

# Silicon Valley is a Hellhole, Unless You're Gilded

Shôn Ellerton, September 3, 2023

*I wonder how many people are genuinely happy living in such places like Silicon Valley?*



Just southwest of San Jose, lies one of the most expensive areas in California, if not the whole of the United States. Situated at the southern end of Silicon Valley nestling up to the green redwood hills are such quaint and immaculately kept towns such as Saratoga, with its lovely tree-lined streets, along which one can stumble upon a variety of fancy restaurants, wine cellars, and trendy cafes. And another being Los Gatos, the home of the giant streaming services company, Netflix, in which there is no shortage of high-end specialty shops, endless coffee shops, and very expensive food boutiques. Between these prestigious foothill towns and the bustling city of San Jose are endless suburbs comprising of three-to-four-bedroom houses with manicured front gardens, many of which have been expanded or subdivided leaving little space for a back garden.

One such a suburb is in Cupertino, in which I stayed for a couple of weeks whilst visiting friends. Being just off one of the main roads, it is a quiet neighbourhood. Wide and well-looked after streets. Teslas parked in the driveways. Mainly single storey sprawling and modern looking houses, each of them different in design. It was summertime and the heat got a little oppressive during the middle of the day, but the mornings were fresh and beautiful. It could have been like one of those perfect suburbs represented by the so-called 'American Dream'. However, it seemed, somewhat, too quiet. No kids playing on the street. No one enjoying their perfectly trimmed front lawn. No one taking their water hose out to wash the car. No neighbourhood banter on the sidewalk. Admittedly, it was midweek, and no doubt, most who live here, or should I say, most who can barely afford to live

here, require that everybody work extensively long hours. To be slaves living in the corporate hi-tech society in which Silicon Valley is infamous for.

Being an early riser, I make it my daily routine to jog to the nearby park, switch on Spotify on my mobile to listen to a podcast and spend a bit of time at the outdoor gym doing my usual pullups, push ups, and sit ups. I meet an occasional other jogger, a slim old guy in his sixties, an athletically toned woman, and a bearded guy dripping with sweat. In the park, there always seems to be a Chinese community monopolising the pickleball courts, which, being new to me, seems to be a cut-down version of tennis without the hassle of running miles to pick up errant tennis balls. Being towards the end of summer, the morning offers much solace before the ensuing heat of the day.

Those working parents with kids take them out to sports practice during the late afternoons and during the weekends, the usual gamut of soccer scrimmages and baseball practice. Other than that, the side streets and the parks are quiet, except for those workers brought in miles away from less affluent neighbourhoods to fix roofs, mend pavements, and do other people's gardening. Heaven forbid anyone here do their own gardening!

There is a new sound which I came across wandering these streets. It is quite an annoying sound that I can still hear in my head even while I am writing this on an aeroplane heading to Singapore. It is the sound manufacturers of electric and hybrid vehicles force onto their owners by virtue of the State, presumably because electric cars are too dangerously quiet. The Toyota Prius has the most irritating of the lot. It sounds like a hubcap that went flying off a car tumbling at high speed down the street crossed with the muffled sound of a rotating cylinder with a damaged ball bearing in it. It's unmistakable. It seems that almost everyone is in possession of the electric car here. I still harbour my doubts as to their viability when used to go out in the sticks or on those long road trips. Perhaps nobody has the time to do so anyway.

During my short stay, I started to loath the place in terms of living or what it would be like to live here. Tech industries have captured an enormous workforce, most of which, can barely afford to rent the places they are living. Save for those very few in the upper echelons of tech society who are earning million-dollar plus salaries, the rest are struggling to make ends meet in a society in which, to buy a small two-bedroom house, is nearly ten times the average tech salary, about eighty thousand dollars. A decent but modest three-to-four-bedroom house will

set one back a cool three million dollars or so. It is totally absurd, and it seems plain to me that this crazy increasing divide in the 'haves' and the 'have nots' is unsustainable. San Jose is America's worst second place to live in terms of average house price to average earnings at nearly nine times.

The smart ones got here many years ago and invested. Some landlords, many of them typically being of Asian origin, have been very enterprising in nearly cornering the property market exacting astoundingly high rents onto desperate tenants. Even if property prices take a nosedive, many of these landlords will probably make a handsome profit off the market. Asian mentality is based upon saving while Western culture is based on credit and spending. Without credit, there is no growth, so it has been the hallmark of Western culture to promote the philosophy of spend now and pay back later. Tech workers, many of whom can do so from the air-conditioned comfort of their own homes, will get take-out food, frequent cocktail bars, and shop at Trader Joes or Whole Foods, while the frugal savers, many of which are Indian and Chinese, can be seen shopping at Smart and Final or the myriad of giant Asian grocery stores like the one I went to in San Jose called Lion Market. I frequently find it amusing when Westerners are in a state of being utterly perplexed trying to navigate the aisles of an Asian grocery shop.

One day, I explored one of those big Westfield shopping malls near San Jose. It had all the usual big brand shops including Bloomingdales and Nordstrum and other overpriced chain boutique shops selling stuff most mortals will never be able to afford. It was an air-conditioned clinical environment, spotlessly clean, scattered with mainly second generation youngish bratster-types with too much money to spend, presumably from the hard work created by the previous generation. I could have been in one of those fancy malls in Singapore judging by the clientele, many of which looked like they came straight out of the cast of [Crazy Rich Asians](#) or the TV staged reality show, [Bling Empire](#). Writing this now, I feel a sense of embarrassment that I succumbed to paying something in the order of twenty dollars for four small meatballs in an overpriced Italian restaurant called Eatily, which still left me decidedly hungry. However, I felt that I redeemed myself after buying lots of goodies from Lion Market and making one hundred Chinese dumplings for the same price, which fed four people for two nights.

I ask myself. Are people happy in these environments? Such maddeningly exorbitantly and overheated economies like Silicon Valley, in which there lie cities like San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose with the burgeoning issue of

homelessness and rising crime. Undoubtedly, the Bay Area around San Francisco, including the lovely village of Sausalito and the Marin County coastline is visually stunning but I see little in the way of appeal for those trying to live an average life in this place. Unless one is cashed up to the hilt and living in a largish residence complete with a swimming pool and a view of the coast or the hills. Or in one of those lavish townhouses in the city cordoned off from the wandering homeless. Apart from San Francisco, the summer climate is generally unpleasantly hot. The air quality poor. And a maze of interstate highways and roads which, during peak times are choc-a-block with traffic.

Considering the area is firmly seated within a 'blue' Democrat area, it is a testament to stupidity and ignorance that the whole of the Bay Area and Silicon Valley is not served by an extensive, clean, and well-running high-speed rapid transit system. It is one of my biggest gripes with many of America's cities and should I ever be offered the position of Secretary General of the United States, the first thing I'd do is build an extensive network of high-speed trains and then increase the minimum people permitted in the carpool lane to twelve. Followed by implementing national healthcare and busting up big pharma and then relishing the thought of watching the angry faces of those upset that their nation is turning to socialism and all their Moderna and Pfizer shares are tanking. In all seriousness, many confuse communism and socialism, and although I support capitalism and free trade, I also condone some of the basics of socialism. No civilised nation should see the amount of homelessness, poverty, and indigence which many of cities in America are suffering from. And many cities within the Silicon Valley are suffering from just that.

But returning on the issue of transportation, the seemingly impossible task to build clean and extensive outer metro commuter railway networks must be given a mention. The current BART system that serves San Francisco and the outlying communities looks like it has been neglected since the 80s. It seriously looked like a third-world rail system which, to my eye, didn't look much better than the condition of the railway I went on in Albania in 2004. OK. I might have exaggerated a little, but this is nothing like your European or Japanese railway network. It's crazy to me when someone gives me the explanation that they don't have a high-speed network in Silicon Valley, the excuse being is that there's not enough densely populated traffic. Trust me. Drive around Silicon Valley from the perspective of someone who used to commute to London by train, it is completely bonkers to suggest that they don't have the traffic to justify building such a system.

But hey, that's ok. All those self-driving Teslas complete with creature comforts and their drivers, some of them still masked because they might pass on covid to their cars, unable to conceive the idea that they could share a train carriage with another commuter. Those horrible and dirty undesirables sharing the same railway carriage!

It's easy to stereotype a whole country based on one or very few visits, and it is not my intention to do so. The United States has many beautiful places to visit and many cities which are far more affordable and liveable. But any first-time tourist who gets dropped into Silicon Valley will probably want to leave it at the drop of a hat and then explore the 'real' America and its 'real' people, or what's left of it. And I can guarantee you that there are probably more happy people in such generally shunned cities like Minneapolis, Memphis, and Kansas City, because of their harsher landlocked climates, than the unreachable paradise of living in a West Coast city. And regarding Silicon Valley, unless you are earning a massive wage or working as a single person renting a cheap one-bed unit sending the remainder of the money to the rest of the family living in a proper house in a small friendly town where the neighbours are friendly and cars run on regular gas, I see absolutely no appeal in the hellhole in which Silicon Valley is. It is a trap difficult to escape for many in difficult circumstances, whether job-related or through domestic reasons. It is a dusty collection of overpriced suburbs and crime-ridden cities huddling between the industrialised shores of a stagnant and unappealing inland body of water nobody in their right minds would want to swim in and a relatively nice range of redwood hills separating the Valley from the coast complete with astronomically priced houses and mansions.

Silicon Valley is great for the rich and privileged, but for the other ninety-nine percent out there, it's like being part of a rat-race of any other major city. One spends most of their time in the house, the office, or stuck in their cars with air-conditioning switched on. On the flip side, it might work out for the relative few taking advantage of making frequent trips to such beauty spots like Santa Cruz, Carmel, and Monterey, but this is the reality. Leaving visits by friends or family aside, how often do Silicon Valley locals pop down to the coast or take that trip to the relatively nearby Sierras? I expect very seldom if not at all.

Are people generally happy in Silicon Valley? Most are probably too busy trying to support themselves to think about whether they are or not. And with what little free time there is, the remainder will probably be spent binge watching Netflix and HBO. It is of note that being a hermit in one's home living in comfort can be

done in practically any other location outside of Silicon Valley. Even in such climatically undesirable places like Fargo, North Dakota, where the temperature is either well below zero or furnace-like. As for those working in the Valley, the extreme workaholics are probably so obsessed with their own worth, many of whom require regular visits to a therapist just to keep an element of sanity about their person. From a health perspective, those living in Silicon Valley are relatively high on the scale which, I assume, can be put down to better diets and regular exercises at the local gym. But again, how often are friendships forged at the gym or by jogging down endless miles of pavement?

So, on the surface, Silicon Valley might appear to be a happy place, but I don't think it is. And, unless you're part of the elite, it is an endless suburban hell.