

Castro cruisin'

Mary Hampshire visits the gay capital of the world.

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Cheerful Trevor Hailey is frequently interrupted with 'Hi's' and hugs as she leads a tour of San Francisco's gay history. She's as much an institution as the Castro, the city's gay community, itself. While the group shades from the sunshine, a famous local author strolls by on a busy Saturday afternoon.

"Hey, you all wanna meet Armistead Maupin?" asks Trevor, 58, excitedly. "Hi honey," she waves, catching his eye. "Hi girl She pays me to walk by," he laughs. Dressed in brown cords and a denim shirt, he shyly ambles over and is introduced. Maupin's Tales of the City books, made into a soap opera shown on British television, wittily detail the sexual and emotional antics of archetypal San Francisco characters.

Historically, San Francisco's always been "a place where people can explore their fantasies and who they really are," explains Trevor, a former navy nurse from Mississippi, who moved to the city in 1972. Its legendary tolerance is no more evident than at the Castro. Characterised by pastel Victorians that rise and dip in the city's rollercoaster landscape, the Castro comprises 44 square blocks from 16th to 27th street at the geographical hub of San Francisco.

Huge rainbow flags, which symbolise unity, peace, hope and diversity, flutter in the breeze displayed from telegraph poles, homes, shops and along Market Street to The City Hall, downtown. "I bet you don't see too many gay monuments in Alabama?" jokes Trevor, with a male couple from its capital Birmingham, before ambling to the heart of the community. "These are the gayest four corners in the world, and people come from all over just to stand here," she says, proudly pointing to the crossroads of Castro and 18th, beneath bright blue skies, where locals are handing out flyers and petitions.

What motivates Trevor is an obvious passion for story telling, and educating others. Her tour attracts straight and gay singles and couples from across the world. "It was so validating for me when I first came across the archives because I'd felt isolated. Coming here for some gay people is like the equivalent of Israel for Jews." In the Castro men, of all ages, outnumber women by five to one, hanging out in bars, shopping hand in hand and serving at cosmetic counters, for example. It's a curious thing being female and straight. You feel invisible. There's relief from intrusive leers. Men look straight through you while some women flirt.

As sex has been the political battleground, it is treated with in-your-face frankness. One of the latest shops to open is Rock Hard, an erotic art gallery filled with black and white photographs. "It's anatomically optimistic," laughs Trevor. Across the road in Don't Panic are penis sweets, penis pasta, a t-shirt

labelled: 'The force is in my pants', a mug saying: 'Please don't feed or tease the straight people' and Tinky Winky dolls.

Born in 1972, the Castro was formerly the Catholic parish of His Most Holy Redeemer where the hottest thing happening, according to Trevor, was bingo in the local church. It was renamed the Castro after the former silent movie theatre. The area was vacated, with a trend to move to the suburbs, and seized by gay activists because of its cheap rent. Around 20,000 people moved to the "liberation zone" in the subsequent two years. "This was the first total gay community in the world," explains Trevor, who started her tours 10 years-ago after digging up pieces of gay history while working at a local library. People who had been invisible began to live openly. As a result, San Francisco has been a role model for other cities. It's still illegal to be gay or lesbian in 21 US states." But, she adds: "Three of 11 people on our Board of Supervisors are gay."

Various social shifts moulded the Castro's evolution. San Francisco's rebellious nature can be traced back to the 1850s gold rush which transformed a hamlet of 500 people to 40,000. "Around 99.9% were men," explains Trevor. "If you've got that many men together aren't you going to see an element of playfulness and risk taking? These were fortune seekers looking for a different way of life. And surely you'll have a disproportionate number of gay men among them?"

During the 1850s and 60s, for example, the Lavender cowboys organised all male square dances. Meanwhile, prostitution, saloons and gambling flourished. Becoming a port city, with the opening of the Panama Canal, also brought more settlers from the US forces. "There's also been a disproportionate number of gay people in the military because it provides an escape hatch from the requisite husband or wife and 2.2 children," explains Trevor. More recently, The Summer of Love, at the Haight Ashbury from 1969 to 1972, rejected existing social values. Popular activists, such as Harvey Milk, who was the first openly gay city council supervisor to be elected in California, led the way for the gay community. After 1972, people flocked to the Castro from across the United States in droves.

The fight for unabashed freedom has not been without its highs and lows. The highs include the annual coming together for Gay Pride, now a festival but originating from the Stonewall riots in New York in 1969 and the birth of the San Francisco Gay Film Festival in 1978. The lows include most notably the assassination of Harvey Milk in 1978 and the onslaught of the Aids epidemic in the 1980s. Milk, who owned a camera shop on Castro street, was murdered by disgruntled ex-supervisor Dan White, a Conservative and a Catholic, upset by Milk's popularity and liberalism. White, who also shot and killed the mayor, was sentenced, in 1979, to five years on the charge of manslaughter through diminished responsibility. He pleaded temporary insanity from harmful additives in his fast food diet. As a result, thousands of gay activists rioted. The rainbow flag was introduced in commemoration of Milk, and the area near the subway station is named Harvey Milk Plaza. Every November, there's a candlelit march in his memory. (White committed suicide after his release in 1985).

The community has also suffered the loss of many lives through Aids. The Names Project Memorial Quilt, which has toured the world as a testimony, is a choking reminder of the devastation. "We had to grieve in order to move on," says Trevor. In coming of age, and weathering the storms, the Castro's temperament has sobered. As Deborah Bosley, in *The Rough Guide to San Francisco* (Penguin 1998, £8.99) notes: "These streets once brimming with gay emancipation and riotous partying have evolved into rather a nice place to shop. Open hedonism," she adds, "has been squarely devoted to the formation of AIDS support groups, care for the sick, and enough political dexterity to maintain a mainstream influence in the city's political arena."

But The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, who won worldwide notoriety by dressing up as nuns and roaring about on motorbikes or rollerblades, still kick up a fuss. The latest was at Easter when they came into conflict with the church for wanting to celebrate their 20th anniversary on Easter Sunday. They were given a permit by the city council. "They're were doing things like running a Hunky Jesus Contest. When the Archdiocese caught wind of it they had a fit," says Trevor.

Current political issues include the domestic partners issue. Straight couples can get benefits. But gay relationships are not recognised by the tax system. There's also concern, adds Trevor, about some of the younger generation who are behaving as though Aids is no longer a health threat. Meanwhile, to add to the confusion, one campaign group is claiming it's all been a conspiracy dreamed up by drugs companies. "In the past people saw their friends suffer a horrible death," explains Trevor, "With the new drugs, Aids is not as visible any more. Some get complacent."

Nowadays, the gay community is dispersed in other pockets of San Francisco. Rent has skyrocketed so not everyone could afford to live in the Castro. Gordon Thomas, 31, who moved to San Francisco in 1995 to find a husband, says there are pros and cons. "On the positive side, you're more likely to see people holding hands in the Castro. "It feels so comfortable and safe there. And the tour's a good thing. San Francisco has a reputation. It's great that's explained. On the downside, the Castro's so expensive. And commercialism has eroded our political culture. You'll see advertisements for mundane things like photocopying being sold by naked torsos. He adds: "The Castro tends to be dominated by young, white, men. Some people such as blacks, Latinos and older people who feel left out have formed another movement to embrace many other differences besides sexuality."

Others have controversially, and idealistically, argued against sexuality as identity. Dan Savage, in *The San Francisco Weekly's Guide To Pride 99*, comments: "Ultimately, we'll never be truly whole until gay people are neither crippled by shame nor addicted to pride. Only when our homosexuality, to others and to ourselves, means absolutely nothing will we be free."