

Leg 7 – San Francisco

Day 34 – Saturday 22 January 2000.

Leg 7 really started yesterday when we left Portland on the Amtrak 'Coast Starlight' at 2:33pm but we have spent the night on the train working our way down the west coast toward San Francisco. With daylight we can see the open plains of California, the swamp country full of ducks, flat bottom punts and areas where they go duck shooting. Most of the countryside is covered in fog which starts to lift as we get closer to the bay and San Francisco.

The train doesn't go into San Francisco as none of the bridges have a train line so we disembark at Emeryville on the mainland and travel by motorcoach across the Bay Bridge through the fog which is hiding the city skyline. It was very strange but once we made landfall on the island the fog lifted but was still hanging over the San Francisco bay.

I never realised how hilly the city is until we had to drag our luggage one block to our hotel on Union Square. Our room is small in comparison to other hotels we have stayed in so far but never mind, we have 2 beds, a bathroom, television set, storage space for our luggage and more important, it's dry and warm.

After we settled in we took a walk through Union Square while waiting for our tour bus to take us to Muir Woods. In the park were artists with their paintings, drawings and human statues. Our coach driver had a wealth of information and kept us informed all the time. San Francisco itself is 7 miles by 7 miles with 750,000 residents, however around 8 million people live in the surrounding counties and most travel to and from the island to work.

Because fog occurs morning and afternoon the trip back and forth to the island can vary, particularly when the wind picks up however today there is no wind and the fog has lifted allowing us to have a good view to the sites. San Francisco is the number 1 destination in the USA with around 26 million visitors every year. On our tour bus we see the 43 hills making up the city and streets where most of the car chases are filmed for various television series and movies.

The Golden Gate Bridge is impressive to say the least. Construction started in 1933 and opened for the 6 lanes of traffic in 1937 and stands 250 feet above the bay and is affected by wind most days as well as earthquakes. Due to building regulations, no new development in most areas is allowed so the housing is getting further out into the countryside. When a house is destroyed by fire or someone wants to build a new house they can only build to the same square meters the original house.

On our way to Muir Woods redwood we crossed the Golden Gate Bridge but what was most interesting we saw a glimpse of Australia, patches of gum trees that were introduced into America as building materials to replace the redwood. However when they started to harvest the gum trees the timber split and now they are classified as a pest and they can't get rid of them.

Without the fog the redwood trees would die as this is how they get their moisture during the dry season. Trees over 250 feet tall and 13 feet in diameter line the walking track that follows a stream that at certain times of the year have coho salmon and steelhead trout.

On our way back to San Francisco we stopped at a coastal town called Sausalito, a tourist stop with plenty of shops, a marina and views across the bay toward the island and the city. It seems just about every shop stays open until late and there are plenty of people buying anything and everything in the market. The rest of the evening we walked around, took in the sights before turning in for a full day of sightseeing.

Day 35 – Sunday 23 January 2000.

Today we have booked two site seeing tours, the first at 8:30am for the city sites and the second to Alcatraz at 2:15pm. Dwayne our tour bus driver is such a character with his knowledge, wit and sense of humour as today it's raining, got to keep the tourists happy. Rain typically falls for the three months of December, January and February and that is about it so no one is complaining.

First stop is Treasure Island now used for filming but was the site for a world trade fair and then an airport for San Francisco. From here (on a fine day) you can get a great view of the city, the Bay Bridge and the Golden Gate Bridge, but due to the rain it was a quick stop for a photo and back on the bus and off. The Bay Bridge has two levels and it was this bridge that was affected by the 1988 earth quake with the top level crashing on to the lower level killing one person who drove over the top on to the lower level.

Driving around the city we saw the library, city hall, court house and government buildings with its architecture dating back to early settlement depicting Spanish, Italian, Chinese, German and Hungarian influences just to mention a few nations.

During the 1906 earthquake the army was called in to bulldoze and destroy a whole line of houses to stop the fire that started from the natural gas explosions. Fillmore Street is the widest street at 120 feet and remains a landmark to the greatest fire that changed building rules and regulations from that time onwards. Today no new high rise building can be painted in grey colours or be over 26 stories otherwise it will block the sunshine or effect the wind patterns.

Next stop is Mission San Francisco de Asís, or Mission Dolores established in 1776 and still operates from the original adobe structure with its 4 feet thick walls and redwood logs supporting the roof. It is oldest surviving structure in San Francisco and the sixth religious settlement established as part of the California chain of missions. Attached to the mission is the Basilica Parish of Mission Dolores reflects the incredible diversity and vibrancy of modern San Francisco. Located at the crossroads of the City's Mission District, Castro District, the Lower Haight, Noe Valley, and Upper Market Street neighbourhoods, Mission Dolores parishioners come from an enormous array of cultures, places, and backgrounds to worship together.

Mass was underway in the Basilica and I stood there watching for sometime as the communion assistants distribute the sacraments and listened to the sounds of what seemed to be a full pipe organ echoing through the Basilica but turned out to be an electronic organ with what must be the best speaker system to give this effect. I had goose bumps all over my body and couldn't draw myself away, thank you Lord.

Twin Peaks and the Sutro Tower are landmarks in San Francisco and from here you get the panoramascope view of the city and the suburbs of this 49 square miles island are magnificent, even through the rain. One gets the sense of how compact the housing really is and it is very rare to see a

front or backyard as all buildings have to be built side by side to prevent them falling over in future earthquakes.

Average cost of the smallest house is around \$389,000USD or you could pay anywhere between \$960 to \$2,500 per month to rent with the average rent for a 1 bedroom being \$1,600 per month or \$400 per week. In today's paper several teachers were explaining how they are still paying off their \$31,000 loan for college as well as pay rent and try to save for a home on an annual salary of around \$32,000 per annum for a first year teacher. It seems the price of houses and rent is much the same in Silicon Valley due to the dot com boom. I don't think this is a place to come to work and play so you can keep the flower in your hair.

We stopped at the Golden Gate Park where most people go on a weekend because of the lack of home gardens and lawn. In this area is the Academy of Science, De Young Museum, and Art Gallery, however as it is still raining it was far too wet to go walking in the park. Once again we crossed the Golden Gate Bridge where the span will rise and fall around 8 feet depending on the traffic volume and sway 13 feet in the winds and earthquakes. An impressive structure but would not like to be driving across the bridge in high winds of during an earthquake. They expect the next big earthquake in the next 10 to 20 years.

Since the military have moved out of Fort Point all the land around Presidio including training buildings and barracks have been given to the National Parks Association and the city. Now they have to work out how best to use the land that has the most beautiful views of the bridge, the city, the bay and has its own airport and 18 hole golf course.

Our tour ended at Pier 39 where we made our way to Pier 41 for the next tour to Alcatraz. Both Robyn and I bought plastic poncho rain coats to try and keep ourselves dry and the persistent rain and wind was making it uncomfortable and an umbrella would have been useless. As we walked up the winding path to the prison we picked some gum tree leaves, rubbed them in our hands and smelt the *eucalyptus* and thought of home.

The history of Alcatraz dates back to 1776 (not long after Australia was discovered) when Ohlone and Mivok Indians visited the bare island before the Spanish, the Mexicans and then the Yankees took it over. It was first used as a military strategy, then a military prison in 1859 and then for conscious objectors during World War I. In 1934 it became a federal penitentiary and some 1545 men did time on the island but only a few could be classified as notorious. Among them were Al 'Scarface' Capone, 'Doe' Baker, Alvin 'Creepy' Karpis, George 'Machine Gun' Kelly, Floyd Hamilton and Robert Stroud the 'Birdman of Alcatraz'.

This is an excellent tour especially when you rent a headset with tape recorder so that as you walk through the cell block you can listen to famous prisoners and wardens explain about life in the cell house. Having seen the movie 'Escape from Alcatraz' starring Clint Eastwood the cell blocks, gun galleries, shower block, kitchen, dining hall, library, exercise yard and utility ducts seem so real and gave you a feel for what life (or lack of) was like in a maximum security lock-up.

As the prisoners say on the tape, you could see the world outside, look at the Golden gate bridge, see the ships come and go in and out of the bay, and if the wind was right even hear voices from the city which made it really hard. They still have a lot of work to do restoring the guardhouse, officers

club, chapel, barracks and apartments, warden's house and industry buildings as the Bureau of Prisons had allowed the island to fall into disrepair.

Only 3 prisoners 'ever escaped from the cell house and the props used in the movie are still in place however as the tape reports, it is a bit hard to believe they used spoons to gouge out the concrete as it is really tough and plenty of reinforcement so they have had to use implements such as chisels and hammers to make holes large enough to climb into the utility duct and make their way up on to the roof and out of the complex. Having seen the strong currents in the bay and being told how cold the water is there is conjecture as to whether or not they survived the swim from the island. They say the water temperature is too cold for sharks so that counts out that theory. The escaped prisoner's are still classified as 'wanted' by the prison authorities.

The last boat back to the pier was 4:30pm so we made our way back down to the wharf even though we hadn't seen everything on the island, you really need a full day, not half a day if you want to see everything and take in the history. I am glad I am only a visitor and not a guest of the warden and can go back to my hotel room.

Back in the city we walked around the shops on the pier and surrounding streets before catching the cable car from Fisherman's Wharf up the steep hills to Nob Hill before it takes its way back down to the other side to Union Square. Each cable car has an engineer (driver) and a conductor (brakeman). Each trip costs \$2 and as you travel along you get a feel for the angle of incline as you slide around on the wooden seats and the way the driver has to manipulate the two levers to increase speed or slow the car down is really interesting and he really earns his pay especially dodging cars at intersections, stopping on hills for traffic lights and missing cars that fill the streets.

Today on our tour we met a couple of other Australians and I must say it was strange hearing them speak, I hope I am not becoming used to the American drawl, that would be terrible. Aussie Aussie Aussie – Oi Oi Oi.

By the time we got back to the hotel we were feeling rather cold and wet but still energetic enough to go out and find something to eat before turning in for the night.

Day 36 – Monday 24 January 2000

Riding on the cable car is quite an experience especially when you ride it standing next to the brakeman at the very back of the car. The cable car was first introduced to San Francisco in 1873 as the most reliable mode of transport to navigate the hills. As diesel busses and electric trolley cars were invented they thought that would be the end of the cable car, however most other forms of mass transport could not perform up the steep hills like the good old cable car.

Its efficiency comes from the rope and steel cables continually moving under the centre slot between the two tracks which travel at 9.5 miles per hour. The cable car has 'jaws' which close around the moving car giving thrust by pulling the car along. When the car wants to stop the cable is released while the brakeman assists by slowing down the cable car from the rear.

Earthquakes have damaged the rails on a number of routes so only 4 of the 8 are now functional and after a \$10 million refit, they predict these cars will continue for the next 100 years.

This morning we went for a walk through China Town and besides seeing many types of jewellery, artefacts and clothing etc. we looked into a shop selling chickens and fish but could not work out what the black looking chickens were and next to them were trays of something with pieces of meat (I think) and vegetables. In the next shop were live hens and people were choosing their hen to take home whole or have the head chopped off then and there on the spot. They certainly shop differently to going to Woollies or Coles.

As we made our way down to the wharf the sound of the fog horn, sea gulls, sea lions and ships got louder and louder. Fishermans Wharf is buzzing and behind a section of the shops and restaurants they were cooking live crabs, lobster and all forms of seafood. Robyn couldn't stand the smell and kept walking but I found it fascinating and watched all the activity for a while, must say the smell wasn't all that pleasing though.

While Robyn went walkabout I went aboard the decommissioned submarine USS Pampanito SS383 built in 1943 and made 6 patrols in the Pacific Ocean with a record of 6 ships sunk, 4 damaged and 73 allied POWs rescued. The boat is now maintained by the National Maritime Museum and is well worth going onboard for a visit.

After walking around Pier 39 we finally had enough of the rain and headed back to the hotel as we feel we have seen enough of this tourist town and ready to move on. Our final task was to visit a laundromat and Internet café. The washing and drying got done but I couldn't check my emails on the Internet as the system was slower than wet week in San Francisco. Checking the email will have to wait until LA our next stop on our journey.

San Francisco has had 3 ¾" of rain over the past 2 days while we saw on the news tonight that Brisbane is sweltering in 104 Fahrenheit temperature while the maximum temperature in San Francisco today was 54 Fahrenheit.

San Francisco is a great place to visit for a couple of days but you need plenty of money however I would recommend you stay down near the pier or fisherman's Wharf as it really isn't worth the extra money staying up at Union Square.