

SAN FRANCISCO

'I Left My Heart...' may be the crooner's song of San Francisco, but I've consistently left portions of my wallet there because I forgot the necessary warm clothes back home to cope with the Bay City's constant climatic changes. With steep hills that amplify the chilly winds, open clangy cable cars leading to foggy shorelines and wharfs and cold weather slapping your face as it drifts in and out, hats, gloves and coats are a frustrating necessity, even in summer.

The music scene is hot though and never stopped exploding over forty-plus years since the psychedelic era and there are clubs galore plus a wealth of festivals. Despite having been burnt out and nearly levelled by earthquakes, the architecture throughout the city runs from Victorian antique houses to the most modern apartments. Surrounded by bays and beaches, it is a wonderland of water activities with the bonus of massive parks, Redwood forests, the Marin headlands, the eclectic houseboats of Sausalito across the Golden Gate Bridge and the university town of Berkeley exuding hipness and political history across the Bay Bridge past Oakland. Plus there are the incredible wine areas of Napa and Sonoma only an hour away.

The rich tapestry of music festivals address all genres. The San Francisco Blues Festival closed a 36-year history in 2008 and the Berkeley Jazz Festival met a similar fate. But the **Stern Grove Festival** (www.sterngrove.org) is 74 years old and a series of free concerts in an area of eucalypts, redwoods and fir trees. The music runs from world and folk to opera, classical and ballet.

Also free, **Hardly Strictly Bluegrass** (www.strictlybluegrass.com) is held in gorgeous Golden Gate Park the last weekend of September and is in its 11th year. It packs more than 500,000 people in that time period scurrying around nine stages with over 150 acts. True Bluegrass stars like Doc Watson, Earl Scruggs and Ralph Stanley are regular stars, yet it's more diverse. Tough decisions abound when you have to choose between punker Patti Smith, Elvis Costello, Randy Newman, Rosanne Cash, Nick Lowe, Sharon Jones and the Dap Kings, The Ebony Hillbillies or even MC Hammer. But traditional Sunday closer Emmylou Harris is the way to go out.

Also in scenic Golden Gate Park is **Outside Lands**' three-day combo of music, food and wine with 75 acts ranging from Phish, Muse, Arcade Fire, Erykah Badu, John Fogerty and Warren Haynes to a gathering of DJ elite and even a Jewish band from New Orleans, The Klezmer All Stars in addition to that city's funk founders, The Original Meters. It's been glorified as a Northern version of Coachella with class rather than crass and it's in its fourth year in mid-August with smaller, more manageable crowds (www.sfoutsidelands.com).

The pirate-themed, two-stage **Treasure Island Music Festival** is held

in the Bay with the first day consisting of electronica and hip hop/rap while the second day centres on rock and indie performers. It features up-and-comers more than name artists like Grizzly Bear, Flaming Lips, Girl Talk and Beirut but the location is spectacular and the crowd is eccentric as well as eclectic (www.treasureislandfestival.com).

The Fillmore at 1805 Geary Blvd opened in 1912 – a three story dance hall, roller rink and ballroom – and is now a top club as a general admission, standing-only ballroom. Its peak was in the '60s and '70s when Bill Graham made it the epicentre for San Fran's psychedelic acts, mainstream rock and blues. Most recently the regulars have been Tom Petty, who's played 27 times, Los Lobos annually in December and Willie Nelson also at the end of the year (www.thefillmore.com).

In contrast, **The Great American Music Hall** (www.gamh.com) at 850 O'Farrell St. has been going since 1907 and tacks on \$25 if you want a reserved table with a dinner. It's ornate, civilised and intimate with a reputation as the best place to see live music. The Warfield Theatre (www.thewarfieldtheatre.com) is a similarly plush hall with a 90-year history where Jerry Garcia lead the 'house band' until his death, but it has an upmarket history of top acts from Bowie to Dylan.

Going downmarket you must hit **Saloon** at 1232 Grant Ave just a block from the City Lights Bookstore. It's a dive with a great ambience, fabulous blues and potent drinks plus a crappy bathroom. In contrast, **Biscuits & Blues** (www.biscuitsandblues.com) at the corner of Mason and Geary St. is a full service restaurant and premium bar with two intimate rooms and some of the best local and touring blues artists. The food is Southern, the drinks range from micro brews to exotic cocktails and it's just a shuffle from Union Square.

Two other venues offer exceptional diversity in comfy premises. **The Independent** at 628 Divisadero (www.theindependentsf.com) is spacious yet intimate with a broad range of local and touring acts. **Café Du Nord** (www.cafedunord.com) at 2174 Market St is an old speakeasy with great sound and vibe as well as a superb selection of beers.

Though my editor favours the chowders and crab soups in sourdough bowls at Fisherman's Wharf, I've moved on from that risky tradition to the **Ferry Building** at the foot of **Market Street** where I could eat every day (www.ferrybuildingmarketplace.com). It's on the water under the Bay Bridge with a bustling **Farmers Market** operating Tuesday and Thursday at the front of the building with the whopping Saturday running from 8am front and rear. Aside from stunning fruits and vegetables, there are street food stalls and local restaurants doing special treats. Inside all days are cafes and restaurants coffee and tea spots, pastry shops and bakers as well as specialty grocers.

FROM THE TOP LEFT,
CLOCKWISE: FARMERS
MARKET; OLD LADIES (PHOTO
BY BRETT LEIGH DICKS); THE
GREAT AMERICAN MUSIC HALL
MARQUEE; HOG ISLAND; COW
GIRL CREAMERY; INSIDE THE
GREAT AMERICAN MUSIC HALL;
STERM GROVE FESTIVAL.

