

Isabel Allende: Love at first sight for my California dream

Have you ever been on holiday and not wanted to come back? Acclaimed author Isabel Allende describes how she abandoned Latin America for good when she fell for a dream (and a man)



Residents moor their yachts at a harbour in Sausalito, Marin County

In October 1987, on a crisp autumn day, I saw Marin County for the first time. An escort had picked me up at the airport at dusk and had driven me to the place where I was expected to speak, probably the College of Marin, although I can't be sure. By the time we got there it was dark, I was exhausted and this was just another stop in a sort of whirlwind. It was my first lecture tour, and I barely survived 12 cities in 16 days. When I was finally back home in Caracas, where I lived at the time, I could not remember any of the places I had been. But in 1987 the circumstances were different. My first husband and I had recently divorced after 25 years, and we needed to have some space between us, so I accepted a book tour of Europe and the United States that kept me travelling for two months.

The last city on my journey was San Francisco. This time the travel arrangements provided for three days, so there was a chance to do some sightseeing. I had planned the usual Chinatown-Muir Woods-Napa Valley excursions, but these plans were changed at the last minute because something happened that would influence the rest of my life. You have guessed: I met a man.

William Gordon was an attorney who had read one of my books and liked it, so he showed up at my reading. He was introduced to me as the last heterosexual bachelor in San Francisco. I liked him, so I accepted a bit too promptly his kind offer to show me the

natural beauty of Marin County. The next day he took me to Mount Tamalpais. We drove in silence, listening to a Chopin piano concert on the radio. The day was clear, the air cool and the trees waved at us in the breeze. From the top of the mountain the view was breathtaking: the bay was laid at our feet, like an old Dutch painting. Willie pointed out each town in the county, like beads of a long rosary, and told me that it was the best place in the world to live. I looked at him and decided then and there that he was proposing to me. I took it as an invitation to stay - Marin County was just an excuse, what he really meant was... However, that was not his intention at all, he was just sharing his awe of the place where he had chosen to live for the past 30 years, after he had travelled all over the world. It was one of those fortunate misunderstandings between people from different cultures. I say fortunate because it gave me determination: I was 45 years old, I was free, Caracas was eight hours away by jet, and there was no time to waste, so I went for the jugular.

Most Chilean women are small and look rather unthreatening. Don't be fooled by appearances. They can be ferocious, especially when they fall in love. To make a long story short, let's say that Willie tried to escape, but he was no match for me. I tackled him (not immediately, a few hours later), threw him face down on the floor and forced him to love me in return. We married against his will and that is the reason why I ended up living in Marin County. I didn't know then what an extraordinary place it was, nor did I suspect that I would grow roots in it.

I have been a traveller, a political refugee and an immigrant. My family and I had to leave Chile after the military coup of 1973. We went to Venezuela, where we lived in exile for 15 years, waiting for the dictatorship to end in Chile, so that we could return. However, when that finally happened in 1989, I was married to Willie and living in California. I did not return.

At the beginning, I felt as if I were a total alien. Marin County was too safe, too clean, too pretty, too affluent, too white for me. It looked like the Côte d'Azur without tourists. People here have time to bike, walk their dogs, surf or join a cult. Restaurants and book stores are always full. Teenagers are almost non-existent, because they prefer to hang out in San Francisco, which by comparison is much more exciting. Everywhere older folks in sweatpants are jogging their brains out, while perfectly fit men sit all day nursing

cappuccinos in coffee shops. 'Don't they work?' I asked Willie. 'They are all therapists,' he informed me.

Marinites look good and dress casually; nobody wears a tie, they are healthy and educated: there are more gyms and art galleries per square mile than in any other region I know of. They treat each other kindly and everybody is politically correct; even perfume is banned in some places in consideration of the 'scent challenged'.

In the late Eighties, when I moved to Marin County, I didn't see any homeless, and the traffic was not a subject of conversation. For a while, I wondered if anything ever happened in this sort of Walt Disney movie set, but soon enough I realised that Marin County is quite a Peyton Place, full of divorcees, gay-lesbian couples and Zen monks; hundreds of ecologists, vegetarians, earth mothers and masseuses; thousands of people in recovery. We even have had one or two serial killers. Half the population is into crystals, gurus, Tantric sex or saving whales. Those who are not in search of enlightenment are in search of the perfect croissant.

I am a person of rough edges, it took me a while to feel comfortable in paradise. It was a surprise for me to learn that the American constitution guarantees the right to search for happiness, something that Marinites take very seriously. They also want to be permanently entertained. The rest of the world accepts that life is mostly boring, and they consider themselves fortunate if they have a few moments of joy here and there. No one expects to live happily ever after. In my Chilean family, happiness was irrelevant. Life was supposed to be tough, take it or leave it. No whining allowed. But, I am proud to say, I have adapted so well that now I expect to be happy and entertained like my fellow Marinites. If it doesn't happen, there is always counselling and Prozac.

I remember my confusion at the beginning. My English was so poor (on my lecture tours I had been reading from prepared speeches) that I could barely order food in a restaurant, and Willie had to translate the movies for me. So my first decision was to learn the language. The second was to get a driving licence. And the third was to accept the customs. Coming from a society where things are always oblique and ambiguous, I found the direct approach of Americans offensive. Their sense of time is so different. Time is gold: fast money, fast sex, fast food..

I thought I would never adapt in Marin County. I look Chilean. I cook, dream, write and make love in Spanish. My books have an unmistakable Latin American flavour. But I am greedy, I want it all. I decided to incorporate what I like about this place without renouncing any of the things I cherish about my own culture. To be totally bicultural was my goal. Why settle for less? The twentieth century was the century of refugees and immigrants; never before had the world witnessed such large numbers of displaced people. My family was part of that diaspora. It is not as bad as it sounds. I thought I could live in Marin County without losing my identity, my background, my language or my beliefs. I could simply keep adding to them.

I love this country in general and California in particular. Diversity fascinates me. All the races of the planet come here with their traditions and their dreams. Everything new or important starts here or comes here. I like the awareness, the sense of future, the generosity of the people. The young and optimistic energy of Californians is so attractive. Also, their sense of freedom: this is as far West as you can get.

It didn't take me long to make friends in Marin County. Now I know everybody: artists and writers, teachers and doctors, obsessive bikers, dog trainers, grouchy mailmen, Latino waiters, Asian acupuncturists, spiritual crones who take workshops on how to become goddesses. I know every town and almost every corner in the county. I know where to find vintage clothes, the most decadent chocolate and fresh-baked bread. My vegetables and herbs come from the farmers' market on Sundays. I can tell you where you can have real Italian latte, buy Oriental furniture, get your next tattoo or have your palms read.

My daughter's ashes are scattered in the woods of West Marin. My granddaughters were born here. The deepest grief and the greatest joys of my life have been in this place. My husband, my son, my grandchildren, my friends and my books are here. This is my home now.

· Isabel Allende's A Home in Paradise appears in the anthology A House Somewhere, published by Lonely Planet Publications this month.