

# Beyond the bridge

*Across the bay from San Francisco, Berkeley is home to architectural gems, mysterious pathways and a roundabout worth circling*

BY KATHRYN STORRING

**LIKE MANY BIG CITIES**, San Francisco has its share of big-league tourist attractions. From the City Lights bookstore to Golden Gate Park, and from Coit Tower to Fisherman's Wharf, there is a lot to see.

But my husband and I had visited San Francisco before, so when a family wedding took us there earlier this year, we decided to spend more time exploring the cities on the other side of those iconic bridges where mysterious staircases, a floating subdivision and even a roundabout beckoned.

A roundabout might seem like an odd thing to visit on vacation, but the Circle was just down the street from our Airbnb apartment in the Northbrae neighbourhood of Berkeley.

Situated in the heart of an attractive neighbourhood, about 10 kilometres from the Bay Bridge to San Francisco, the roundabout is a thing of beauty all on its own. As a resident of Waterloo Region, where roundabouts have caused their share of consternation, I was mesmerized.

Built in the early 1900s, this roundabout speaks to its grand

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A view across to Berkeley below the Bay Bridge and the San Francisco skyline.

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past. Classical balustrades, stone pillars, stairways, benches and giant terracotta pots flank it. A huge fountain stands in the centre, complete with plump decorative bears.

Studying the traffic was like watching a courtly dance. Drivers halted, moved gently forward, circled the grass buffer that surrounds the fountain, glided off to the right, almost always in a mindful, polite manner. And that's a very good thing because there are pedestrian walkways all around, and walkers are given the absolute right-of-way, even at rush hour when the pace picks up.

The Circle isn't a small roundabout; an estimated 30,000 cars use it each day. Six streets — some one-way, some two-way, some very close together — feed into it. Actually, make that nine, maybe even 10 streets if you ignore names and count the individual forks or add the fact that some streets branch off immediately into others. On a map, the roundabout is like a Medusa of snaking roadways.

Beneath the roundabout is the Northbrae (also called Solano) Tunnel. Originally built

for trains, it now connects motorists to Solano Avenue's shops and restaurants.

We couldn't resist strolling along some of the Circle's pedestrian paths, which include Fountain Walk, a wide walkway with a steep descent to Del Norte Street. Black Path and an unnamed pathway nearby meander down to Solano Avenue, passing beautiful homes where terraced gardens tumble onto the walkways and sidewalks.

The carefully designed Northbrae subdivision opened in 1907. John Galen Howard, a University of California architect, envisioned the roundabout and its stately features. Landscape architect R.E. Mansell designed the streets and pathways. And the fountain's bears were the work of sculptor Arthur Putnam.

Considering the Circle was built in the early days of the automobile, I couldn't help but ask myself, "Why?"

Researchers such as Alan Cohen, who has written a detailed history of Berkeley, have come up with an answer that is as intriguing as the design itself. It seems early land speculators were determined to stir up interest in the hilly areas of North Berkeley



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Many of the colourful homes along the Issaquah Dock in Sausalito are owned by artists. Some are quaint; others are architectural marvels.







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Upper Orchard Lane walkway leads to this steep staircase, which connects to one of the many zigzags on a street called Panoramic Way.

that had little value for farms, industry or early homebuilders.

So they cooked up an audacious scheme — convince the state to move the capital here from Sacramento. Sort of a “build it and they will come” kind of plan. If the plan had succeeded, the Circle would have

been part of a dramatic entrance to the capitol building.

The Circle has had its challenges over the years. For one thing, the fountain was destroyed in the late 1950s. A truck lost control on one of the main feeder streets, Marin Avenue, a street so steep it’s a bit

like tipping over the edge of a cliff. Small wonder the fountain was wiped out in the accident.

It took almost four decades for the fountain to be rebuilt. Finally, two neighbourhood groups joined forces in the early 1990s, determined to bring the Circle back to its glory days.

With the assistance of the city and some municipal organizations, the coalition dubbed “Friends of the Fountain and Walk” raised more than \$100,000 from individuals and businesses. Others donated professional services. The new fountain was dedicated in 1996.

**J**ohn Galen Howard is much more than a designer of roundabouts. Better to attach his legacy to the University of California, Berkeley. The sprawling campus is in the heart of the city, and fortunately for us, its range of architecture, botanical

garden, wooded areas and footpaths are open to visitors.

Many of the standout buildings are credited to Howard, who studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris at the end of the 1800s. He supervised an architectural revamp of the Berkeley campus in the early 1900s and also founded the school of architecture.

The stately Sather Tower (The Campanile) is one Howard structure that’s hard to miss. At about 92 metres, the landmark is the world’s third tallest clock and carillon tower. Adventurous types can take an elevator and stairs to the observation platform 60 metres up for bird’s-eye views of the campus and the Bay Area beyond. We planned our campus stroll to exit on the east side, so we could connect to a network of staircases that runs through the Panoramic Hill Historic District of Berkeley. The city has more than 100 pathways



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and staircases, including the ones near the Circle. And the walkways we encountered energize the Nancy Drew adventurer within: What could possibly be at the top of this mysterious set of old stairs connecting one hillside street to another?

Some of the Panoramic Hill walkways have Old World charm, such as the first stretch of the multi-level Orchard Lane,

The Circle’s design elements, including balustrades and huge terracotta pots, continue down the Fountain Walk, viewed here looking up toward the Circle from Del Norte Street.

built in 1910. This Beaux-Arts staircase leads to a spectacular view across to San Francisco as well as connecting to one of the many zigzags on a street called



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Panoramic Way. Other nearby walkways, such as the Arden Path, are dare-you-to-walk-it workouts that reward climbers with glimpses of private spaces, gardens and hillside homes.

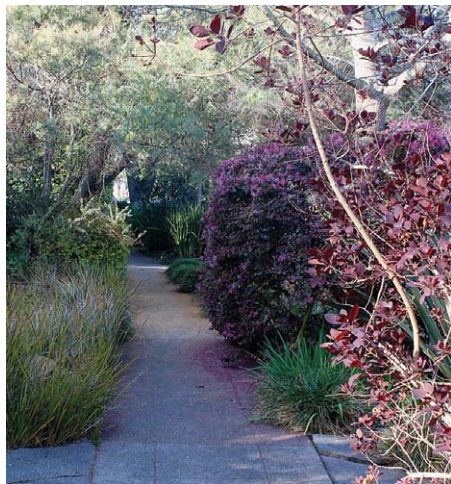
It's early morning as we stroll along a long wooden walkway in Sausalito, the stillness broken only by the squawk of seabirds.

Benches, whimsical sculptures and decorative pots full of huge succulents and flowers punctuate this neighbourhood about a 10-minute drive north of the Golden Gate Bridge to San Francisco.

The homes, many owned by artists, feature trellises, gardens and patios. Many are close together, an eclectic collage of bold colours – blues, purples, yellows. Some homes are quaint, even rustic; others are architectural marvels with cantilevered decks, skylights and eye-catching shingle siding.

Some homes have names — Bliss, Alien Lifeform Research, Dragon Boat — all fitting considering these are permanently moored houseboats.

But calling them boats is deceiving. This



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floating subdivision is as much a part of Sausalito as the traditional streets.

Permanent waterfront communities trace their history to the 1906 earthquake that left many homeless. Also, after the Second World War, people took over surplus military vessels and boats from a closed shipyard. However, houseboat living really gained momentum during the 1960s era of peace, love and counter-culture.

In today's community along Richardson's Bay, in the north end of Sausalito, free spirits have gone mainstream. There are more than 400 floating homes on five des-

**ABOVE:** A cyclist takes a spin around the Circle on a quiet day in Berkeley. This large roundabout, built in the early 1900s, is surrounded by pedestrian walkways, as well as balustrades, pillars and other elegant touches. The centre of the roundabout is set off by a whimsical fountain featuring a sculpture of chubby bear cubs. A swath of grass and a fence protect it from the traffic. There is no pedestrian access to the fountain.

**LEFT:** An unnamed pathway along Los Angeles Avenue leads from the Circle to Solano Avenue.

ignated residential marinas off Bridgeway and Gate 6 Road. The homes are subject to property taxes and are connected to utilities and services such as sewage, water and electricity.

The floating-home marinas are private, but respectful visitors are welcome. The few residents who were out the morning we poked around Issaquah Dock greeted us cordially, no doubt used to the curious and their cameras. They went about the business of weeding flowerpots or carrying in groceries, and we got down to our business — another day relaxing in the California sun.

## ALSO WORTH VISITING

### *Berkeley's Shattuck Avenue*

Crowds of foodies scout for dinner at eateries offering cuisine ranging from upscale deli, to sushi, tapas, French and Indian fusion. For pizza, stop in at the Cheese Board Collective.

For an afternoon pick-me-up, we stopped in at the People's Coffee and Tea, near Shattuck and University Avenue. The décor in this café channels Berkeley's hippy past, but the abundance of electrical outlets for laptops plants it firmly in the present.

### *Oakland Museum of California, 1000 Oak St., Oakland; museumca.org*

A museum with an intriguing blend of art, history and natural sciences. It is also notable for the way its terraced gardens, walkways and sculptures set off the mid-century modernist architecture.

### *Cat Town Café, 2869 Broadway, Oakland; cattowncafe.com*

Where cat lovers go. There's a fee to enter the cats' room at this non-profit café, and reservations are recommended.

### *Fentons Creamery, 4226 Piedmont Ave., Oakland; fentonscreamery.com*

Fentons Creamery has been handcrafting ice creams, sauces and sundaes since 1894. From butterfinger to pomegranate, there is a flavour to suit every ice-cream addiction.

### *Muir Woods National Monument, 1 Muir Woods Rd., Mill Valley; nps.gov/muwo/index.htm*

A popular park north of Sausalito with towering redwoods, wildlife and trails. Parking can be an issue so summer travelers would be wise to take the shuttle from Marin City Transit Hub.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

**The Circle:** Friends of the fountain and walk. org  
Alan Cohen's history of Berkeley: historyofberkeley.org/contact.html

**Sausalito's Floating Homes Association:**  
floatinghomes.org

**Berkeley Path Wanderers Association:**  
berkeleypaths.org

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