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A California Passegiata

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Author
Mozingo, Louise A

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Every Sunday morning, San Francisco’s Parks and Recreation Department removes barriers across Golden Gate Park’s John F. Kennedy Drive, barring automobile traffic for half its length. The wide, elegant roadway, conceived as a carriage drive for polite society but disused during the week as a commuter cut through, becomes an invigorating artery of self-propulsion, an agora of the American obsession with movement. The street becomes the vibrating, energizing spine of this 1,000-acre, nineteenth-century pleasure ground—all because the city skips its nervous Nelliyeh street festivals and lets the congestion act as rip.

The asphalt is seized by a tempest of bicyclists, inline skaters, trolley riders, skateboarders, roller skaters, bike racers, runners and their prolific variations. In the byways, the disco skaters, slalom skaters and street hockey players rhythm and weave and swirl, entertaining spectators who occupy the natural theaters formed by the picturesque topography. The kids are out, too, carefully watched by parents, egg crated in helmets, elbow protectors, and knee pads, demonstrating their splayed-leg task of expertise on skates or trundling along on training wheels, indulged in the illusion of independence.
The paths that parallel the roadway are filled with amazed onlookers—parents propelling baby carriages, interlinked elderly couples, strollers who seek the security and varnish of numbers and wide-eyed tourists. Some of the edging meadows capture weekly habits of communal athleticism: backyuck players and jugglers who kick and flip under particular Monterey cypress; volleyballers who shoot from an exceptionally wind-sheltered enclosure, Wiffle ball and Frisbee players. Other meadows, less proprietary, harbor the eddies of the human tide the quietly seated observers of the teeny-tweeny and children who recognize each other from school and neighborhood, drinking juice and checking for injuries; families picnicking on broad blankets; and loaing lovers willing to be distracted from each other by sleek athletes.

The hot exoticism of the rose garden, the rhododendron dell, the conservatory and the fern forest bejewels the roadway and gives satisfaction to the veterans of flower shows and garden clubs, families in their Sunday best posing for the picture to send Far East or back East, and the plump ladies who miss the tinker back in Russia not one bit. At the pedestrian underpass near the conservatory, instead of the lurking danger we have come to associate with such places, the civilizing serenity of live music, acoustically resonant in the arched tunnel, lures an audience crowded cheek to cheek. In the morning the music flows from a sparkling jazz trio, in the afternoon from a Middle Eastern, New Age ensemble with a boned, dark-haired Fabio who sits the juices of at least three quarters of his audience.

An ample, curving roadway, set amidst the generous pastoral of easy undulating lawns and the aching shelter of enclosing tree groves simply structures this antiquated, sunny versatility. People can make it their own— with heat, happiness and the inevitable West coast–left coast hospitality. The speed and the risk are unfettered yet there are generous, genial havens in the invisible lines of demarcation, mutually agreed upon by the tacit negotiations of urban life, socializing habits, and the salubrious effect of shared pleasures. The spaces layer up and everyone, including the elderly, the young and the less than Spandex-ready, finds a place to be.