

The City With the Personality : San Francisco for JTAers

What is life in San Francisco like? You've only been walking three blocks but it seems like you've gone mountain climbing already. By now, your heart is pulsing rapidly at 160 beats per minute yet you have every desire to go on. Tony Bennett's 1962 ode to the city by the bay spoke of *little cable cars climbing halfway to the stars* and you come to realize that he wasn't kidding after all. Above the hill, you see a quaint sign that says 'cat psychiatrist' and you gasp at the hourly consultation fee. It is also high summer and you've finally congratulated yourself for scaling the mount, yet not a drop of sweat falls from you. You pause and take a brief rest at a bench. Sitting down with you is an elderly Cantonese man reading a Chinese newspaper. On the café right across from you, a blonde girl charmingly makes her way out – a café latte on one hand and carrying her precious poodle on the other.



You forget what you've heard about U.S. cities. After spending about a week or two here, you come to the conclusion that San Francisco isn't your typical America. You're amazed by how Chinatown can suddenly spill over to Little Italy, or how the buzzing Latin quarter segues into the rainbow flags and flamboyance of the Castro district; and that the center of the psychedelic hippie and flower child culture of the 1960's – Haight Ashbury - lies just a few blocks from your Catholic university. Fortunately for you, these cultures, plus a number of manicured parks and sunny beaches, are all just a bus ride away. However, you're feeling adventurous on this four and a half month trip of yours. Not feeling contented with just using the bus, you spend your breaks and long weekends taking road trips or flying to other fascinating cities like Vancouver in Canada, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, New York or even Mexico.

However, you've decided to use your feet this time. It's almost 7PM and the sun is just starting to go down. You've already been walking all day yet you've never felt so refreshed. The air smells of eucalyptus but the faint aroma of freshly baked bread tempts you to stop at the Russian bakery to grab some *piroshki* and *vatrushka* to-go. You decide to give these to your Moldovan friend whom you met at an International Students social to determine whether or not they're authentic. Far into the distance, the wide expanse of the bay comes into view – with the orange Golden Gate Bridge to the left and unassuming Alcatraz to the right. You decide it's time to go to your dorm and change to more comfortable clothes. That's because you're going to Koret later tonight - the university's massive fitness center. As you try to decide tonight's activity between basketball, swimming, soccer, weight training, cardio or even yoga; your lips form a faint smile with the thought that they're all free, and that someone's always available in the courts to join you.

You're now a mere block from your dormitory. You pass by a row of gaudily-painted turn-of-the-century Victorian houses and finally come to a stop at a distinct red building with small ornate carvings. Upon stepping inside, your dorm mate cum front desk clerk says hi and – and you do the same. As the squeaky elevator slowly makes its way down, your stomach grumbles, serving to remind that you haven't had anything since that clam chowder on a breadbowl from the wharf several hours ago. A sign by the elevator's door announces an Ice Cream Night slash Movie Night this Sunday but you don't seem to notice. You're thinking about the research paper that's due for International Business class tomorrow and how you'd do on the curve this time. However, your thoughts are suddenly distracted by a call through the cellphone. It is your boss, who's been so nice she almost seems like a mother to you. She wants to know if you can make it to work this Friday. You say yes, but only until 5 because you plan to watch either Narnia or King Kong at Japantown after having a Peruvian dinner that night. Or Burmese. Or Ethiopian. Or do something else. It doesn't really matter. Your friends from the Hall Association and your co-workers will help you decide; like that one time your friend treated you to *bruschetta* after you accidentally bumped into her in a cozy Italian restaurant because she just so happens to work there. You reciprocated that night by buying her a tempting cup of chocolate gelato, to her delight.



With a thud, the elevator comes to a stop at your floor. You walk past the Harry Potter-esque decors of the hallway. Passing through their doors, you appreciate how short a time it took to get acquainted with your other floor mates, however culturally diverse they may be. Japanese. Korean. Singaporean. Brazilian. Rwandan. Sudanese. Italian-American. Mexican. Chinese. American. And Filipino. You thank yourself for making the right choice upon realizing that you've got it all in one of the most cosmopolitan cities on earth.