

Leon & Audrey's world trip 08/09

Part 29 – San Francisco

We made another transit through Heathrow. This time without being searched - thanks mainly to Audrey's water bottle being in the pocket on the outside of her backpack where they could pull it out themselves and check it was empty (which they did).

We met a fellow Melbourne traveller from Audrey's internet forum on the plane and discussed travel plans and locations. He will be in London for a couple of days then off to Berlin to meet his parents (from Singapore) to do a couple of weeks in Europe.

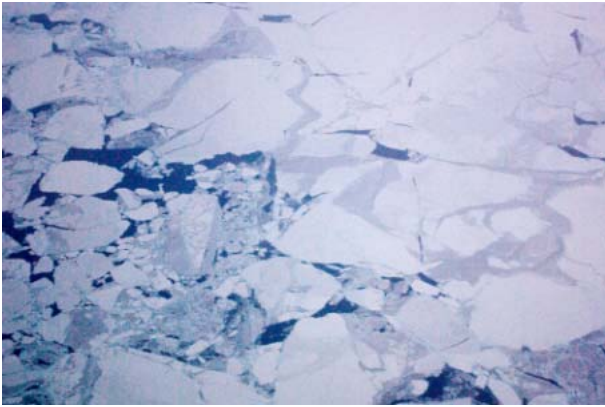
British Airways have a strange seating policy that only allows gold status frequent flyers or higher to choose their seats before check in. They make no effort to keep people travelling together sitting together. On the flight from Istanbul they had managed to split a husband and wife so they were sitting one in front of the other and a father and son (he looked about 13 years old) 8 rows apart. Audrey and I got our gold status on the flight before we started flying with British Airways so we reserved seats together – I would not have enjoyed a 4 hour flight with Audrey several rows away (to say nothing of a 10 hour flight).

We had found another 11 British Pounds while we were in Istanbul and since it would cost us 3 pounds to change it decided to spend it instead. We bought a copy of the latest Harry Potter book, a second copy for half price so we can both read it (it as a special deal and we were in a country where it's in the right language) and some dark chocolate Kit-Kats. After a couple of hours in the lounge we headed off to board the plane to San Francisco.

It took 25 minutes to go from the gate to the runway. If I was on an Australian domestic flight I'd be unhappy, but on a 10 hour plus flight it didn't seem to matter. And we were moving all the time and looking out at the various planes on the ground at Heathrow.

There was a covering of clouds until we got to Iceland when some ice sheets gave us something to look at out the window. We flew into night for a short time and then caught up with day again and had the sun come up for sunset. I'm calling it sunset because it was to the west, I could just as easily call it sunrise because it came up. The sunset lasted for about 50 minutes before it finally came up again.





Broken ice sheets just west of Greenland.



The Canadian Rockies.

After a slight hold up with slow computers at border control we were passed by customs and officially set foot in the United States of America. And jet lag started to set in. It was after 4 am body time and we had woken up at 5am. We managed to stay awake until about 9pm (7 am body time) before going to bed.

The cable car runs right past the hotel, so we decided to take that down to the wharf area to start the day. I was so busy watching the city going by and figuring out how the cable car worked that I didn't bother taking pictures.

Monterey Bay Aquarium is 110 miles away and the only way to get there is part of a tour US\$86 per person and an 11 hour day (2 hours for the aquarium) or by car – driving on the wrong side of the road while jet – lagged. There is no public transport or private bus company that just goes there and back. Audrey and I tend to take two to three times as long as everyone else to go around this sort of thing so being part of a tour group is not a good thing for us or the rest of the group. We have come to the conclusion that we really can't justify going there if we can't do it properly. So we settled for the Aquarium on the Bay, which is on Pier 39, and a boat cruise of San Francisco Bay.



A walk around the pier seemed in order as we waited for our cruise. The seagull was waiting for tourists and was not at all worried about the cover on this cup of coffee. He pecked a hole right through it and dripped coffee as he pulled away. The owner of the cup seemed upset and moved her coffee out of the way.

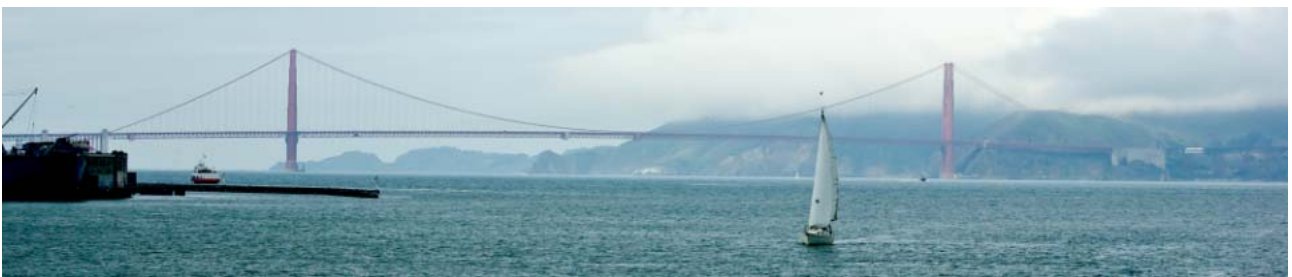
Above right is our ship's captain for the cruise. The cruise came with commentary – which annoys Audrey as she can't hear it properly. This one included voices in character of people living at the time of the area being described. I found it a bit annoying too, but the information was interesting, despite the method.



When the marina was built a group of Californian sea lions moved in to the floating docks at one end. They are loud and smelly and the tourists love them so they stay (after a legal battle – the sea lions are protected).



The Bay Bridge. It's longer, older and more impressive than the Golden Gate Bridge, but less famous.



The Golden Gate Bridge, named for the area where it was built and not the colour which is international orange.



The Golden Gate Bridge from below. All the ferry tours come out under the bridge and back.



Another ferry on the bay ferrying some of the thousands of tourists that come to San Francisco.



Alcatraz doesn't seem that fearsome a place. It's not that far out and the swim doesn't seem that impossible. The majority of buildings on the island are derelict and seem to be falling down. Tourists are only allowed in certain areas. We didn't stop.

The aquarium was interesting as it focused on the local area and I haven't been in a large bay based aquarium before. That said it was not large and we finished reasonably quickly.



We took the cable car back to the hotel, but by now they were letting the cars fill up before running them, so it was not the best for watching the view on that trip. We went looking for the tourist information which when we got there discovered that they closed at 3, just before we got there so they couldn't help with any options of things to do.

The cable car works on a moving cable that is about 30cm below street level. The car is controlled by the Grip Man via a set of levers that control the clamping on and off the cable and a set of brakes. There is also a battery that powers small lights. Apart from that the car is unpowered. At the end of the run the car is manually turned around on a turntable and then pushed to a point where it can reconnect to the cable.

It takes a lot of strength to pull the levers, and the brakes are still the same as they were over 100 years ago, so not really quick at stopping the car. Most of the traffic avoids the streets where the cable car runs as it has right of way and the narrow streets provide no room to stop.



The cable car is entirely used by tourists as the busses are more comfortable, but it is an experience. Hanging off the side seems to be the favourite activity and quite a few people chose to stand on the running board rather than take an empty seat.



All the older buildings have external fire escapes with a ladder at the bottom that can be pulled up for security. Some residents use the fire escape as an extra room for watching the views of the city or drying washing.

The tall pyramid shaped building can be seen from all over the city. The tapered sides let more light down to the street below, but the locals hated it when it was first built and saw it as an ugly blot on the city skyline.

A lot of the buildings have two or more doors and two or more street numbers to go along with them. I'm not sure how they would manage if a two door building was replaced with a 3 door building.

Sunday started out as a bright sunny day. It was much better weather than yesterday for cruising the bay, but that is life. We were headed for the Exploratorium – a hands on Science Museum. We headed out via the cable car, because it went where we wanted to go and it's an interesting experience. We sat at the front facing the middle of the street.



It's an interesting experience having traffic go past your feet. The streets are too steep in places for the cable car to stop before or after the intersection so they stop on the intersection and block cross traffic to let people on and off.



We made a stop at Ghirardelli along the way. Ghirardelli make chocolate and while they now have modern plants for making their chocolate, their main

store has original chocolate making equipment set up and working.

Grinding machine right.

Chocolate mill far right.

Conching machine previous page.

We use the Ghirardelli hot chocolate powders at home and though the chocolate is quite nice we avoid it because it is made with corn syrup (as is everything sweet in the US) which can cause health problems in some people, and we rather not find out if that includes us. I did try the samples that were handed to me however – a small amount will hopefully not kill me.



The Golden Gate Bridge on a sunny day – the international orange looking more it's normal colour.



The Exploratorium is housed in buildings originally built for the World Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915. We had a lot of fun on all the exhibits and went slightly cross-eyed from all the optical illusions. We did come out knowing more than when we went in and that is always a good thing. The clouds (mammatus clouds that we don't normally see in Australia) had started building when we came out too so we kept an eye on them as we continued on our way.



Bakers at Boudin's Bakery making the sour dough bread that San Francisco is famous for. We did try some and have to report that the sour dough we buy at home is as good or better.



On the cable car ride back (it's a fun ride and we had to get our money's worth) we went past the Cable Car Museum and jumped off to have a look. It is housed in the building that runs the system and we watched the machinery that powers the cables and distributes them down the streets. The cables last anywhere between 75 and 250 days. Any loose strands are picked up by special sensors (designed 120 years ago) and repairs are done as soon as possible – the cars can't move while repairs are done so it is usually between 1 am and 6 am when the cars are not running.

In the couple of days we have been wandering around San Francisco we have seen lots of people selling tickets serving and making food, cleaning up after people and driving public transport. Of all those people three were Caucasian – one of the receptionists in the hotel, a manager in Boudin Bakery and a grip man on a cable car. All the rest were Asian, Negro or Hispanic. There are also a lot of beggars round hoping for an easy mark from the tourists. Nearly every beggar I saw was Caucasian.

It makes me wonder at the social dynamics at play. I will have to see what it's like in the other US cities we visit.

We caught a taxi to the airport, it was the easy option. This is the first time I have seen prostitutes walking the street – I know we have them in Melbourne, I just have never seen them before. The street signs are all in miles, I expect that, what I didn't expect was the fractions like "1 ½ miles". Coming from a metric country and having travelled through metric countries all these fractions stand out.

Airport security in America has been a concern and this is our first time through US security. We took off our shoes, we took out the laptops, we emptied our pockets and I took off my belt. And we breezed through security taking up 5 trays and a lot of space. It's far better than Heathrow.