Where to See Silicon Valley

October 2010Silicon Valley proper is mostly suburban sprawl. At first glance  
it doesn't seem there's anything to see. It's not the sort of place  
that has conspicuous monuments. But if you look, there are subtle  
signs you're in a place that's different from other places.1. Stanford  
UniversityStanford is a strange place. Structurally it is to an ordinary  
university what suburbia is to a city. It's enormously spread out,  
and feels surprisingly empty much of the time. But notice the  
weather. It's probably perfect. And notice the beautiful mountains  
to the west. And though you can't see it, cosmopolitan San Francisco  
is 40 minutes to the north. That combination is much of the reason  
Silicon Valley grew up around this university and not some other  
one.2. University  
AveA surprising amount of the work of the Valley is done in the cafes  
on or just off University Ave in Palo Alto. If you visit on a  
weekday between 10 and 5, you'll often see founders pitching  
investors. In case you can't tell, the founders are the ones leaning  
forward eagerly, and the investors are the ones sitting back with  
slightly pained expressions.3. The Lucky  
OfficeThe office at 165 University Ave was Google's first. Then it was  
Paypal's. (Now it's Wepay's.) The interesting thing about it is  
the location. It's a smart move to put a startup in a place with  
restaurants and people walking around instead of in an office park,  
because then the people who work there want to stay there, instead  
of fleeing as soon as conventional working hours end. They go out  
for dinner together, talk about ideas, and then come back and  
implement them.It's important to realize that Google's current location in an  
office park is not where they started; it's just where they were  
forced to move when they needed more space. Facebook was till  
recently across the street, till they too had to move because they  
needed more space.4. Old  
Palo AltoPalo Alto was not originally a suburb. For the first 100 years or  
so of its existence, it was a college town out in the countryside.  
Then in the mid 1950s it was engulfed in a wave of suburbia that  
raced down the peninsula. But Palo Alto north of Oregon expressway  
still feels noticeably different from the area around it. It's one  
of the nicest places in the Valley. The buildings are old (though  
increasingly they are being torn down and replaced with generic  
McMansions) and the trees are tall. But houses are very  
expensive—around $1000 per square foot. This is post-exit  
Silicon Valley.  
5. Sand  
Hill RoadIt's interesting to see the VCs' offices on the north side of Sand  
Hill Road precisely because they're so boringly uniform. The  
buildings are all more or less the same, their exteriors express  
very little, and they are arranged in a confusing maze. (I've been  
visiting them for years and I still occasionally get lost.) It's  
not a coincidence. These buildings are a pretty accurate reflection  
of the VC business.If you go on a weekday you may see groups of founders there to meet  
VCs. But mostly you won't see anyone; bustling is the last word  
you'd use to describe the atmos. Visiting Sand Hill Road reminds  
you that the opposite of "down and dirty" would be "up and clean."6. Castro  
StreetIt's a tossup whether Castro Street or University Ave should be  
considered the heart of the Valley now. University Ave would have  
been 10 years ago. But Palo Alto is getting expensive. Increasingly  
startups are located in Mountain View, and Palo Alto is a place  
they come to meet investors. Palo Alto has a lot of different  
cafes, but there is one that clearly dominates in Mountain View:  
Red  
Rock.7. GoogleGoogle spread out from its first building in Mountain View   
to a lot of the surrounding ones. But because the  
buildings were built at different times by different people,  
the place doesn't have the sterile, walled-off feel that a typical  
large company's headquarters have. It definitely has a flavor of  
its own though. You sense there is something afoot. The general  
atmos is vaguely utopian; there are lots of Priuses, and people who  
look like they drive them.You can't get into Google unless you know someone there. It's very  
much worth seeing inside if you can, though. Ditto for Facebook,  
at the end of California Ave in Palo Alto, though there is nothing  
to see outside.8. Skyline  
DriveSkyline Drive runs along the crest of the Santa Cruz mountains. On  
one side is the Valley, and on the other is the sea—which  
because it's cold and foggy and has few harbors, plays surprisingly  
little role in the lives of people in the Valley, considering how  
close it is. Along some parts of Skyline the dominant trees are  
huge redwoods, and in others they're live oaks. Redwoods mean those  
are the parts where the fog off the coast comes in at night; redwoods  
condense rain out of fog. The MROSD manages a collection of great walking trails off  
Skyline.9. 280Silicon Valley has two highways running the length of it: 101, which  
is pretty ugly, and 280, which is one of the more beautiful highways  
in the world. I always take 280 when I have a choice. Notice the  
long narrow lake to the west? That's the San Andreas Fault. It  
runs along the base of the hills, then heads uphill through Portola  
Valley. One of the MROSD trails runs right along  
the fault. A string of rich neighborhoods runs along the  
foothills to the west of 280: Woodside, Portola Valley, Los Altos  
Hills, Saratoga, Los Gatos.SLAC goes right under 280 a little bit south of Sand Hill Road. And a couple miles south of that is the Valley's equivalent of the "Welcome to Las Vegas" sign: The Dish.  
NotesI skipped the Computer  
History Museum because this is a list of where to see the Valley  
itself, not where to see artifacts from it. I also skipped San  
Jose. San Jose calls itself the capital of Silicon Valley, but  
when people in the Valley use the phrase "the city," they mean San  
Francisco. San Jose is a dotted line on a map.Thanks to Sam Altman, Paul Buchheit, Patrick Collison, and Jessica Livingston  
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