

Travel

Big trips, short breaks and going green

Singleton San Francisco (on the cheap)

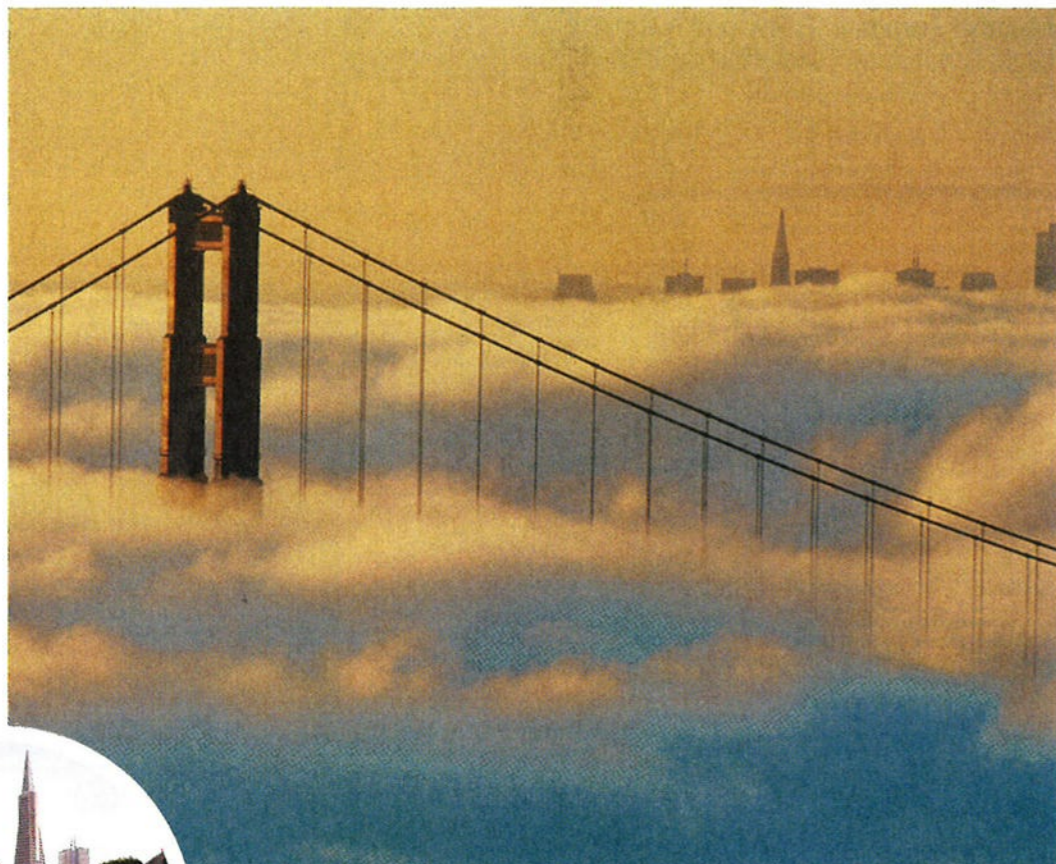
After a sudden break-up, Catherine Somzé got stuck with a ticket to the West Coast and, via couch-surfing, turned her trip into a romantic adventure

Just a couple of weeks before I was supposed to go to San Francisco to visit my summer love, he decided to break up with me the way these things are done nowadays, on Skype. After the circumstance-fitting outburst of tears and endless phone calls with my patient girlfriends, I tried to cancel my flight and discovered it was a non-refundable ticket. Desperate, I jumped on the phone again, this time with my mother. 'Why wouldn't you go anyway?' she suggested. I didn't need him to enjoy San Francisco, after all, did I?

The sudden break up had generated unforeseen problems, though. I needed cheap accommodation, fun things to do and, more importantly perhaps, company. Also, since I'd had the expectation of being shown around by someone who was familiar with the landscape, I had to face my own almost complete ignorance of the place. All I knew about San Francisco, arguably one of most popular destinations in the States, had come to me from Hitchcock movies, literature and my parents' Summer of Love: the Golden Gate Bridge, the Beat Generation and the Hippie movement.

The solution to all my sorrows was waiting for me just a few mouse clicks away. I shut down Skype and went on Couchsurfing.com, the online network for backpackers.

I made exactly ten requests based on the profiles and my gut feeling that I wouldn't end up raped or chopped up in the gutter. I looked at their general interests, reviews from previous couch surfers and avoided



Love can build a bridge: and as Catherine found out, so can couch-surfing (inset)

candidates with obvious sexual second agenda (those who offer their own bed 'if affinity'). I ended up staying with four very different, yet all equally friendly people. My hosts happened to have several things in common: They all lived in the same neighbourhood, the Mission District. As I found out later, they all used San Francisco public online dating website, Okcupid.com (without much success). They all had time to spend with me and each of them showed me his or her own San Francisco.

Kyle (27), web programmer

Kyle is a multi-talented hunk. Athletic, tall and fair-haired, he likes to ride a motorcycle on the weekends (pretty predictable) but he also likes to play the piano and the cello (less predictable). Yet, Kyle doesn't take much advantage of his Mission District surrounds and rather spends his time in front of his computer. 'The Mission is great because of its weather,' he says, 'it's the only neighbourhood in San Francisco that isn't misty.' Kyle is utterly shy and doesn't have many friends as he just moved to the Bay Area. He dreams of a girlfriend who would entertain him during the week-

ends and, of course, at night.

He took me to his favourite spot, the utterly romantic Bernal Heights Park to see the breathtaking 360-degree city view. Perched atop a steep hill, Bernal Heights is a quiet, children- and dog-friendly neighbourhood situated at the Southern edge of the Mission valley. Later, we treated ourselves with a cone of salted caramel ice cream at the Bi-Rite Creamery (3692 18th Street; +00 1 415 626 5600; \$2.50). The dozen-person queue at the entrance was an indication of the exceptional experience waiting for us inside. We took our crispy cones to Dolores Park at 18th St and Dolores St, and watched tennis players on the free public courts. I didn't know ice

cream could taste as good as crème brûlée. What I did know is that I would definitely have dated Kyle, had I been staying in San Francisco.

Rauri (35), accountancy student

Before school, Rauri, a wiry surfer-type with ginger hair, heads toward Pacifica three times a week to practice riding the waves on Linda Mar Beach. He drives 15 minutes south of the city to the unassuming-looking spot, which turns out to be ideal for both beginning and advanced surfers. Although there's a long stretch of shoreline to choose from, the secret of this particular beach is that it produces different types of waves: mellow ones to the south and far more challenging ones to the north.

I was excited for my first surfing experience, but my enthusiasm dwindled as soon as I found out I had to wake up at 7:30am. Rauri is a true die-hard and we were at the local surf shop, Nor Cal (5440 Coast Highway; +00 1 650 738 9283), before it opened to get me geared-up.

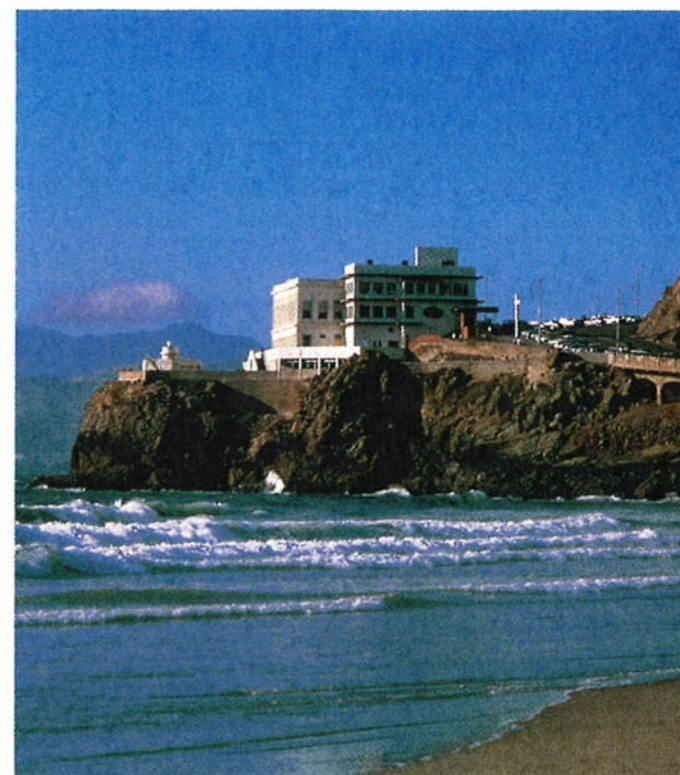
A 'Big Lebowski'-like dude showed us through the shop, where surfboards (\$18) were lined up against the walls like totems; then into the back yard where the wetsuits (\$16) were hanging, still wet. I rented a suit but no shoes ('That's unhygienic,' said 'Lebowski'), which might've been helpful because the water was freezing cold.

Rauri explained the basics: sit on the back of the board so you can turn around when the wave comes and stand up when it arrives. He also explained that I should stay away from more advanced surfers or else expect unpleasant interactions with the local habitués.

After a couple of hours surfing, I was exhausted. Rauri brought me some tea and we drank in silence, looking at the ocean. When I was warm again, we took off. Although it had been a great introduction into surf culture, I didn't accept his invitation to go camping the next weekend. I'd had enough of nature for the moment.

Melissa (35), Spanish and Chinese (Mandarin) translator

My next host, Melissa, a jovial curvy brunette with a generous smile, took me almost every day for breakfast to the Mission Kitchen, a Mexican diner on Mission Street between 23rd and 24th Sts. She ate French toast (\$3.50) or huevos rancheros (\$5.50), while I had plain oatmeal (\$4). I could practice my Spanish since the wait staff was always up for a chat and they introduced me to some locals.



Shore thing: San Francisco's Ocean Beach

This is how I met Mexican mural painter Antonio Huerta, who was once an apprentice to famous social realist painter David Alfaro Siqueiros. Antonio's work can be seen in local hangouts such as La Taqueria (2889 Mission Street). Antonio took me to the Precita Eyes Mural Arts Center and I took one of their casually organised tours



of the city's ever-changing street murals (2981 24th Street; 415 285 2287; \$15). During the 1.5-hour tour, I saw some 70 murals including the four-story 'Women's Wisdom Through Time', also known to locals as the 'Maestrapeace' created collaboratively by seven women in 1971 (3543 18th St). It's an ode to female strength

and independence, featuring famous women like lesbian activist Andre Lorde. Ever since Diego Rivera painted murals in the Bay Area in the 1930s, amateurs and famous painters have been drawn to San Francisco, especially the Mission, to create colourful and often monumental works that speak to political and social concerns.

While staying with Melissa, I regularly stopped by El Farolito on Mission and 24th St, where Latino migrant workers, local hipsters and downtown suits all converge for fast, cheap and amazing Mexican fare. I would eat a Super Burrito (\$5.50) or a Super Quesadilla Suiza (\$5.75), which I could never finish, filled with molten cheese, fresh avocado and sour cream,

not to mention the tender carne asada that's chopped by the bowl-full behind the counter. These were so delicious that I'd stop by at two in the morning for yet another carnivorous fix.

Gabriel (32), architect

I took a writing break at Haus (3086 24th St), a café of minimalist, Danish-inspired interior design where I could order a cup of coffee (\$3.75 with soy milk) and spend the rest of the afternoon working, when a man of fine Mediterranean features and heavy, salt-and-pepper curls, sat down at the

next table. He struck up a conversation about my iPad and it didn't take long to discover we had a lot in common: Armenian roots (really), a passion for art (as he's an architect and I'm an art historian) and more importantly perhaps, the desire to see each other again.

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The same evening, we met at the Revolution Café (3248 22nd St) for Sangria (\$5.50) and listened to live jazz while discussing sustainability, his main preoccupation as an architect. Then we headed toward his favourite restaurant, Weird Fish (2193 Mission Street), which combines a trendy yet cosy atmosphere with organic vegetarian and fish dishes made from home grown seasonal produce. He ordered the stewed squid and farm egg with tomato, lentils, herb salad and broche toast (\$14), while I decided to go for the Suspicious Fish Dish (AQ), which was going to be a surprise: local cod with cauliflower puree.

Afterwards, he took me to the rooftop terrace of the Medjool, a hidden gem, no one would expect this fairly cheap hotel (\$450 for 7 nights) to provide such a luxurious vista for the price of a drink (2522 Mission Street; \$3.50). Yet, the best was still to come, when Gabriel finally invited me to his own place, a movie theatre he'd converted into a two-apartment complex.

For once in my life, I was truly happy I was single. Who said being dumped was a bad thing?



Wish you were here? the Victorian homes of 'Postcard Row'