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Finance

Fri, Aug 24, 01

Whiplash response to dotcom downturn

As the tech slump continues, alternative lifestyles are making a comeback in California and some are more alternative than others

By NIALL MCKAY

Now that the high-tech boom is over, San Francisco is returning to its roots as the world's alternative lifestyle capital.

Recently I ran into a colleague who has been writing about the technology industry for the past six years for publications such as Wired and the Industry Standard (one of the premier dotcom revolution magazines).

Since the beginning of the year the steady flow of work in the high-tech industry has slowed to a trickle. So she decided to take on a part-time job.

Five days a week she still works as a journalist but one day a week she dons her thigh-length stiletto boots grabs her whip and heads down Highway 101 from San Francisco to Silicon Valley to punish those naughty high-tech workers who are looking for somebody to cleanse their sins. She's a dominatrix known as Madam Cerise.

Ironically, Madam Cerise doesn't feel that her part-time job is a step down from journalism.

"It's nice clean work," she said. "For the last couple of years I felt like I was pimping BS companies and passing along BS projections from the analysts who were making them up to the unsuspecting public. It became difficult to feel clean."

Now Madam Cerise feels like she provides a valuable service and that her customers walk away feeling happy. In fact, Madam Cerise is representative of what is taking place in San Francisco as all the dotcoms move out and the alternative lifestyle types move back in. In the past the city led many of the cultural changes from the "beat generation" to the summer of love.

Then came the high-tech boom and the city changed drastically. Within a few short years, it became less alternative and more money-crazed. But since the beginning of the year as many as 100,000 people have been laid off in the Bay Area. Many have fled to places such as Portland, Oregon or the east coast.

But while San Francisco is about as open-minded a city as you're likely to find, Madam Cerise still keeps her part-time job a secret from most friends and acquaintances.

"As a journalist, people give you a certain respect," she said. "But if I tell people I am a dominatrix then they see me as nothing more than a hooker in PVC."

Despite this, she insists it's her journalism skills that help her most as a dominatrix because she needs to interview her clients to find out what they really want from their dominating figure.

In fact, Madam Cerise is so happy with her new job that she has even convinced some of her journalist girlfriends to do the same.

Lest you get the wrong impression, Madam Cerise works in the sex industry but does not get to know her customers in the biblical sense.

"Oh God no," she said. "I never get involved in a sexual sense. And besides, I am in a very happy and very monogamous relationship with my fiancé."

Instead, her job is to dominate or punish her clients. "Most of them just want to be told what to do or want to be punished for what they have done. But it's like I keep getting the same client over and over. They are nearly all upper-income middle-aged (married) men who work in some form or another in the high-tech industry."

What's more, at \$250 (€274) an hour, the pay is a lot better than a technology journalist can fetch.

"I think that people in Silicon Valley are now going back to their other talents and going back to things they might have done before we went on this rollercoaster ride of initial public offerings and high-tech stock market valuations," said Madam Cerise.

Perhaps the Madam has a lesson to teach us all.

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