

MAP of FOG



These Stagnant Streets



Ask the Average Joe what he knows about San Francisco, and you can probably guess his answer before he speaks it. This city is famous all over the world for a few specific things: the Gay community, Hippies, Earthquakes, and the Golden Gate Bridge. If you dig a little deeper, by looking into a guide book or talking to someone who's visited, then you might hear about some of the more-famous areas: Fisherman's Wharf, Union Square, Chinatown, and North Beach. Quiz a local and a few more neighborhoods come into play, like SOMA, the Mission, Castro, and Lower Haight.

What the tourist won't tell you, and what the local won't think to mention, is that there's a whole other side to the city. I'm talking about the Sunset. Forgotten and ignored by almost everyone--except the people who live in it-- the Sunset District and the neighboring Richmond and Ingleside areas are a veritable "lost world" hidden within the borders of San Francisco. There are thousands and thousands of people living here, countless obscure corners and secret spaces, and it all exists in the shadow of the trendy, touristified half of the city.

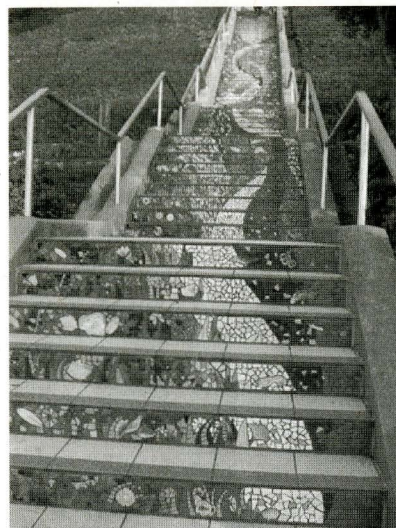
A lot of people dismiss the Sunset as boring, stagnant, and lifeless; they think of this area as "the Drab Avenues." I used to feel the same way. I first moved to the Sunset in 1999, and before the new millennium came I was looking for a new place to live. I wanted the "in-your-face" quirkiness that San Francisco is known for--the hipness of the Mission, the gritty cool of the Lower Haight. The Sunset, with its miles and miles of residential housing, didn't seem to offer much action.

But as time passed by, my eyes were opened. Little by little, I met people living in the area, I saw things, I discovered gems. Hidden beneath the stagnant-looking surface, I found thriving life.

This article is about what I've found, and what I'm finding. It's about those forgotten corners, and those hidden gems. It's about the lost world of the Sunset, and my exploration of it.

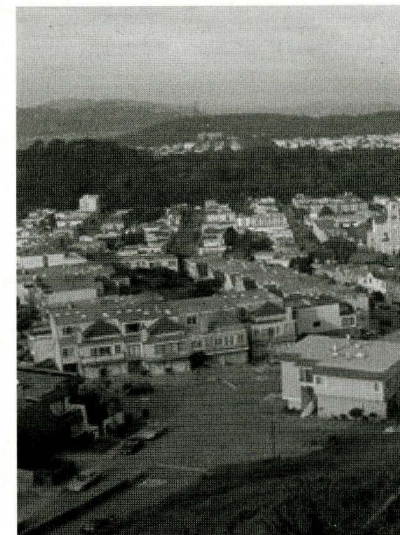
Read on, and let me show you what I've found.

Moraga Stairway



At the intersection of Moraga Street and 16th Avenue is the base of the most beautiful stairway in the entire city. The front of each step is capped with a brightly-tiled panel, and as the stairs stretch up the hill toward 15th Avenue, the individual panels blend together to form a single massive mosaic. There are 163 steps in this stairway, each one a unique piece of art. Combined the steps work as a naturalistic journey, taking you through several realms of life as you travel up the hill. The mosaic begins with a swirling blue, vaguely oceanic realm, populated with various sea-creatures. From there you ascend to a green, wildflower-beseiged meadow, alive with tiles depicting turtles, frogs, birds, and more. The meadow leads onward, following a river-like ribbon of color, to a ruddy-earthed valley, and then up into the starry heavens above. As you near the top of the staircase, you pass a white crescent moon, ringed by a lunar halo; and finally, in the uppermost section, you encounter the brilliant, blazing sun. Because of its west-facing orientation, the mosaic is especially stunning on a cloudless afternoon, when the mirror-tile depictions of sunbeams reflect the light of the sun itself. And once you've reached the top, turn around and look back the way you came; it's an awesome view of the Outer Sunset, and the Pacific Ocean beyond.

Grand View Park



If you ascend the Moraga Steps, you arrive on 15th Avenue, with Grand View Hill in front of you. For those worn out by the 163 tiled steps already climbed, the idea of two additional stairways might seem daunting, but if you can manage them, you'll find yourself on top of Grand View Park, probably the best vantage point in all of the Sunset. Grand View Park boasts 360 degree views. Looking north, you see the Inner Sunset, Golden Gate Park, and the Golden Gate Bridge Beyond. Cast your eyes west for the Outer Sunset, a dense-plain of houses stretching to the Pacific Ocean. Twin Peaks lies to the east, and Daly City squats southward. On a clear day, the view is limited only by the curvature of the earth. When compared to the short-sighted lives most City dwellers live, with buildings crowding in on all sides and the distance of a few blocks serving as the longest span your eyes normally roam, a view like that offered by Grand View is a radical experience. It can provoke epiphanies. It's also a popular place to watch fireworks. On fog-free nights you can see whatever San Francisco has to offer, as well as the displays staged by Sausalito and Oakland.

Banana Slugs



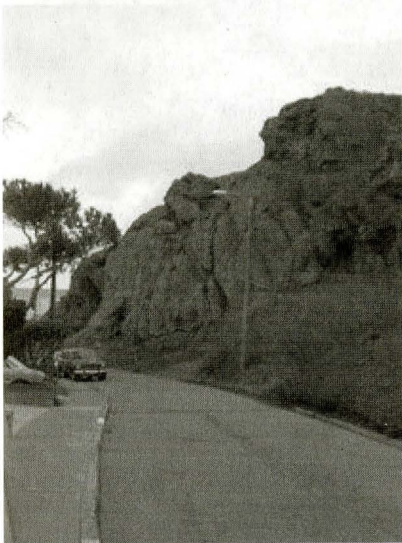
There are a lot of weird things living in San Francisco, but one of the weirdest and most fascinating creatures to call this city home is the Banana Slug, and I've only ever seen them in the Sunset (Stern Grove in particular seems to have a healthy population). What's so fascinating about a slug, you ask? Well first of all, Banana Slugs are a beautiful, bright shade of yellow. They're also capable of getting really big, more than nine inches long in some cases. They can crawl across the edge of a razor, or a pile of broken glass, without cutting themselves. Their slime contains anesthetic chemicals that provoke sensations of numbness, making them a difficult meal for most predators. Every slug is capable of being both a mother and a father, because the same slug can produce sperm and lay eggs. And finally, Banana Slugs can rappel down from trees on ropes of slime, so they're sort of like disgusting, humpbacked, four-eyed, yellow-skinned daredevils.

Central Pump Station



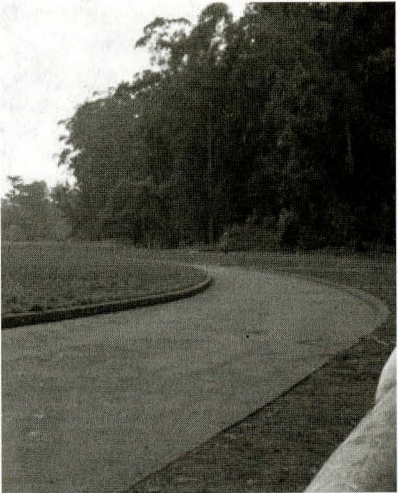
Located on Sloat Boulevard, between 22nd and 23rd, is an imposing building that looks like some sort of pagan temple. Long and low, with Grecian columns flanking a tiny door, and archaic symbols featured prominently on the exterior, the Central Pump Station commands a mysterious aura. Why aren't there any windows? What's going on inside? The given answer--that the pump station serves to force water uphill, for storage in the City's higher reservoirs--doesn't satisfy the curiosities provoked by the building's mystique. All four corners are adorned with red, three-pronged tridents, originally associated with the water god Neptune but later appropriated by the Christians as a sign of the devil. Above the disproportionately small door loom two icy maids, each with a baleful eagle at her side. Between the maids, at the crown of a crest, is the cold-eyed face of Neptune himself. Apparently the old gods live on in the Sunset.

Rock Cliffs (near 14th Avenue and Ortega)



San Francisco was a fascinating place long before it carried the name "San Francisco." Caught between the Hayward and San Andreas faults, the land this city is built on results from incredibly unique geologic conditions. Surrounded on three sides by water, but rising to nearly 1000 feet of altitude in just a few miles, it bears the mark of massive tectonic powers. Man has had his way with the area, leveling much of it, adding to the coastline, and covering over almost everything with concrete and asphalt, but there remain places too wild to be tamed. The Rock Cliffs just south of the intersection of 14th Avenue and Ortega are a good example. On the west side of the street it's identical to much of the rest of the Sunset, with well-maintained, free-standing houses, and small yards. The east side, on the other hand, looms large with tumultuous rock. As San Francisco streets go, this might be the most unusual in the whole city. Where else can you get that kind of contrast?

Pine Lake Park



Thanks to its free music festival each summer, Stern Grove is one of the better known parks in the Sunset. About ten times a year--every Sunday from mid June to mid August--the area surrounding the park's Concert Meadow gets crammed full of people. They take over every table, crowd every inch of lawn, even crawl up into the loose-dirt hillsides beyond the official seating area. Most of these concertgoers never leave the vicinity of the stage, so they don't know about the area to the west of Stern Grove, an entirely different park known as Pine Lake.

Despite the lack of interest shown by these festival attendees, Pine Lake has its own group of fans, and most of them walk on four legs. This is one of the most popular dog parks in all of the city. The eastern end of the park--a huge meadow bordered on all sides by very dense, very tall Eucalyptus trees--serves as the primary dog meeting point. Come here almost any day of the week and you'll see a number of dogs running loose. On weekends, that number easily builds into double digits.