



Travel Stories by Amaru & Suzanne



The Hills of San Francisco

by Amaru & Suzanne, August 30th 2006

California.....I've been to the US quite a few times but I've never managed to make it over to the west coast before, until now!

My last day in New Jersey I had planned to do some packing and just spend time with family. Since my plane would be leaving the very next morning at 6.45am I decided to skip sleep and just stay up all night instead of having to get up at 3-4am to get to the airport. To make it easier for me to stay up all night I stayed up until 5am the previous night and was planning to sleep through most of the day. Well, it was a good plan but at 8.30am the phone rang!

It was Suz calling from Australia, she had just been watching a TV show about border security and realized that I was coming into Australia without a return ticket, could that cause a problem??

So just to be on the safe side we purchased a single ticket for me to New Zealand (we are planning to travel there in a few months anyway), made sure I had a printout of my bank account to show that I have money to support my time in Australia since I can't work on a tourist visa and applied for a tourist visa online!!



San Remo Hotel
Where I stayed



Pier 39
And the Sea Lions that comes with it...

Later on during the day I went out with Kira and Freddie for some Lebanese dinner, we just ordered lots of different entrees and shared them all. All of this together with a nice bottle of wine.....a good combination!!

After I said goodbye to everyone I went to Rene's place where we sat watching TV for a while on his new HDTV and then around 2am he gave me a ride to the airport.

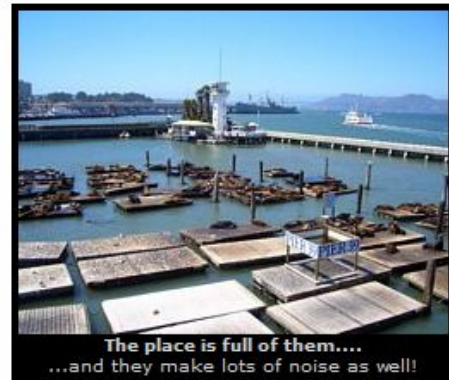
I had to wait for around 2 hours before I could even check in, obviously the check-in counters were closed at this time. I finally made it without a glitch (I was flying United so you can never be sure). I had a lot of time to waste at the airport but thanks to my new portable MP3 player I was able to make time fly (since my player also plays video clips and I

could sit there watching episodes of different shows time really flew by).

Once on the plane I realized that they weren't going to serve any food (this is really cheap by United, after all I'm flying for 5 hours) so I just made myself comfortable and tried to catch a nap. I can never really sleep on a plane but being awake for so long helps and it's also good to have an empty seat between myself and the person sitting next to the aisle.

I must have managed to get a 30min nap here and there, the rest of the time I spent listening to music and just looking out of the window at the amazing landscape we were flying over, I saw huge fields, deserts, canyons and mountains, it was just great!

Five hours later I landed, picked up my bag, jumped on the train and 30min later I was in downtown San Francisco!



I got off the train at the Powell station and climbing out of the train station the first thing I see are the famous Cable Cars of San Francisco.



This is at the intersection of Powell and Market street and here you'll find the Cable Car turnaround, i.e. where they are turned around so that they can go back the same way they arrived. It was quite interesting to see them turn the cars around, it was all done manually. The Cable Car drove up onto the turnaround and the 4 guys pushed it 180 degrees so that it was facing the other way. I had the idea that the Cable Cars just went round and round in a way.....I guess not.

I got my ticket and managed to get onboard with my backpack. The hill up onto Powell street is quite impressive and when you are standing at the very back of the Cable Car it's almost a bit scary as well....you are at the bottom in case something does happen you know!

The trip was awesome though, I got to see some of Chinatown along the way and then made it into North Beach, the Italian quarter. And it's not like Little Italy in New York where it's only a tourist area, here you actually hear people speak Italian.

I got off the Cable Car very close to its final stop (or it's next turnaround) and walked for about 5min to my hotel, the San Remo Hotel.

This is a really cute, small and inexpensive hotel very close to North Beach, Chinatown and Fisherman's Wharf. Actually it's within walking distance of anything that you might want to see in the city. I first heard about this place in the TV show "Pilot guides", you know, the travel show, and then later on I also read about it in my guidebook and on a few travel websites.



After checking in and dumping my bag in the hotel I made my way over to the Fisherman's Wharf, the biggest tourist trap in SF. I made my way over and had a look at where I would catch the boat to Alcatraz the next day and from here walked over to have a look at the Sea Lions. It's quite funny to see so many Sea Lions just lying there lapping up the sun and making an awful lot of noise.



After this I quickly made my way out of here, there were just too many tourists in this area and of course everything is catered for tourists (I'm not trying to say that I'm not one myself, but to really experience a city you have to explore areas outside the mayor sights).

I wandered around aimlessly for a while and found an In-N-Out Burger, this is a franchise but I've heard that they do some of the best burgers so I decide to try it out. It was a huge line inside and after ordering you get a number and have to wait for them to prepare your meal for you. Fair enough, this way it might actually taste good.

I finally got my meal, found an empty seat and sat down. The burger was good but I must say that I still think that Blue 9 Burger in New York has better burgers, at least this one came in as a good second. The fries were halfmade though so I didn't really bother with them. All of a sudden the person that's been sitting next to me leans over and tells me "whoa, you must be really hungry!!"

That's a weird thing to say.....so I sneak a look over and see the person. Seeing her pants I can tell that she's a homeless person that sneaked in and is trying to get some change or anything else. I didn't have any coins on me (that I wanted to give away) so I just offered the fries to her, which she grabbed and wolfed down. Well, at least I've done my food deed of the day.

I only mention this because I wasn't expecting to see so many homeless people, I mean you see them everywhere and there are lots and lots of them. And yes, I've seen quite a few in my travels, you find homeless people in any mayor city, but I've never seen so many in one place at the same time.

Well, anyway.....from here I made my way up Russian Hill, which must be one of the steepest hills in the city. I was exhausted by the time I reached the top....and it doesn't really help that I didn't sleep the night before.



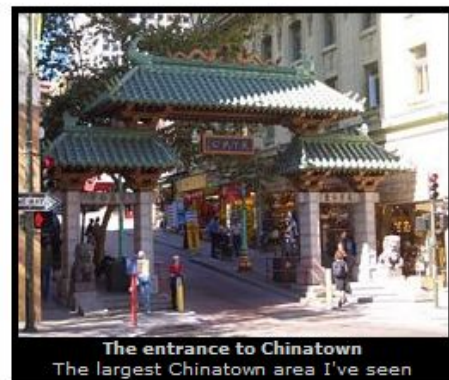
But it was really, really worth it!!

From here you get an awesome view over Alcatraz and you can also see the Cable Cars ascend this hill towards you. Just the Cable Car on this hill and Alcatraz in the background is a very famous sight that's in a lot of movies.

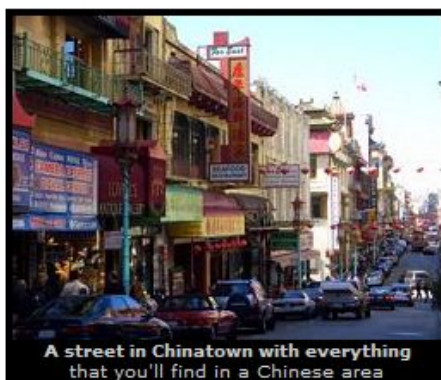
At the top of the hill I found Lombard Street, or as this section of it is called, The Crookedest Street in the world, also a famous sight from movies. The street really turns like crazy all the way down and I even got to see some idiots trying to race down the street.....not very clever!

I walked down Lombard Street towards Columbus Street where I turned towards North Beach. I walked through the Italian area, stopped for some espresso (of course), made it past the TransAmerica Pyramid and after a while ended up on Market street. Almost where I had started my day in SF. Here I strolled around the shops for a while, just browsing really and not too long after that I decided to start heading back to the hotel, but this time I'd walk through Chinatown.

Chinatown in SF is HUGE, not only are there loads of restaurants everywhere but you can find small corner shops that sell stuff that I had no idea what it was. I was walking through the area trying to find a nice and cheap place to eat. What I was really looking for was a place where I could have some Dim Sum. I walked past a few restaurants that were offering Dim Sum, but by reading the menu outside I could see that it wasn't as cheap as I had expected. Maybe I couldn't get the food as cheap as I wanted....



Oh yes I could, I eventually almost walked past a little food place with hardly any signs on the front. Looking in I saw only Asian people sitting there.....always a good sign. I walked in and everything is in Chinese so I have no idea what the Dim Sum's contained. Ah well, won't let that stop me, I just pointed and said: I want that one, and that one, and that one!! I also had a rice soup that contained some meat and a Diet Coke for drink. All of this cost me around \$2.70!!



After dinner I walked all the way back to my hotel where I had an early first night...

The next morning I had a quick brekkie before heading down to the wharf once more, it was time to catch the boat to Alcatraz! I had heard that it's difficult to get a ticket on the same day or even a few days in advance so I had purchased my ticket online =))

I still had to line up together with hundreds of others and wait our turn to climb aboard the boat. The reason that it takes so long to get aboard is that they take your photo with Alcatraz in the background before they let you pass (I actually never checked my photo when arrived back from the Island so I don't know how it turned out).

After a short ride we were there, on Alcatraz.... it looks exactly like it does in every movie you see from the place. We were welcomed by one of the rangers working there and he gave us some quick background info and told us where to go and not to go. After that we watched a short documentary showing the history of the island and how it went from a Civil War fort to a prison.

Once that was done we had to climb up the hill (more hills) to get to the cell house where we were given our audio tours. The audio tour is read by people that used to work as guards in Alcatraz and also by some former inmates, and it was really interesting to hear. It looks a bit funny when everyone has headphones on and the guy on the tape says something like "...and to your left", and everyone turns left at different times depending where on the tape they are. I just paused my tour and watched the people for a while, it was just as fun!!

After spending approximately 90 min on the Island I felt that I had seen all that I needed to see so I headed back down to the dock and caught the first boat back to mainland.

Time was approaching the lunch hour and I had a quick look around for anything that wouldn't break the bank....and I found it. Right by the boats there was a small kiosk where they were selling Clam chowder in a sourdough bread as a bowl. Well, can't go wrong with that so I ordered one, sampled it and it was just great, the chowder and the bread. I left nothing left (except a tiny littly piece of bread that I was feeding the doves with...)



Dim Sum....Mmmmmm
cheap and good!!



Dim Sum
My order

Walking back to the hotel I told myself that I had to get out of my shoes, these were new sneakers but they were killing my heels.....blisters, no!! This was more like they had taken a chunk out of my heels. So once at the hotel I changed into my thongs (flip-flops that is, nothing else) and wondered where I should walk now, what to see.

Well, I ended up deciding on the Golden Gate Bridge, I had seen it from a distance both from the Fisherman's wharf and from Alcatraz, but I wanted to be right next to it. I walked down to the shore line and started my walk over there.

Anyone that's been to SF knows that the Golden Gate is not exactly around the corner, I just didn't think that it was going to be so far away.

And it's a good thing I didn't, if I had known I probably would have stayed in North Beach enjoying a few more espressos.

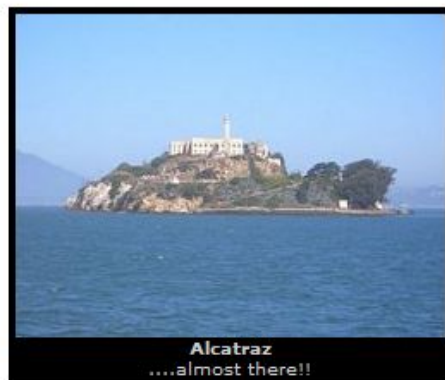
So imagine my surprise when I had walked for at least an hour and it still seemed avfully far away.... At least at this point in my walk I found myself right next to the Palace of Fine Arts so I took a break and just had a look at this amazing building, what the whole structure is supposed to mean, I have no idea, but it looks nice though =))

Since I hadn't been wearing the thongs (still talking about the flip-flops here) for quite some time, my feet weren't used to them anymore and now I started to get a blister on the side of one of my feet. This is just typical.....I'm halfway to the Golden Gate by now, turning back to change into some other shoes or maybe even renting a bike is too far already. So I managed to squeeze in the leg of the trouser inbetween my foot and the rubber of the thong so that at least I had some cover to protect it....



Waiting in line...
...to board the ship taking us to Alcatraz!

Not only was there quite a bit to walk to the Golden Gate, but now I also had a sting coming from my foot after every step.... But that wouldn't stop me now, this had all of a sudden turned into a mission, I would reach the Bridge and I would do it walking (I tried not to think about the walk back to the city).



Alcatraz
....almost there!!

After another hour or so I actually made it.....I was standing on top of the Golden Gate Bridge!! In my original plan I intended to actually cross the bridge as well....but hell no, not this time at least. I'll be back here another travel, another time and then maybe, just maybe I'll cross it.

Walking back was actually not as bad as I had thought it would be, I took it easy and just strolled all the way back into the city to my hotel. Entering my room I quickly changed into another pair of shoes, a pair of sneakers that usually gives me blisters if I use them for too long, but my feet were so tired right now that I didn't really care.

I found some food in Chinatown that evening as well, picked up a small 250ml bottle of red wine and took it with me to the hotel, then after a long and hot shower I just lay on my bed, having a nice cup of wine and

watching episodes of 24 of my Creative M player.

Next day was my last in San Francisco and I wasn't quite sure of what I wanted to do. My feet were aching from all the walking as of course as well from the blisters, so I didn't feel up for a long walk. I checked out of my room and managed to store my luggage there for a few hours and then made my way out.

I ended up getting a day pass for the Cable Car since I was going to take it later on in the afternoon anyway, I rode the Cable Car down to Market st. when I caught the subway to the Mission station (very, very, very dodgy station, wouldn't want to be walking around here at night) and from here walked through the Mission (the Mexican part of the city) until I made it to the Castro (where all the gay people live). And there were flags everywhere.....the rainbow flag that is =))



A big warning....
is the first thing you are greeted with

After this I just started heading back, a different route this time since the Missions wasn't all that nice and I ended up next to the Alamo Square and some very famous house facades, after the obligatory photo I made it back onto Market st, caught the Cable Car back to my Hotel, sneaked a shower, grabbed my things and starting making my way back to the airport.

At the airport I had a few beers and watched some Family Guy episodes on my Creative player while I waited for the plane, I was hoping for someone to call my name and tell me that I had gotten an upgrade to Business class, but I guess that would never happen (would it Suz??).

The plane ride was 14 hours from San Francisco to Sydney and United didn't even provide us with a screen each for entertainment, I will really try hard to avoid flying United in the future.

At Sydney, I passed immigration and customs without a problem and then Suz was there to meet me.....I was home!!



"Indians Welcome"
Background information about the island



A well known sight!
Do you recognize it?



Quite a walk to the jail
Quite a hill to walk



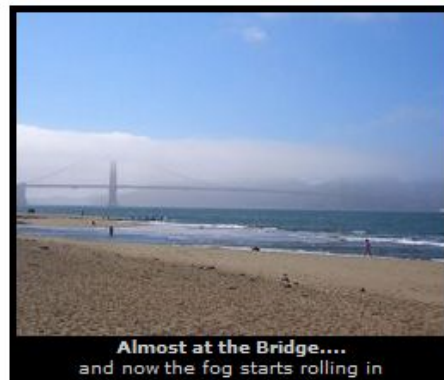
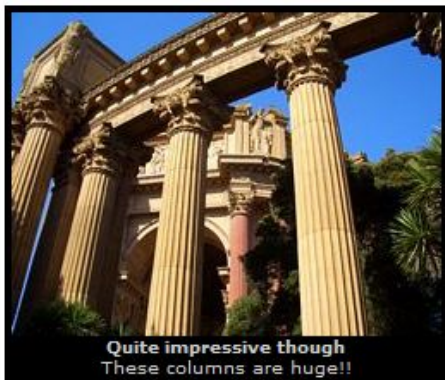
The cellhouse
Here we were given our audio tours



"Broadway"
As the isle was called by the inmates...



Nice cell!
Very cozy.....no thanks!!





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