

The thought I always have when I see that crazy block of Lombard Street is: people who live in these houses must be really tired of seeing hordes of tourists and creeping cars jam their street every hour of every day, and late nights, too.

Actually San Francisco's Lombard Street is not confined to this one block, a famed one-way meander between Hyde and Leavenworth Streets. The famed block features eight very sharp zig-zags, and boasts that it is "the crookedest street in the world".

The quarter-mile block was developed 80 years ago when a builder first decided to erect houses on that craggy Lombard location. Because it's a very steep hillside, he staggered the paved street to make the 30 degree grade safer. Almost impossible for rickety, top-heavy 1920s cars to drive up, it became a one-way down street. Even today, it can be hazardous for modern cars to descend, and signs warn drivers to stay within the five-mile-an-hour limit or they could be ticketed.

Pedestrians can walk it either way, and it takes hardy climbers to make it from bottom to top. We were there about a year ago, standing at the little garden plot at the bottom, snapping away along with all the other tourists, when a troop of pre-teen Boy Scouts arrived.

After a pep talk from their leader, flag unfurled, they began a quick ascent. We decided to follow them. Most of us made it about half way and then slunk back to the bottom again. However, the boys carried their flag to the top and stood there proudly like the Marines on Iwo Jima while tourists snapped photos of them.