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Finance

Dot.bombed nerds find new age relief

By NIALL MCKAY

Fri, Dec 01, 00

I have a confession to make. Ever since I was a teenager, I have wanted to be a Californian hippie. Don't let the palm-pilot fool you, this high-tech journalism gig has just been a cover, and a bad one at that.

But way back then, when my school mates were purple-suited new romantics, I pictured myself blazing up Highway 1 from LA to Frisco in a VW Microbus to the sound of Neil Young, stopping off at Alice's restaurant for a bowl of chickpea soup and a funny cigarette.

So, when I heard that what must be the world's last hippie commune outside Kilkenny was just a 2 1/2-hour drive from San Francisco, I decided to take a break from the dot.bomb doom and gloom, the redundancy parties, and the post IPO blues and head for Harbin Hot Springs. There I could unwind in the natural hot spring water, sun myself by the pools or hike one of the many trails in the 1,700 acres of forest.

Harbin Hot Springs was once sacred ground, where the Lake Miwok Indians came to pray, then it became a Victorian bathing place, but was later abandoned during the Depression. Then in the 1960s, it became a commune and centre for all sorts of 1960s goings on. Since then, however, it has been transformed into a new age retreat centre (clothing optional) where Silicon Valley hipsters come to unwind, take a course in yoga, meditation or massage, after an hard 80-hour week in front of a computer terminal. There are two types of people there, the visitors, like myself, who have come for some rest and relaxation, and the residents, who work for low wages and the privilege of living there.

Some of the residents have been there since the place was a little more crazy, lacked any real structure or rules. Now, the place is the best organised version of anarchy I have ever seen.

It is located about an hour from Calistoga - a well-known mud-bath and crystal-azing enclave for nouveau riche trying to cell-phone and credit-card their way to enlightenment.

On my way, I stopped off at a local restaurant in Calistoga where a bunch of middle-aged, middle-class hippies in ponchos argued the merits and demerits of digital cameras. Fakes, I decided as I got into my Saab convertible, sparked up a cigarette, and cranked up the techno music to annoy them.

However, half an hour after arriving in Harbin all the stress and hostility seemed to seep away. Now don't get me wrong, I am not a believer in ley lines, crystals or levitation. Far from it. But there is something very peaceful about the place. Perhaps it's the way the deer and other animals wander about as if they owned the place, or the fact that no alcohol, drugs or cigarettes are allowed on the premises, or the fact that cell-phones don't work and the rooms have no TVs or phones.

In fact, the most stressful thing you can do at Harbin is be late for your massage. However, I did have one dodgy moment when I spotted somebody reading a copy of Business 2.0, a business and technology magazine. Then I got slightly irate when I heard two 30-something computer programmers try to out-boast each other as to which was the more evolved being. But after a soak in the pools, a walk in the mountains, yoga and a good vegetarian feed, it was very hard to feel irate.

There are loads of new age courses such as "A Journey Home to the Self", or "Embodiment of Awakening" or "Healing from Within". However, I didn't participate in the courses, I just sat around and read books and talked with similarly beleaguered dot.com refugees, and don't you know it was hard to worry about much. That is, of course, until I had to get back to the Bay Area and figure out a way to pay the mortgage.

Niall McKay is a freelance writer living in Silicon Valley. He can be contacted at www.niall.org

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