was stiff and constant. It was perfect sailing weather.

Back on land, I got on the streetcar and went back to the hotel. I was feeling pretty tired again. I stopped at an Italian pizza stand and grabbed a small cheese pie. I took it upstairs with a liter of Pepsi and proceeded to take a break. Unwilling to experience the exhaustion of the previous day, I took it easy between excursions. My next trip was going to be dinner. I had picked a restaurant and sat down with the map to find my way.

At dinnertime, I hiked the seven blocks to The German Cook. In a sketchier part of town, my walk from the hotel required a good deal of awareness. But I never felt particularly unsafe.

The restaurant was a quaint little dive. There were only about 15 tables at most. I wasn’t the only patron dining alone. The waitress was a German woman of slight build with gorgeous red hair. As I entered she turned on some Bob Marley and spent the evening flitting about singing reggae tunes in her severe German accent. It was too funny.

I ordered what I came for: wiener schnitzel. I also ordered a glass of German white wine. It was different. It was sweet and dry at the same time. Very unusual

flavor. I also opted for red cabbage with my dinner. What the hell, you only live once right? It was surprisingly good though, drippy with syrup and cinnamon — or something. I enjoyed it. I was also served the second most perfect order of mashed potatoes I'd ever had. (The King's Head British Pub in St. Augustine is still the best order.)

Back at the hotel I packed with intentions of catching the early flight home. I was still on Eastern time ... for now.

Monday, March 12

When the alarm went off at 6 a.m. I chose to ignore it. Instead, I slept 10 hours until after 8 a.m. I went back to my original plan of leaving out on the 11:25 a.m. flight. Oops, I had finally adjusted to the time change, just in time to leave. Oh well, at least I wouldn't be rushed to the airport. Or so I thought.

The next thing I knew, the 9:30 shuttle was full. I wouldn't be picked up until at least 10 a.m. The shuttle arrived at 10:05 with at least a 30-minute ride to the airport. This was gonna be close. I was supposedly the last stop, but there were three more pickups. I was getting a little twitchy. What was it with me and shuttle drivers?

But all turned out well as I got there and got on the plane. I even got an entire row to myself. And a good movie: "The Legend of Bagger Vance." I had seen "Billy Elliot" on the way over, but it was my second time. Still good. But this was Redford's latest and I like Will Smith. It was even better than I thought. For the record, it isn't a "golf" movie. Just so you know.

Getting into Atlanta was tough. The East coast had been bombarded with storms. I was delayed a bit, but finally made it home. About an hour and a half later than planned, but it was OK. The scary part was that our plane was struck by lightning coming down out of the clouds. The passengers gasped when they saw the lightning and heard the pop. The captain came on and claimed we just "let off some static electricity." Whatever. It was scary. But I learned in the aircraft support shops how planes are designed to redirect and thereby shrug off lightning, so it turned out alright. Whew!

When I got home the boys were so glad to see me. I couldn't shake 'em all night. Finally adjusted to the wrong time zone, I stayed up late with them watching Animal Planet and cuddling. They're still here now, curled up in a fluffy little Siamese ball on the sofa next to me.

It's nice to be home.

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