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A different sort of trip through San Francisco

If I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look any further than my own backyard. Because if it isn't there, I never really lost it to begin with.

— Contribute Dorothy Gale in "The Wizard of Oz."

AND TO THINK, our backyard is way cooler than hers — no hog pens in sight, unless you count the occasional Harley dealership. Yet, like Dorothy, do we need to embark on a perilous Technicolor detour to appreciate it all?

Heck, yes. And it all starts in a Land Rover that thinks it's a zebra.

Once upon a time, about three weeks ago, I went on a grand journey on the back of said zebra, over hill (Potrero and Sutro) and valley (Noe and Hayes) during an "off the beaten track" tour of our very own San Francisco, designed for tourists and restless natives alike and led by a pleasantly off-his-rocker dude who makes his passengers wear a pith helmet and sing "Wimoweh" over and over again, especially when in cavernous parking garages with good acoustics.

The dude is Daniel Oppenheim, a longtime resident and extreme lover of said city. He's a former management consultant, an African adventurer himself and a generally quirky guy who oft slips into an English accent and relentlessly tests you on "Vertigo" trivia — quick, for a box of animal crackers, who is the woman in the portrait about whom Kim Novak is obsessed?

He recently started Urban Safari (www.TheUrbanSafari.com or 1-866-MY-SAFARI), toting people around the town's nooks and crannies in his converted zebra-painted open-air Rover.

A touristy San Francisco tour? Yawn? Then little do you know the wonders that await. In fact,

deep exploration of one's own turf can be as enlightening and refreshing as an elsewhere vacation, if said tour is performed properly.



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You see,

Oppenheim doesn't take guests to such pedestrian sites as Fisherman's Wharf and Alcatraz. To be sure, he includes some basics for newbies. But on a recent "morning safari," he took me, three New Yorkers and a woman named June from Michigan (she took a cab all the way from the Ritz in Half Moon Bay just for this) on a magical mystery tour, boldly going a few places I'd amazingly never been before.

Up near the carousel in Yerba Buena Park, we saw a sculpture titled "Urge" with a human figure crouching atop a giant globe. If you sit on a certain bench, the figure does something. I won't tell you what.

Back in the zebra, we were tested on the 1968 movie "Bullitt" as we navigated Potrero Hill. It's a perilous journey, all right. "Remember how Steve McQueen came flying through these streets?" Oppenheim says. "Let's try and replicate that famous stunt!" Not really, of course. Zebras don't fly well, even in Oz.

We careened down the crookedest street in San Francisco. Lombard? Wrong! Vermont Street. Then to the Mission, where Technicolor

pales next to the murals on Balmy Alley. For lunch — no sourdough, baby. Instead, we crammed into the local fave, La Taqueria at 25th and Mission for the sweet ambrosia of a watermelon agua fresca and a killer chicken taco.

Over to Chocolate Covered Sweets and Gifts on Noe and 24th, where we tried a dark chocolate bar with toasted chiles from Santa Fe. Weird, with a sassy kick, kind of like Oppenheim.

Then off to a mosaic staircase on Moraga with starfish tumbling down 182 steps. We made a sweep through Golden Gate Park and the Haight, then to Alamo Square and a "magic shoe garden," where people have made planters out of sneakers, snow boots and platform shoes.

"This is one of the greatest cities on the planet," Oppenheim says. "I just want to bring some sense of adventure back to the city."

He does this with all sorts of tours, pre-planned and custom — Victorians, ghosts, wine tasting, kids' tours, drag queen tours, famous movie sites, five-mojito tours. Not a cheap date — \$75 to \$100 for four hours, depending how many people go. But worth it, and you get freebies along the way (think sassy chocolate).

You never know — you may find your heart's desire, or you may tumble into a hog pen, get caught in a tornado and go all psychedelic with hallucinations.

Either way, you'll have a good trip.

"Give 'em Hill" runs every other week in this space. Giver her some by e-mailing ahill@angnewspapers.com.

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