

BAY AREA

By Ken McNaughton

A flight across country to the Scottish Highland Gathering & Games presented by the Caledonian Club of San Francisco enabled me to sample two outliers in the Bay Area—Pleasanton and Marin County.



These games have been held for 153 years in the area, and for the last 22 at the Alameda County Fairgrounds in Pleasanton. I drove my rental car from the airport and parked on Division Street at Main. A Mexican tailor called Augustin Estrella was sewing at an open booth across the street, so I asked him where I could find a tasty salad. He pointed right behind

me to *Experience Burma*, where the manager was also Mexican, but the chef and staff were all Burmese. I had a fermented tea leaf salad with cabbage, peanut, fried garlic, tomato, fried yellow pea, jalapenos, sunflower seeds, sesame seeds and lemon, tossed lovingly at my table, and followed with green tea.

The Firehouse Arts Center was only a block away, so I made a brief tour and noted the 2011 steel sculpture in the garden by Greg Hawthorne called “Dancers.” This was *apropos* because right behind there was to be a concert that evening at the Chan Henderson Bicentennial Bandstand.



A band called *Public Eye* was closing the Friday-night summer-series from 7 to 8:30 p.m. Even though it was only lunchtime, ardent fans had reserved their seats by spreading blankets edge to edge as far as the eye could see, stage left and right. Behind the stage there was a dry creek bed (arroyo), and people had spread their blankets on the grass there as well.

It was estimated that 50,000 people would attend the Games in this small town over Labor Day weekend and all the recommended hotels were at least five miles away. After several searches on AirBnB I discovered excellent accommodation right in Pleasanton, less than two miles from downtown and the Fairgrounds. I made arrangements with Paul by email and was met at the door by his wife Dana. She showed me to my comfortable room and I had a quick swim in the backyard pool.



I went back to *Experience Burma* for dinner and had wok-tossed shrimp with fresh mango, onions and chili, plus a cocktail, semolina pudding and decaf coffee. When I arrived at the concert I could see across the audience that no-one was dancing in front of the stage but some people were making an attempt stage right. So I walked a hundred yards up Second Street to skirt the crowd, walked through the grassy area and wound my way back through the trees and spectators to stage right.

I had seven lessons in ballroom as a teenager, fell in love with jive at Melbourne University, developed a style akin to salsa in New York City and fell in with a flamenco crowd in Washington DC. My creative freestyle draws on all those influences, including tricks I have learned from watching other dancers. I like a lot of space, favor Latin songs or classic rock, and prefer to have a female partner with similar taste. It's a lot to ask, but I often find it. There are obstacles. A lot of adults do the weight-shift—two beats on the left foot and two beats on the right foot, etc., filling the space with people who are just keeping time. Millennials sometimes press the stage while taking videos, leaving no space for dancing. Loud bands will stun the crowd, which tamely moves forward, waiting for something to happen.

The band was playing a number by Steely Dan with which I was not familiar. But the opening chords of the next song sounded like The Doobie Brothers "[Long Train Running](#)," which became my favorite dance song in 2017. I moved to the empty space stage front and launched into my routine. Two or three women came alongside. I was three thousand miles from home and this excellent band was playing my favorite song on a warm sunny evening, while hundreds of people looked on. When it finished I withdrew and sat on a bench with a woman from Sri Lanka who was filming the band, which I could still watch through the sea of weight-shifters.

Later in the set, lead singer Steve Marvel invited audience members onstage, a gutsy move considering all the instruments, musicians and cables. A lanky woman in a long dress danced next to him, while others filled the rest of the space. When she came offstage I danced with her for a while, until a dude all dressed in black came to claim her. Then a lovely lady from India started matching my moves. When the music slowed, we had some contact dancing. She embraced me as a man would embrace a woman in ballroom dancing, which cracked me up, and I would reverse the hold and start giggling.

I gave her my card and she asked if I was married. We had a great time and then she said she had to go check on her kids. It was near the end of the set and I decided to go onstage, toward the back. The lanky one was again dancing up front and the lead singer asked if I would counter her—"Seduce her," he said. I suppose he wanted to create a male-female performance on his left so he could concentrate on singing. So now, three thousand miles from home, I was dancing a duet stage front, with hundreds of people watching, laughing and cheering. It was a spectacular start to my trip.



Paul and Dana insisted I make myself at home in the kitchen and I was surprised on Saturday morning how quickly I figured out where everything was while I fixed myself a tasty breakfast.

I walked down Hopkins Way, over Livingston and climbed through a cattle trap into the Bonde Ranch, which is classified as "open space recreation area." I climbed uphill through the dry yellow grass with its smell of fresh mown hay, to get a better view of the ridges, trees and hills overlooking my accommodation.



On the corner of Hopkins and Junipero I entered the Mission Hills Park. A man who was walking two little white dogs looked at my Canon point-and-shoot digital and asked in amazement, "Is that a film camera?"

From Main Street I walked down to the Arroyo del Valle, asking this couple first to make sure I was following the stream in the right direction.



Back on Main I explored an art gallery set in an alleyway and looked into the Pleasanton Hotel, which dates back to 1915. Ed Westmorland pulled

together seventeen investors to restore the Grand Lady, as the hotel is called. On this day they were interviewing new hires, and I saw some of the questions being asked—“If you were to mess up on a recipe, what would you do to correct the situation?” and “When asked to make Mashed Potatoes, what are the proper steps in executing perfect mashed potatoes?”

The stained-glass window on the ground floor represents a racing scene, with a trotter in front harnessed to a jockey in a sulky, while the crowd watches from the grandstand. This was where I was headed—to the Alameda County Fairgrounds, which includes the Pleasanton Fairgrounds Racetrack. This was built in 1858, making it the oldest one-mile (1.6 km) horse-racing track in the United States.



But on this Labor Day weekend the 270-acre (110 ha) facility was host to the Scottish Highland Gathering & Games. I wandered by the athletic competitions, the marching bands, the Highland dancing, the concerts, food stands, whisky tasting, birds of prey, sheep dog trials and gift stalls to the clan area. Keith Everett was convening four Macnachtan Clan tents. This was an opportunity not only to see officers with whom I usually only email, but also to make contact with members of the Clan Macnachtan Association Worldwide on the other side of the continent. Over the two days I met some interesting people, all searching in one way or another for their family roots. On Sunday I was able to introduce Shandy, who is half McCracken and half Navajo, to Ed, whose grandmother was a McNaughton and who is half Cherokee. Two days prior, Ed had married April, who was with him.

I was very impressed by watching the Royal Scots Renaissance Faire Guild, Family of Folk, portray the Royal Court of Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots in the year 1562. The players were all dressed in colorful period costumes, and spoke in dialect, keeping in character and portraying typical court procedure. Her Royal Guards presented a pageantry of military maneuvers with weapons that was quite scary. The young woman who played Mary was very vivacious and charismatic. I saw her dancing in a mixed circle. She came by the Macnachtan tents just before our annual general meeting and shared a wee dram of McNaughton whisky with us. She insisted on giving me a hug and one of her courtiers left a small royal token with me.

Several times I joined the mosh pit of the Celtic rock group Albannach, musicians all born and bred in Scotland. They include a bagpiper, main drummer, bass drummers and bodhran musicians. The drummer on the left had long dark stringy hair and excited the crowd with his energetic drumming, vigorous movements and promises that if we came to their tent they would speak Scottish to us. On the right hand side a musician had a ten-foot didgeridoo on a stand that he aimed around the audience—there is nothing quite like an audible didgeridoo massage. At one time he appeared at the back of the audience,

made his way down the center aisle, and somehow penetrated through the mosh pit, preceded by his wireless-miked didgeridoo.

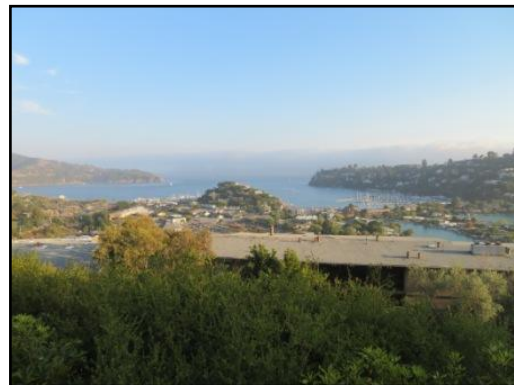


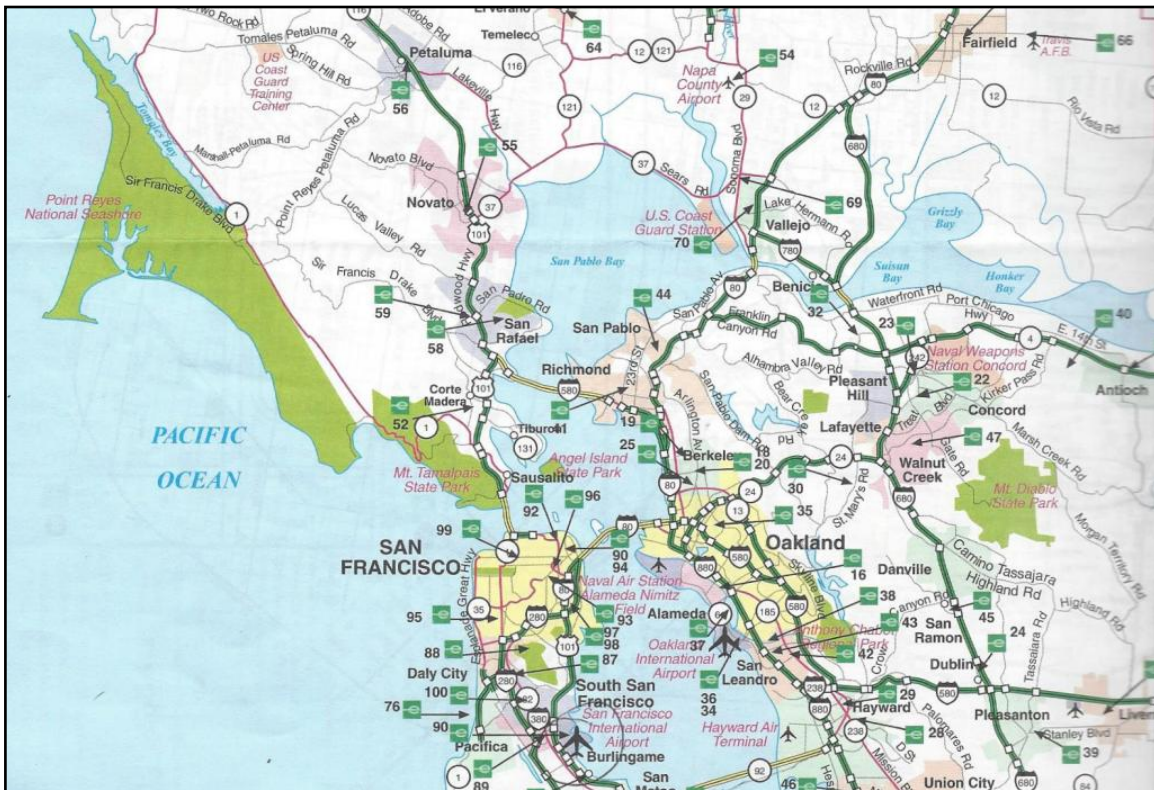
On Sunday night I went back to *Experience Burma* and enjoyed ground catfish chowder with rice noodles, onions, cilantro, egg, split yellow peas and lemon; followed by a salad of lettuce, cabbage, fried onion, fried garlic, cilantro, cucumber, yellow pea powder and pickled mangoes. It was still early, so I drove to the Pleasanton Ridge, drove up and down Foothill Road, and watched the sun set over the ridge.

Paul works for Uber and was not around much over the weekend. He sleeps four hours a night, gets up at 2 a.m. and works out at a gym for a couple of hours. He and Dana have a 28-year-old daughter Christen, who works for Instagram in San Francisco; a 15-year old daughter Sarah; and 9-year old Makayla, whom they adopted. On Saturday night I joined Dana and Makayla in the kitchen and we chatted for about an hour. When Makayla said she was at the concert on Friday night I asked if she had seen me on stage, but she was playing in the arroyo behind the stage. On Sunday I gave her a souvenir red tote bag inscribed with the Macnachtan family crest.

In 1988 I founded the first alumni association for an Australian university in North America, the [University of Melbourne Alumni Association North East American Branch](#). Two active members in the early years were Laurie and Libby Weisheit. Libby was from New Zealand and Laurie attended the University of Melbourne. They moved from Pennsylvania to California, and then Laurie died unexpectedly in 2010 from a heart attack while they were staying at a hotel in Norway. Libby several times invited me to visit her in Tiburon where she now lives with her new partner Paul. So on Monday morning I drove from Pleasanton (bottom right of map) west and north on Route 580, and crossed the five-and-a-half mile (8.9 km) Richmond-San Rafael bridge to Tiburon (center of the map, on Route 131).

From their picture windows in the sitting room there are fine views of Angel Island (left), San Francisco Bay and the ferries. A hilly point at the harbor is called Corinthian Island (center), since it was once isolated from the mainland.





The winding one-way approach up Bellevue Avenue was so narrow I was afraid I would hit the sides. Fortunately there were four parking spaces at the tip. I could not maneuver into the one on the left but was able to squeeze into the one on the right for this photo of the house at the end (see my grey car bottom left). Just as I was about to leave, a garbage truck came grinding up the hill. Fortunately I was able to slip out and head down the other side before becoming trapped behind it.



Tiburon used to be a rail depot. Timber from northern forests arrived at the dock and was loaded onto ships. All that is left now is the little depot (center, at right), which has become a museum, and a palm tree that was planted to signify the terminal.



A modern plaza has been developed.



Libby took us for a tour of the town, including the house where she and Laurie used to live. We could not enter, but I photographed the house next door, which has model sheep in the front garden.

I took a walk from Libby's house, past a giant aloe plant to the Vistazo Fire Road (west gate) on the Moller Ranch ...



... and met up with a young couple from Ukraine walking with their three children; he was a stock broker.



Old Saint Hilary's Church on the bluff is now only used for special events.

Paul drove us to the Loch Lomond Marina in San Rafael, where he keeps a 40-foot trawler. It has comfortable cabins fore and aft, a head and a kitchen, and he also keeps a small zodiac and a kayak. We shopped at nearby Andy's store and sat on the rear deck munching sushi, all the while listening to upbeat music from the boat alongside, where a small party was celebrating Labor Day. When I asked one of the ladies if she was a dancer she said she was, but these days more of a singer, with the stage name "Mrs. Joans." I asked if she sang the Great American Song Book and she said she did, presumably including the provocative "[Me and Mrs. Jones](#)," made famous by Billy Paul in 1972.



Two other neighbors were an adult Snowy Egret and an adult Green Heron.



At Muir Beach a long and solid boardwalk led to a grey sandy beach with rocky outcrops.

Tuesday morning I toured Paradise Drive, along the edge of the Bay, as far as the Estuary & Ocean Science Center of San Francisco State University, then took Route 101 south and Route 1 east to the Shoreline Highway, which clips the northern limit of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area before entering Mount Tamalpais State Park.





Fog was still in the air this late morning as owners and dogs enjoyed the wild shore.



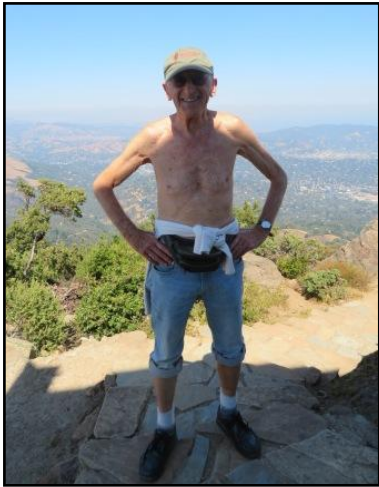
The steep and rocky coast of Marin County reminded me of Big Sur. On a recommendation from a lady with two dogs I stopped for lunch at Parkside, in Stinson Beach. Here the sand was wide, extensive and yellow, ideal for swimming and sunbathing, if it's not too cool.

The approach to Mt. Tamalpais (2,600 ft/792 m) took me through coastal redwood forest and rolling hills of dry yellow grass, nearby green trees and distant blue hills. The name comes from coastal Miwok *támal pájiš*, "west hill."



I paid \$7 and parked in the lot, but the peak, with its fire-lookout station seemed a long way off and it was very hot. I had worn a long-sleeved cotton shirt, jeans, shoes and socks and carried a fleece sweater, which were appropriate in the early morning by the Bay. But I figured the only way to reach the top would be to tie the shirt around my waist, roll the jeans up to my knees and roll the socks down.





The path was steep and rocky. I reached the top in a sweat and asked a young Asian man if he would photograph me; I photographed him while he wasn't looking.



He and I prowled around the peak, conferring about alternate routes down. I was going to creep around the edge of some rocks, but I heard voices and noticed some clothing on top, so I gave it a miss.

It was nice to complete a loop via the Panorama Highway back to Route 101 south, which took me to Sausalito. I strolled up and down Bridgeway ...



... explored the plaza ...





... and found myself in the Bubble Street Art Gallery. Daniel Merriam opened it in 2012, an emporium celebrating creativity and the imagination where he and other steam-punk-infused artists showcase their work.

Normally his wife Yulia runs the gallery but I had come at a rare moment when he was filling in. I found all of his art stimulating and asked to take some photos. He said that is

not normally allowed, but he would let me, remarking that some people abuse the privilege.



Two of the pieces were “Dress Rehearsal,” in which a wicked looking girl tiptoeing on a swing is beautifully dressed; and “Eye of a Dreamer,” in which a colorful and fanciful boat sails perilous seas under a full moon. I also bought a box of his note cards, published by Pomegranate Communications Inc., Portland, Oregon. Daniel was not even sure how to work the cash register, which emphasized my good fortune at finding him onsite.

I asked if the music on his Pandora sound system was by Carlos Santana. He said he thought it was salsa, but noted coincidentally that Carlos lives in Sausalito. Daniel often sees him at the Angelino Italian restaurant, and once ran into him at the local hospital. I said I had only seen Carlos play live once, but loved his version of “[Smooth](#)” with co-writer and vocalist Rob Thomas. The next number on the gallery system was “[Águas de Março](#),” by [Ellis Regina and Tom Jobim](#), one of my all-time favorite *bossa nova* numbers, so we traded stories about that. My car was parked next to Angelino’s, so I asked the Mexican attendant if he ever parked for Carlos Santana. He froze for a split second, and then said softly, “Yes.”

Wednesday morning I set the alarm for 5 a.m., said my farewells and set off at 6:15. My fears about driving an unfamiliar route through San Francisco at peak hour were unfounded. It was a straight shot over the Golden Gate Bridge via Routes 101, 280 and

380 south. I arrived at the Enterprise Car Rental drop off in 55 minutes, instead of the 1 hour 25 minutes that I checked three times for the same period before I left Maryland. There was plenty of time to catch the train to the terminal, clear security, have some California rolls and a seaweed salad, watch some children play by the rotating wheels and line up for my flight.



The trip back was shorter than the trip out. I spent a lot of time watching free TV episodes of *The Carbonaro Effect* without the ear buds I left in my checked luggage. Michael Carbonaro, a handsome young man, sets up familiar everyday situations and invites one or more strangers into what turns out to be a hidden-camera magic show. People experience an apparently impossible illusion. It's fascinating to watch their expressions progress through various emotions of bluster, anticipation, fear, mystification, disbelief, relief and amusement, if and when he brings them into the secret. Even without the sound I was able to understand almost all of set-ups, and enjoyed it immensely.

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