

San Francisco, California

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What are my impressions of San Francisco, after a month's stay? A city wrapped in a thick mist, in a fog obstructing the panorama. Cold. A city, less frequently, with a clear blue sky, silhouetting the hills and buildings. Low houses, of two or three stories, each with their own characteristics, with their own individual style, often delicate, well cared for. With interesting architectural decorations, bay windows allowing you to glimpse objects clearly held dear by their inhabitants: pottery, flower vases. American flags. Religious images. Near where I live, in the Mission, a largely Mexican neighborhood, I often pass an image of Christ that changes physiognomy depending on my distance: now he seems to have an eye closed, now he seems to be looking out with two alert eyes. The houses generally have wooden steps; blue, pink, green in various gradations, yellowish. Also purple. They evoke European architecture, some are Victorian in style. Downtown, instead, skyscrapers characterize the business and bank district.

It's an atypical city for the United States: it's easily walkable, no one seems to think it's strange to see people on foot. The police don't consider this suspect behavior. There are many bicycles: so many that the drivers have begun to consider them a serious hindrance. There are many vespas on the streets. San Franciscans stop habitually at intersections, allow pedestrians to cross, wait scrupulously for their own turn to go. A city of hills and vertiginous drops. Of old cable cars, for the delight of tourists. Trams and buses are in constant use, where they exist, in addition to the subway system. This isn't the case in San Diego or elsewhere.

A city where you can travel from a Mexican neighborhood, such as the Mission, to a Japanese one. From Little Italy to Chinatown, which has a true gateway, and shops with many useful items: two dollar T-shirts, embroidered napkins and towels, every type of trinkets. An elegant city, where you can find goods from countries both near and far, also in the area around the port, which provides views of ocean depths and steep cliffs. Luxury houses, rented at exorbitant prices, give you a view of the bay, the Golden Gate Bridge. More modest houses, elsewhere, still provide a comfortable life in quiet neighborhoods, with many shops (for a haircut- both cut and wash- 16 dollars- to get your fortune told: tarot reading, magic; many taquerias, diners, little stores filled with limes, mangos, avocados; others, with ceramic religious objects, nativity scenes, the fancier ones with artistic renderings of the interiors of Mexican houses) but also with green spaces, parks with playgrounds. They are everywhere: three near

where I live, with swings, slides, climbing constructions, with wheels that spin fast. Later I saw a very beautiful park, very large, downtown, not far from MOMA, in the Yerba Buena Center: with incredibly tall slides, with places where children can play on a kind of organ. And many soccer fields. In the Mission, near my house, there seems to be one that's frequented by gang kids. How can you identify them? They have sagging pants, tattoos everywhere, a tough attitude. In the Mission there seem to be two gangs, known by their colors, red and blue. Or also North and South. The northern gang is a group of Latino kids born in San Francisco, the southern gang is a group of kids of more recent immigrants. In the neighborhood there are a noticeable amount of police cars.

A city attentive to little ones. Where there's a lot of green space. Think of Golden Gate Park, of its wide shadowy paths, with tall trees and shrubs and plants like strawberries, blackberry bushes, or the gorgeous Dolores Park, in the elegant neighborhood that housed the first mission built by the Franciscans, surrounded by elegant buildings, most certainly belonging to the wealthy. A place to avoid by night, when it's frequented mostly by drug dealers and their clients.

The streets of San Francisco are generally tree-lined: many types of trees, like blooming magnolias, when you walk through them they give off an exquisite smell. On other streets I see cherry trees covered in white blossoms, with fruit that's almost ripe. Here no one seems to know it, but in Italy they grow well on the coast, and the fruit is considered good to eat. There are breadfruit trees, and others with names that I don't know. And maples: I admire a large maple tree, covered in red and green leaves, from the back porch of the two-story house where I'm staying. San Francisco is a windy city: every day we collect pounds of leaves that drop from the maple tree. All of the houses I see in the Mission have a backyard: with large banana trees, with silvery trees that give off a scent of eucalyptus or mint. With lemon trees or apple trees heavy with fruit. With tall sunflowers and jasmine, with bougainvillea in a variety of colors. In our backyard there is a small potted orchid, bursting with flowers, there is a parsley plant, and blossoming lavender. Many aloe plants. And a camellia plant, full of buds. And more still: yellow roses. Often the wind pushes bougainvillea flowers and buds in the street: which children chase after, from house to house, stopped by their mother's calls just as they reach the edge of the sidewalk.

Generally everyone grows plants in front of their house: bamboo plants emerge from the asphalt, and other large plants, sometimes tomato plants. And every so often, randomly, there's a sale: on a chair in front of a house a variety of objects crop up; old toys or clothes. Sometimes you'll find chairs, old televisions, and other items. Maybe the owners are thinking of moving, maybe their children have grown and there's no need for these toys or clothes any longer.

There are large colored murals everywhere: the neighborhood is Latino, and so they depict their own history, with faces of typical men and women, moments in armed battles. Diego Morales is omnipresent, but there are also murals with fantastic animals, snakes, monkeys and elephants, waterfalls and woods. Every shop advertises with appropriate murals: a laundromat has one depicting pools, waterfalls, and streams.

I see a similarity between the lower parts of the Mission and the outskirts of Rome: people stand leaning against walls, waiting for someone who needs help with manual labor for a few hours. There are drug addicts. There's a great deal of poverty. It's common to come across a homeless person sleeping on the street, protected by cardboard and blankets, with a shopping cart nearby that holds all of their belongings. They tell me that the number of homeless in the area of San Francisco is 300,000. A huge number. I see others looking for food or useful objects in the garbage cans left in front of shops, or they pass the time at the curb, their faces covered in white sunscreen, also on cold, grey days, when there's not even a ray of sun. There are people who talk to themselves, aggressively.

Many inhabitants of the Mission are from San Salvador, but there are also people from Senegal, from India: the many stores reflect the plurality of their origins, even if the large majority seem to be Latin American.

The area around Union Square is utterly different, with elegant streets, large hotels, doormen in uniform, steady traffic, busy shops. Parking is scarce and expensive.

I'm happy to have seen such diversity. I went to eat at Kearny Street, at Zoetrope Café, owned by the Coppola family, the family of the director Francis Ford Coppola, in an old historic building, which survived the 1908 earthquake. Green, with gilded finishings. An elegant place where they serve pizza. And have an excellent wine list. While we wait for a table they bring out pieces of paper for the kids to color on, and pencils. I had a sumptuous brunch in a hotel, the Palace Hotel, which is evocative of Rome's Grand Hotel, with its gilded ceilings, large mirrors, and sumptuous crystal lights, Austrian in origin. With a three-piece ensemble playing jazz while people walk among the tables, choose between the exquisite culinary offerings: from the ever sought-after oysters to a selection of delicate fish, from tables filled with meat and others which offer salads of pine nuts, raisins, walnuts. The desserts are sumptuous, the length of an entire wall with enticements of fruit, of cream, of ice cream. Waiters walk from table to table, pouring champagne, fruit juice, and wine. There are around sixty people here, and everyone finds something that they especially love. I also had a breakfast at the St. Francis Hotel, I dined on a private yacht, over the course of a three-hour cruise in the bay, everyone was seated the entire time. From the sea, the sunset (at eight o'clock) illuminates the profile of San Francisco, the piers, the skyscrapers. We admire the moon rising, the first stars that appear in the sky.

But more often I ate in the Mission, in more modest locals: salads and crepes in French restaurants, accompanied with fresh squeezed citrus or water with lemon (it's hard to find plain water); guacamole, tacos, food paired with hot sauces and rice in Mexican restaurants: puree of eggplant and chickpeas, rice, soft meat in Indian restaurants. The whole meal was offered usually at a very low price, around 15 dollars. There was always a great amount of good food. Sometimes so abundant an amount that we took home part of our portion, to have for dinner, a habit common also in Brazil, in addition to the USA.

And I saw many different thrift stores, with objects and clothes at rock-bottom prices, frequented by people of varying social strata. Also children's items were for sale.

I spent a lot of time in the company of a young professor of Cinema at San Francisco State University: this was maybe the reason that I saw many gorgeous movie theaters now abandoned, which I captured on film. With video rental, with the possibility of seeing film more comfortably at home, the cinema, in its original form, as a building, is now in trouble. In San Francisco, as well in Rome and elsewhere, these buildings are shutting down. One beautiful historic cinema survives, in the Castro neighborhood: with an elegant atrium, with a piano that is played during intervals.

Together we took a tour of bookstores; he was looking for books on cinema, I was looking for books about the metropolis and about personal histories, oral histories. But the selection was less extensive than we'd hoped, even in the bookstores that cater to the students at UC Berkeley. Perhaps books are now largely bought online. Thanks to him I saw films that I missed in Italy, like the one about the Orchestra of Piazza Vittorio. Or others that I'd never seen, which interest me a great deal, about Africa: like Xala, which takes place in post-colonial Mali.

The areas surrounding San Francisco are stunning: Half Moon Bay, where you can walk for hours along the ocean, on a beach filled with crab shells, with seagulls. In front of you sit little low houses, made of wood, in excellent condition, with wooden sculptures, overflowing with plants and flowers, in the shadows of the tall California pines. Often, with sculptures made out of shells. An old-fashioned town, very touristy, it's filled with beautiful shops and restaurants. But it's also a charmed space with glass and ceramic trinkets, old birdcages, glass that chimes in the wind. There's often a formidable wind; in over a month it was absent, or asleep, for maybe a few days.

Heading towards Santa Cruz, in Felton, we arrive at a place designed specifically for children (Roaring Camp Railroads), with trains named Thomas after the protagonist of the beloved children's stories, which provides many possibilities for amusement: tables with pieces of chalk, markers, paper with images of trains to color in; miniature trains and wheels for children to climb on; tents reserved for specific age groups, where the children wait their turn to enter and jump on a rubber floor that helps them bounce, a

place where they can get temporary tattoos on their wrists: all of these activities are free. Naturally there is also a store that sells various gadgets, along with hot dogs and French fries, beer and so forth. The train then brings the lucky ones to the mountains, passing through groves of tall sequoia trees. So tall that they take your breath away, all the more so because the forest seems to be untended, with fallen trunks, with a luxurious undergrowth. Below, a river where some brave souls submerge themselves carefully: we have woolen clothing, with windbreakers. Closed shoes: a necessary dress code most of the time in this cold, grey August.

And the intellectual life? The University of California, Berkeley, not far away, is certainly very beautiful in terms of the campus, nestled in greenery. Squirrels run between the trees, dig in the garbage cans, and don't seem afraid of approaching people: like birds, they are generally more commonly found among people here than in Italy. Passing through wide streets, each with posters bearing faces of alumni of diverse backgrounds. They have only one thing in common: they sing the praises of the university, its decidedly important role in what it has given them, in having opened horizons otherwise inaccessible to them, in having helped them find themselves, their identity and place in the world. Posters that, to a European sensibility, seem rather embarrassing, excessive. But maybe I'm wrong. Maybe in a not-too-distant future I'll find them at La Sapienza in Rome, where I'll walk beside excessive praise, among faces proclaiming their distant origins, homelands. Certainly this could be seen as a good communicative strategy.

San Francisco State University is certainly less lofty, due to funding problems. A professor who enters there now has to fight tooth and nail for an hour more, or an hour less, of help from an assistant (I understand that they are communal), to receive minimal resources: this is an experience perhaps not entirely unknown for Italian professors. As in many cases it doesn't prevent a strong drive to research, or a good teaching ethic.

I also visited San Francisco Art Institute, and returned there for an exhibition. It's located in an elegant neighborhood of the city: it's large, the architecture is severe, square. And grey. Upon entering the building is there a courtyard with trees, and, at the center, a pool with fish. Wide exposition spaces, with murals in the background. They've thought about children also: there's a large room with chalk that they can use to draw on the walls. From one terrace there's a view overlooking a large portion of San Francisco. Inside, a pottery studio and a woodshop. Another room contains models. The classes are held elsewhere, closer to the Mission. Each student has their own large space that they can use for their own work. I understand that San Francisco Art Institute is very famous, that it's considered the second most important program of its kind in the USA. It has an agreement with MOMA: the students of the San Francisco Art Institute enter the museum without paying admission.

Over the course of my stay in San Francisco I will meet many artists: the city is famous for this. Among the best and certainly among the kindest is Renée Green, creator of "Negotiations in the Contact Zone," with her we talk about Armenians: she's been asked to meet with a delegation of Armenians, to present a project for a monument in their honor. She'd like to make something that thinks about the future. And truly the tragedy has been such that it's also difficult to remember it, to overcome it. I've read that even those who were lucky enough to have been saved by the surrender of the defenders of Mussa Dagh (the mountain has long occupied the collective imaginary, perpetuating, almost by itself, the memory of this tragedy, thanks to the novel by Franz Werfel *The Forty Days of Mussa Dagh*, which came out in Italian in 1935 with *i tipi della Medusa*) just a few years later live out a similar fate of violence and destruction. Moreover, from everything I read on the subject it seems to me that there are differing positions between the Armenians still in Armenia and the Armenians of the diaspora. In the Armenian diaspora the topic of genocide is very present, the memory is interwoven and central to the construction of their collective identity. But in Armenia today there is the tendency rather to not talk about the tragedy anymore, perhaps in light of the accords with Turkey.

I meet many artists, including a young Italian who won a scholarship to attend the Marina Abramović Institute of San Francisco. And I hear many conversations about this famous Serbian artist, active in the field of performance art, winner of the Leon d'Oro at the Venice Biennale (1997). One of her most recent performances at MOMA in New York was a much-discussed event. It seems she sat for seven hours in a row, mute, in front of a group of spectators. The winners of a residency through her San Francisco Institute seem to be in crisis, speak about the promised benefits not received, about a variety of different difficulties.

Among the people I revisit includes the architect René Perlata, just back from a trip to Korea, whom I had visited years ago at his studio, against the "wall" that divides California and Mexico, near Tijuana. And Sergio de la Torre, a well-known photographer, filmmaker, also known for his performances/installations. He too had his artistic coming of age in the art community near the border between Tijuana (Mexico) and San Diego (USA); today he lives in San Francisco. I have dinner with others in his beautiful house with decidedly modern furnishings paired with objects that evoke ancient magic practices: among these, a wooden figure, female, Mexican, rather unsettling, which overpowers the living room. And I also discover his culinary skills, so well-regarded that this year he is giving a cooking class.

Connie Lewallen has us over for lunch in her house with its beautiful antique furniture, its plush carpets. I met her briefly in Rome, where she came for a conference a few months ago, when we discovered our shared interests, thanks also to a retreat into French, and her open admission of interest in our grandchildren. A respected artist,

curator at the University of California Berkeley, she is also a gracious hostess, capable of putting her guests at their ease, offering exquisite food, of mixing and uniting her guests with great wisdom. An affectionate grandmother to her grandchildren.

And I also met with other old acquaintances, including a professor at Stanford, Walter Munch, who was for years and years head of the Department of Oceanography at San Diego, an international authority in his field, who recounted the story of his father, of his family, a story of Jews persecuted in Europe. Among my new acquaintances was the director of the Jewish Museum Hohenems, which documents the story of the three hundred years of a community crossing between Austria, Switzerland, Germany and Lichtenstein.

San Francisco is a very beautiful and tolerant city. Famous for gay couples and artists. Artists of all kinds: those who feel compelled to express their feelings in an immediate way, their own expressive urge, to those who instead base their work on long intense study and seek to make social thematics visible through art and visuality.

At Angel Island, an island not far off, I find the place where hopeful Asian immigrants were stopped and evaluated: it isn't well known, so much so that there is no way of getting there directly from the Embarcadero: you can arrive at the peaks of mountainous cliffs after climbing for thirty or forty minutes, or you can take a tour of the island and get off at the old field. A large bell facing the ocean commemorates the destinies of these immigrants. It's a place of great beauty: it must have been very painful to live so close to freedom, near the open sea, and to have to submit to continuous checks, deprived of liberty. It's strange, I think, that Ellis Island is so famous (where Italian immigrants were magna pars) and Angel Island is so unknown, despite the effort of some scholars: but perhaps this depends on the fact that despite everything even today the West is the West, whereas here there were mostly Asian arrivals.

San Francisco is a beautiful city. More livable than others, certainly child-friendly; filled with cultural opportunities, rich with artistic expression. A tolerant city with many different types of people. Though here there is also poverty, a growing phenomenon, it seems to carry a certain attitude of social censure. Social solidarity seems still to be a distant mirage here as well.