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California dreaming

By James Sherbon

"THIS is my 14th stay," my newfound barfly friend Rob tells me in The Huntington Hotel and Nob Hill Spa's Big 4 Bar on my second night in town.

"It's just an extraordinary hotel. Wonderful service and a classic ambience right in the best part of San Francisco."

A native Californian from Anaheim, Rob's 14th visit was courtesy of a deal he had found online and thought it was too good to pass-up.

Four days in San Francisco was his idea of the near-perfect short getaway.

I must admit. He was probably right. San Francisco remains one of the most picturesque cities on the planet.

Sure, we Sydneysiders like to think we have it all when it comes to harbourside beauty, but watching a cotton-candy fog roll up San Francisco Bay and engulf the Golden Gate Bridge is one of the most awe-inspiring sights anywhere.

I was sitting in the Huntington recounting my San Francisco Saturday with Rob before my early morning drive to Yosemite National Park the next day.

The Huntington sits atop Nob Hill, which is one of the city's more affluent neighbourhoods. It offers exquisite luxury as well as extraordinary service.

For me, it was an especially comfortable haven after a hard day of wandering the hills of San Francisco with only the occasional ride on a cable car.

The day had started early with my first decent coffee in America at the

Farmer's Market down at the Ferry Terminal on the Bay. Wandering through the market munching on gorgeous custard-filled panzarotti and sipping coffee was the perfect pick-me-up before a day of pure tourist experiences.

Firstly, a ferry trip under the Golden Gate Bridge and around Alcatraz before a return to Fisherman's Wharf and a lip-schmacking lunch of chilli crab washed down with a Sonoma chardonnay. For dessert, a walk up to Ghirardelli Chocolate for one of their scrumptious Sundaes while watching the fog slowly crawl up the bay. It's an amazing spectacle.

Full of seafood and ice cream it didn't seem right to ride the cable car

up to Lombard Street - the world's crookedest street - so we channelled the climbing skills of mountain goats and dragged ourselves upwards.

Nearly every other tourist in San Francisco seemed to have the same idea, which must infuriate the residents. Relieved to be on a cable car, there should have been more exploring to do, but I wanted to be right for my drive to Yosemite the next morning.

A drive which would take me past San Francisco's adjacent neighbours such as Oakland and Berkeley and out through the Californian countryside past orchards, vineyards and fields of strawberries. From the flat lowlands around Modesto to the rather nervy ascent into Yosemite's western entrance, it was a classic American

drive. Unfortunately, I wasn't in an open-topped roadster, but a Dodge Caravan which meant I lacked a little highway cred. It didn't matter though.

That first look at Yosemite's scenery is truly amazing. During my childhood I had watched countless Disney and Warner Bros cartoons with their ruggedly drawn landscapes and thought them unreal. They're not.

Yosemite is awe-inspiring. It's the real Disney set with truly deeply iconic American scenery. Huge waterfalls cascading into the main valley and stunning monolithic granite rock forms of ever-changing shades.

Getting there

V Australia flies daily to Los Angeles and has just extended its current online airfare sale until September 17. www.vaustralia.com.au

Stay

In San Francisco, stay at the Huntington Hotel and Nob Hill Spa. **Tel: 1800 251 958**
www.slh.com

See

Yosemite National Park. The Evergreen Lodge on the western border of the park offers a real Yosemite experience and great packages.

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