

Traveling Hopefully

On the perennial enchantment of leaving home.

The idea for an issue about San Francisco tourism came up—as editorial ideas often do—one night while senior editor Sara Deseran and I were out having dinner after work. We had just passed scads of late-August tourists in Union Square, and Sara wondered aloud why city magazines tend to ignore tourism when it plays such a vital role in a place's image, urban experience, and bottom line.

It makes sense that tourism doesn't get much play. After all, city magazines are supposed to focus on the local's experience. Tourism is about outsiders, not insiders—and often plays up static, historical areas of town that aren't of interest to the people who live there. But as we pondered those camera-toting foreigners stumbling through Chinatown and North Beach, we realized something very significant was happening. As SF denizens, we have a quid pro quo relationship with these travelers. We share our city with them, and in exchange they bring us their money (tons of money, as you'll read on p. 52)—and their dreams.

Think about it. Isn't traveling to a new place one of the most exciting things you ever do? Even the most mundane acts—like riding the bus or seeing the basic bucket-list attractions—are heightened in Buenos Aires, or Bangkok, or Barcelona. To you, today might be just another day on the J-Church, but to the tourists, it's a day for which they've saved, planned, and eagerly waited.

I was in London a few years ago and happened into a bar where several locals were drinking. They took me under their wing for the evening, divulging their romantic problems, job concerns, and political views. For them it was a typical Thursday night in Soho, but I remember everything about it. On another trip, while celebrating New Year's Eve in a pub, I made the mistake of casually asking a Polish man what his best memory of the year had been. He leaned back, surprised and offended, and then launched into a harsh lecture, scolding me for my overly personal and invasive American rudeness. Though

I think he overreacted, I'll never forget the gist of his message, and I don't casually ask strangers about their personal lives anymore.

Then there was the time I was shopping in Paris. An effusive Brazilian shopkeeper chitchatted while I browsed, asking if I was married (yes), did I have children (no), and why not. Talk about overly personal questions.

Suffice it to say that, in his banter, he lightheartedly suggested I get a new husband. He probably meant it as a joke, but his words made more of an impact than if a therapist had spoken them.

Which is all to illustrate something worth remembering: The people wandering down Market Street with maps in their hands, holding their windbreakers closed around their necks as they venture out across the Golden Gate Bridge walkway, and feeding those noisy sea lions in Fisherman's Wharf are most likely in an extremely receptive state. They've scoured articles and guidebooks, spent thousands of hard-earned dollars on plane tickets, packed their bags, and headed to the country's No. 1 tourist destination. They're away from home, routine, and obligation, free to explore a beautiful, legendary, fascinating city. What they're doing may seem irrelevant to us, but it just might be one of the most memorable days of their lives. The glances, smiles, and words we exchange with them will resonate for a long time to come.

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Our annual Best of San
Francisco issue. Don't miss it.

THREE TOURISTS, THREE COVERS

SHOT ON MARCH 17 AT
PIER 39 BY ALEX FARNUM.



Bundo Onwueme is a grad student from Madison, Wisconsin. She was here with her boyfriend, Bisi Falana, and said they were looking forward to seeing "the squiggly street" (Lombard Street).



Suzuki Ryuto is a student in Shizuoka, Japan, located about 100 miles from Tokyo. He and his girlfriend, Sato Hiroko, noted how friendly San Franciscans are and how easy it is to get around the city.



Lina Östlund works in retail in Stockholm, Sweden. She and her friend Filippa Gille shopped for themselves, friends, and family—even at Swedish H&M—until they ran out of room in their suitcases.