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On the Road with NEMO MEMO: John's July San Francisco Journal

Barbara and I had the opportunity to spend a month house-sitting in San Francisco and beat the daily 100+°F summer heat in southern Arizona. We departed from home early on Sunday, June 27, with the sun blasting from just above Tucson's Santa Catalina Mountain range, and both outside air and pool water temperature starting the day at 84°F.

As we headed for San Diego, Barbara mentioned that the Internet appears to have taken over a huge chunk of “reality,” and is now impossible to ignore, even for her. I asked her to explain, and she said:

“Look at you, John. You sent email messages to all our friends and family in California and the rest of the world, telling them where we're going to be and how to reach us during July. You checked <<http://www.smartraveler.com>> for last-minute road and weather reports, <<http://www.zagat.com>> for restaurant reviews throughout California, and you printed out pages of natural foods store locations from <<http://www.wholefoods.com>> and <<http://www.wildoats.com>>.

“Then you used <<http://www.yahoo.com>> for links to San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Francisco area information, including guest privileges at the S. F. Public Library and travel passes on the MUNI public transportation system.

“Next you got radio schedules for your favorite shows: <<http://www.realcomputing.com>>, <<http://www.soundmoney.org>>, and several

National Public Radio programs from <<http://www.npr.org>>.

“Finally, Mr. Book Bytes, you made sure we had precise locations and phone numbers for every bookstore at <<http://www.borders.com>> and <<http://www.barnesandnoble.com>>. I rest my case!”

While considering her well-developed dissertation, we heard on NPR’s Sunday Edition a story on a musical entrepreneur whose latest “album” of compiled tunes is being distributed via MP3 downloads, one week at a time on <<http://www.songs.com>>.

CALIFORNIA, HERE WE COME

The primary reason for going via San Diego was a delightful afternoon at Quail Botanical Gardens, <<http://www.qbgardens.com>>. We didn’t need any Internet reviews to select our San Diego restaurant, because we spotted it on the way in, and walked there from our hotel (chosen from the AAA motor club guide book, by the way). After dinner I said “I wish we could find some fresh bread tomorrow. I should have looked up bakeries on the web.”

“You won’t believe this, John,” Barbara shouted, “but there, as you requested, across the street is the San Tropez Organic Bakery. I know it’s blind luck, but forget the Internet, and let’s explore without having so many digital expectations in advance.”

MONDAY, JUNE 28: We rarely watch TV at home, but tend to look at the Today Show on NBC <<http://www.nbc.com>> when we stay in hotels on vacation. The novelty is, well, a novelty, at least for a half hour. Enticing commercials invited us to participate in <<http://www.ivillage.com>>, an online community for women, and purchase our next house via <<http://www.realtor.com>>, letting a team of professionals take care of the particulars, instead of us having to interrupt our overactive lives to participate in the transaction.

TUESDAY, JUNE 29: Reading USA Today <<http://www.usatoday.com>> at breakfast in an Los Angeles area restaurant, I came across <<http://www.doughnet.com>>, a financial site for kids, plus <<http://www.mapblast.com>>, for maps and other travel info. The previous night we had learned how the Biography TV Channel has extensive supplementary material at <<http://www.biography.com>>.

At the Los Angeles home of Wink, an old high school buddy, another friend, Raj,

showed us how his wife used <<http://www.ebay.com>> to purchase a toy model of a used “woody” car Raj had purchased over 30 years ago. The toy cost more today than the \$100 car had cost him.

Wink remarked, “I can now locate everything in the world on the World Wide Web, and I never knew where to look or who to ask previously.” He is active with online stock trading, and does all his investment research on the web.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 30: We purchased delicious natural food carryout items at two different Wild Oats Markets in Santa Monica, armed with our printouts of the locations of every one in the state. That night, in our motel in San Luis Obispo, we were fascinated by infomercials for <<http://www.psychicsolution.com>>, appearing on the Weather Channel <<http://www.weather.com>>, with weather forecasts sponsored by America Online <<http://www.aol.com>>. As we approached San Francisco, we saw a grocery delivery van from the new service, <<http://www.webvan.com>>.

THURSDAY, JULY 1: Now in “our” house in San Francisco, I heard a huge delivery truck stopping in front of a neighbor’s home. Both entire sides of the truck were decorated with billboard-size advertisements for [Go2Net.com](http://www.go2net.com) <<http://www.go2net.com>>, the portal for Metacrawler <<http://www.metacrawler.com>> and several other well-known websites, with the slogan: “When You’re Done Surfing: Go2Net.com.”

FRIDAY, JULY 2: I downloaded the latest issue of My Mac Magazine <<http://www.mymac.com>> on the sluggish house Performa 6214CD, and Barbara replied to a few of her AOL email messages.

We had a late lunch at home, each of us reading a different information-packed current issue of a San Francisco free weekly newspaper. At one point Barbara exclaimed: “This web business is getting out of control. Does everyone really need their own site? Look at this, in the San Francisco Bay Guardian <<http://www.sfbg.com>>. Here’s a shoe store called John Fluevog’s, and their domain is <<http://fluevog.com>>.”

I noticed that the S.F. Weekly <<http://www.sfweekly.com>> was advertising for an online editor, with “knowledge of HTML, DHTML, Javascript, and Flash.” I’m sure it’s a great opportunity, but not great enough for me to abandon My Mac Magazine!

SATURDAY, JULY 3: I turned on the classical music radio station to wake us up

gently, and was immediately bombarded by announcements for obtaining the latest technology news at <<http://www.cnet.com>>, getting up-to-the-minute financial reports from <<http://www.dowjones.com>>, and going on the best possible walk with shoes from <<http://www.walkshop.com>>.

The 102.1 FM classical radio station itself offers streaming audio (Windoze only?), plus expanded music listings at <<http://www.kdfc.com>>. We were lulled back to sleep with an ad for special mattresses, offered exclusively from <<http://www.sleepworks.com>>.

SUNDAY, JULY 4 was the national Independence Day holiday. That night, waiting with 200,000 of our closest friends for the spectacular fireworks display about to begin at Aquatic Park near Fisherman's Wharf, we heard a noise, looked overhead, and observed a DC3 airplane displaying a ticker tape-style message under its wings for (I'm not making this up!) <<http://www.JewsForJesus.org>>.

On the way to the fireworks display, we had stopped in Chinatown at the world-class purveyor of tea, ginseng, and Chinese herbs, <<http://www.tenren.com>>.

MONDAY, JULY 5: The classical radio station had a bunch of new weekday announcements. We learned about alternative medical advice at <<http://www.mylifepath.com>>, and highest-interest online bank rates from <<http://www.wingspanbank.com>>. If you want to donate your car for a tax writeoff, park it at <<http://www.ccasf.org>>.

TUESDAY, JULY 6: The business section of the San Francisco Chronicle had a syndicated column discussing the best way to calculate retirement investment income, using <<http://www.financialengines.com>>.

At nearby Corte Madera Town Center shopping mall, I was delighted with the comfort and styling of an upscale \$2,000 rocking chair from Norway (a bit out of my price bracket!) from <<http://www.rocking-chairs.com>>. Across the walkway is a foodissimo emporium featuring delicious imported Italian foods since 1919, <<http://www.agferrari.com>>.

Down the road, at Whole Foods Market in Mill Valley, we purchased some butter from local cows, probably all branded with <<http://www.strausmilk.com>>.

As I was secretly crunching through my third sample of chocolate biscotti at the back of the grocery store, Barbara rushed up to me, and said in a stage whisper, "Hurry, John. I found something amazing. Come up to the front right away."

She was correct. I was incredulous.

At a display table between the specialty baked goods and the cash registers stood Mike and Barb, the brains and talent behind CYBERBITES.com, with “Food for the Internet Age.” We sampled their three different flavors of star-shaped 6 ounce chocolate or ginger-flavored brownie cakelets, and purchased “The All Nighter,” which has coffee added.

The office at <<http://www.cyberbites.com>> is “all Mac, all the time,” according to Mike, who is an avid reader of My Mac Magazine! He registered the tasty domain in 1996, and, like me, is an old hippy musician (also a handsome baldie, BTW).

We plan to stay in touch with Barb and Mike, and catch up with them at future in-store tastings.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 7: My aunt dropped in for a visit, and the first words she spoke were: “Can you imagine what the newspapers are advertising now? I just saw a full-page ad for <<http://www.furniture.com>> or something similar. I burst out laughing as soon as I saw it in this morning’s paper. The thought of buying furniture over the Internet is ridiculous.”

She continued, “I read that Ireland has positioned itself as the techno-capital of Europe. While its economy was in the dumps, the Irish government had the foresight to create an educated workforce, who are now working overtime on all sorts of software and other post-Y2K e-commerce solutions.”

That night, in charming Tiburon, across the water from downtown San Francisco, Barbara and I had a picnic highlighted by Mango Tango Smoothie from <<http://www.odwalla.com>>, before attending a world-class Baroque music performance by the American Baroque Orchestra, <<http://www.americanbaroque.org>>.

THURSDAY, JULY 8: On a tremendously scenic hike up Mt. Tamalpais, our hiking companion remarked that he was thinking of getting a new Mac, armed with competitive cost info from <<http://www.pricepulse.com>>, but his future expenditures would probably be headed in a different direction: an engagement ring from someone other than <<http://www.caratplus.com/moshe/home.html>>, who lists no physical address or company personnel at the websites. Our hiking buddy has a friend who is now working for <<http://www.digitalchef.com>>, a new company attempting to be the prime mover of kitchen equipment.

On the drive back to the city, listening to "All Things Considered" on the radio, we

heard a segment about <<http://www.rtmart.com>>, a group of anti-corporate hackers, who use the Internet to disrupt online business-as-usual of their target institutions and companies.

FRIDAY, JULY 9: After a discussion with my cousin Jim, centering on the thought that Internet domains have become de-facto trademarks or enterprise identities, I noticed that nearly every bus and bus shelter has a banner ad with a URL printed as least as large as the company name, such as <<http://www.bchothouse.com>>, whose Canadian tomatoes were prominently displayed at the nearby greengrocer.

More from the classical radio station: a disgusting commercial for <<http://www.forbes.com>> encouraging successful young “capitalist pigs,” and a bizarre spot for <<http://www.homegain.com>>, pretending to be a source of home equity information, but in fact being a website for homeowners to use for selling their properties.

SATURDAY, JULY 10: The Embarcadero Farmer’s Market is one of our favorites, selling lavender from <<http://www.lavenderfarm.com>>. Our car loaded with produce, we stopped to let a truck from <<http://www.sfsalsa.com>> pull ahead, followed by a bus promoting a dust-free environment, care of <<http://www.gazoonteit.com>> (honest!). This week’s S. F. Weekly contains a large ad for an online casino, <<http://www.goldenpalace.com>>.

SUNDAY, JULY 11: In the car radio on a family visit, I laughed at a promotional piece for <<http://www.avocado.org>>. Later that day, my uncle asked Barbara what I was doing with all the URL information I was collecting. He said to her, “What’s the big deal? Where has John been? Here in California we’ve been seeing Internet addresses attached to advertising for years.”

Barbara and I discussed the matter that evening. I realized that in Arizona I’m out of the bright beam of cutting-edge technology and media, but I consider myself tuned into the Net culture. Is California, which is the world headquarters of the new technology, representative of the world in general? I doubt it.

WHEN IN ROME

Since that day weeks ago, I have attempted to take URLs for granted, as they parade before me in growing numbers. Wherever I go in the American west and southwest, I am becoming accustomed to the profusion of <<http://www.blahblahblah.com>> with each turn of the head, and every sound entering my skull.

I wish all the enterprises and individuals tremendous success with their Internet-based endeavors, but I predict there will be many frustrated folks for every sponsor who achieves fulfillment in the foreseeable future. My personal “brainwidth” will never be vast enough to spend time at the computer investigating more than 1 per cent of the URLs that fascinate me. It’s pick-and-choose, just like in real life.

Here’s an idea: send me the most fascinating or unexpected commercial/institutional URL, with your reasons for thinking it to be peculiar, and I’ll present the compilation in a future Nemo Memo.

Blue Screen Blues?

Tens of thousands of 15” monitors were sold with Macintosh 6200 and 6300 series Performa computers. Many, if not all of them, are now exhibiting an inherent defect: permanent shift from normal coloration to a bluish tint. Shame on you, Apple!

The bad guys turn out to be good guys after all. By phoning Apple at (800) SOS-APPLE (or your local Apple dealer outside of the United States), owners of these true-blue monitors can make arrangements to have them repaired FOR FREE.

I know it sounds too good to be true, but it’s true. Three of my friends are now happily using their recently-repaired Apple Multiple Scan 15 Displays, with a turnaround time of 2-3 weeks.

When you call, the service rep will give you a case number, and may make arrangements for FedEx to send a box for direct repair by Apple. Soon your old faithful monitor will be good as new. Oops, I mean better than new.

He Haves and Have-Mores

On the morning when the national news media carried lead stories on the “Internet gap” between economic and racial groups, I tested the premise as a one-person sample. The new, controversial main San Francisco Public Library <<http://sfpl.lib.ca.us>> opens at 11:00 on Fridays, and I was punctual.

After the homeless patrons entered, I sprinted up to the top floor, scouting for Internet computer terminals. Bad choice: most of the “Netscape computers,” as they are labeled, are on lower floors.

The policy at SFPL is simple:

- sign-up in advance for 30-minute computer usage
- wait in line for new half-hourly sign-up sheets
- no consecutive sessions at the same computer.

By the time I learned the method, the first two increments were fully booked, so I was able to try three different computers during the time I was online, from 12:00 - 1:30.

One librarian explained, “It used to be a free-for-all, and people were hogging the work stations and getting into fights. This new system is equitable and easy to supervise.”

Dell computers are used, with Dell or Trinitron monitors. The CPUs run Windows Workstation NT 4.0 and Netscape 3.0 software. Connection speeds are excellent, with infrequent “hangs” due to excess server demand. I’m a left-handed mouser, and quickly became comfortable with the left-click button.

San Francisco’s main library is on a prime corner in an attractive part of the city center. Neither the city nor the library were as busy as I expected them to be. Library staff are consistently helpful, and the patrons are polite and patient.

The atmosphere at the Internet terminals is quiet and intense, because 30 minutes vanishes suddenly while browsing or working on email. A majority of users spend most of their time reading and replying to email on Hotmail <<http://www.hotmail.com>> or comparable free-email sites. I also noticed people checking international news and sports.

Taking a short break every half-hour is always a good idea, and becomes essential in order to reserve a computer for future use. The workstations are scattered inconveniently throughout the unusual six-floor building in clusters of 2 - 10, for a total of approximately 50 units.

Other observations:

- Everyone at the Netscape computers was already familiar with the WWW.
- Many of the users were international tourists to the city.
- Total concentration is required to maintain 25 minutes of solid productivity.
- The sitting terminals are much more comfortable than the standing terminals, both for feet and wrists.

A few questions remain:

- How are people supposed to learn from scratch about navigating the Internet and the web?
- Where is the best place to have open-ended time on the Net for non-computer owners, and how much should it cost? (The SFPL has several one-hour private suites for a reasonable \$6 per hour.)
- Until high-speed connectivity is generally affordable, which is better for browsing and searching: a slow connection at home, or a fast connection at a public computer?
- Why did the architect design a hundred-year building that is avant-garde in design, but has so much empty atrium space?
- At what point will the SFPL realize the need to fill the copious floor space with 500 more Internet computers?
- Should every city have its own free, public New Media Center, separate from its public library?

Here at My Mac Magazine, my colleagues tease me because I must “live in a library” in order to read so many computer books each month for "Book Bytes." Give me a cozy corner in the SFPL, and I'll consider it! Next summer I'll be back in San Fran, so stay tuned for Nemo's SF/Y2K report.

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Websites mentioned:

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