Over the past 30 years, what place has most influenced the way we communicate with one another, shop for the things we need (and things we don’t need), access music and movies, study, do business and find where we are? London? Tokyo? Not even close. New York? Close, but no cigar.

The correct answer is a location that may not even exist in a geographical sense: Silicon Valley.

Silicon Valley has spawned Apple and Hewlett-Packard, Google and Yahoo, Facebook and LinkedIn, Netflix and eBay, Oracle and Intel, YouTube and Yelp. Thousands of other high-tech firms are there along with scores of new start-ups every month, a critical mass of creativity, technology and venture capital that gets stronger with every passing nanosecond. But in Silicon Valley a physical place or just a clever marketing phrase? Even the locals aren’t sure.

It’s even harder to define Silicon Valley. Even though one of the local government agencies recently changed its name to the San Mateo County Silicon Valley Convention and Visitors Bureau, there is no town, city or neighbourhood that actually bears the name Silicon Valley. Complicating matters even further is the fact that the area generally defined as Silicon Valley—encompassing a dozen small cities stretching between San Francisco and San Jose—isn’t even a valley.

People who live and work there offer a variety of opinions on the topic. “I think of the term Silicon Valley as a business state of mind and not a cultural or geographical region,” says biotech executive Duncan Beniston, who was born and raised in Palo Alto, about halfway between San Francisco and San Jose. “It’s a brand—like Louis Vuitton or any other.” says local hotelier Anita Cowan, another native. “People here do realise how much they influence and control the planet.”

Local business leader Barbara Gross, who helped fund many start-ups during her years as a banker, agrees that defining Silicon Valley is a challenge. “Where does it start? Where does it end?”

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PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES

“Gordon Moore is a great example,” says Postel of the man who co-founded Intel, the world’s largest maker of semiconductor computer chips. Born in Pescadero, just over the mountains from Stanford’s main campus, he formed a company that would change the way the world viewed and used computers. One of their early successes was Walt Disney Studios, establishing a long and fruitful relationship between Silicon Valley and Hollywood.

“There’s also something about California,” says Mitch Postel, president of the San Mateo County Historical Association, during a walk through a county museum packed with tributes to local high-tech giants. “When in American history has there been a time when a person with smarts and no grubstake could make a fortune? Only twice, in 1849 during the California Gold Rush, and with the emergence of Silicon Valley.”

Silicon Valley is flush with stories about self-made men and women who created something from nothing and made a bundle selling it. None more so than Apple co-founder Steve Jobs, who famously quipped to John Sculley, the chief executive he was trying to lure from a soft drink company: “Do you want to sell sugar water for the rest of your life, or do you want to come with me and change the world?”

Postel sees many parallels between the goldminers of old and today’s silicon sourdoughs – people with a vision and a willingness to risk all to achieve a dream, who worked both hard and smart, and who had the good fortune to be in the right place at the right time. Where is the heart?” she asks. “The original spirit started in Palo Alto with Hewlett-Packard and Stanford University, the connectivity between intellectual capital and financial capital for research and development of new ideas, and a concentration of creativity and liberalism that really speaks to the entrepreneurial spirit.”

THERE WERE CLUES LONG AGO that something special would happen in what was once Spanish ranch land south of San Francisco. In the 1850s, one of those haciendas was bought by Irish immigrants and renamed Menlo Park, after a suburb of Galway, Ireland. And even though that predated Thomas Edison’s laboratory in the New Jersey town of the same name, the moniker foreshadowed developments of a century later when the area around Menlo Park, along with a string of towns along San Francisco Bay’s southern shore – Redwood City, Mountain View, Sunnyvale, Palo Alto and Cupertino – would become the world’s new ideas factory.

Stanford University also had a lot to do with the transformation, in particular Fred Terman, the engineering department dean and so-called father of Silicon Valley. Starting in the 1930s, Terman encouraged his students and colleagues to start their own businesses. Among his disciples were William Hewlett and David Packard, two brilliant engineering students who graduated from Stanford in the mid-1930s. Working in the tiny wooden garage at Packard’s home near the campus, they formed a company that would change the way the world viewed and used computers. One of their early customers was Walt Disney Studios, establishing a long and fruitful relationship between Silicon Valley and Hollywood.

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SILICON VALLEY started out making machines that were highly coveted by companies, governments and institutions around the world,” says Alex Bochannek, curator of the Computer History Museum in Redwood City, “but didn’t hit full steam until they started making things coveted by ordinary people.” In summing up the spirit of the valley, Bochannek quotes Richard Hillman, computer game pioneer and chief creative officer at Electronic Arts: “Don’t wait for permission to take charge.”

That’s what the valley’s trailblazers have done since the 1930s and what they continue to do today. You see an opportunity, you grab it. As a result, the valley continues to expand in both form and function. New cutting-edge businesses and industries continue to take root in the area. A case in point is Tesla Motors. The revolutionary car...
FOUNDED BY South African inventor and entrepreneur Elon Musk, who made his first Silicon Valley fortune by starting PayPal, Tesla, in very short order, has become the world’s most successful maker of electric-powered automobiles. The sleek Model S, launched in 2012 and packed with high-tech features, is suddenly the “it” car for Hollywood celebrities and Silicon Valley tycoons. Tesla is now outselling Porsche, Jaguar and Cadillac in California and turned its first profit this year.

“It was kind of a no-brainer,” says Tesla spokesperson Shanna Hendriks about the decision to base the company in Palo Alto rather than in a more traditional car manufacturing centre such as Detroit. “There is no better source of engineers and designers. I don’t think anyone thought about it at the time – because they were so hung up on the engineering – but this area was also a great market for the car. People who buy Teslas tend to be early adopters. If you lined up to get your first-generation iPhone then you are probably in our target market.”

Those same consumers – from billionaire CEOs to the thousands of young, single, cash-flush techies who populate so many local companies – have transformed Silicon Valley into something of a cultural hub, a mosaic that includes gourmet food, upscale shopping, top-notch performing arts and even excellence in sport. Founded just a decade ago, Symphony Silicon Valley (symphonysiliconvalley.org) has been a runaway success with both critics and music lovers. Thanks to booming ticket sales and private contributions, it is also one of those fortunate public cultural institutions that have minimal need of government funding.

Foodies are catered for with a good smattering of Michelin-starred restaurants, including the two-starred Baumé in Palo Alto (201 South California Avenue, baumerestaurant.com), where Bruno Chemel crafts internationally inspired dishes with a focus on local produce.

Designer fashion is also gaining a footing in the area. Earlier this year, Prada and Miu Miu joined Cartier, Louis Vuitton and Tiffany & Co in the renovated luxury wing of the Westfield Valley Fair Mall in Santa Clara.

From next year, football fans won’t have to go far to get a fix. After more than 50 years based in San Francisco, the 49ers are being lured to Silicon Valley by the prospect of a new billion-dollar, high-tech stadium in Santa Clara. From stadium-wide wi-fi and mobile connectivity to photovoltaic panels, recycled building materials and gargantuan high-definition scoreboards, the 68,000-seat stadium will be a showcase for the very latest Silicon Valley technology.
AND IT IS A GREAT PLACE TO LIVE. According to the 2012 Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index—which accounts for emotional health, physical health and work environment—congressional district CA 41, which covers Silicon Valley, ranks No. 4 for best quality of life in the US. Of course it has its problems. Mere mortals can no longer afford houses in neighbourhoods that a generation ago were filled with middle-class families. Traffic has escalated. Anyone who works a mere 40-hour week is considered a slacker. But the reward—besides high wages—is a feeling you are living and working at the centre of the universe and that you are determining a big part of the 21st-century lifestyle.

All these factors are creating a sense of spatial identity. There may never be a place officially called Silicon Valley—the small cities that comprise the strip are far too wealthy to ever merge, but more local organisations are using the name—the San Jose Silicon Valley Chamber of Commerce, the German International School of Silicon Valley, the Silicon Valley Art Council. It is no longer seen as an economic and cultural appendage of San Francisco. If anything, the opposite is now true. The valley is slowly but surely becoming a genuine geographical place. The question now is: what are its boundaries?

“The boundaries are kind of drifting,” Postel says. “Purists would say it’s got to be the western side of the Santa Clara Valley and the lower part of the Peninsula where all of the electronics and technology is located. But I would add the biotech in northern San Mateo County, the western side of the bay where many high-tech factories are located, and even San Francisco’s Mission District, where you find so many of the startups that can’t afford office space down here.”

Adda Gross: “We’re like Florence in the 1400s—the next big thing is the Renaissance, only with technology.”

SEE & DO

Campus Tour
Stanford Visitor Center, 295 Galvez Street, Stanford. (650) 723-2560. stanford.edu/dept/visitorinfo/tours
Visitors are free to explore the Stanford University campus, either on their own or part of a guided tour. Both walking tours and golf cart tours are available.

Googleplex
1600 Amphitheatre Parkway, Mountain View. Most of the high-tech headquarters are not open to the public, but stroll around the grounds of the sprawling Googleplex to see its employee sports facilities, outdoor relaxation areas and offbeat modern sculptures.

Apple Company Store
1 Infinite Loop, Cupertino. (408) 974-5050. apple.com/companystore
The original employee store at Apple HQ doesn’t sell computers or iPhones, or have a Genius Bar, but it is the only place in the world that sells Apple logo T-shirts, caps and accessories.

Intel Museum
2200 Mission College Boulevard, Santa Clara. (408) 765-5050. intel.com
The story of Gordon Moore and Robert Noyce comes alive with interactive exhibits dedicated to everything microchip.

THE REWARD IS A FEELING YOU ARE LIVING AND WORKING AT THE CENTRE OF THE UNIVERSE
EXECUTIVE TECHNOLOGY
SPECIAL REPORT

COMPUTER HISTORY MUSEUM
1401 North Shoreline Boulevard, Mountain View. (650) 810 1010. computerhistory.org

This excellent museum has become the world’s largest collection of Information Age artefacts. Among its high-tech icons are the Pong game prototype, an “insanely great” trail through all the Apple gadgets, and a massive 19th century-designed calculator called the Babbage Difference Engine.

SAN MATEO COUNTY HISTORY MUSEUM
2200 Broadway, Redwood City. (650) 299 0104. historysmc.org

Learn about the inventors and entrepreneurs who shaped Silicon Valley in the History Makers hall, or surf a 13m Maverick’s wave off the San Mateo coast on the surfing simulator.

GARAGE BANDS
Neither is open to the public, but visitors can snap photos of the structures where history was made: the garage at 367 Addison Avenue in Palo Alto where Bill Hewlett and David Packard started their company, and at 2066 Crist Drive in Los Altos, where Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak founded Apple. Pose for a picture in front of the giant Facebook thumbs-up sign (5601 Willow Road, Menlo Park) and get a shot of a row of Model S sedans recharging in front of Tesla HQ (3500 Deer Creek Road, Palo Alto).

STAY
THE FOUR SEASONS SILICON VALLEY
2050 University Avenue, East Palo Alto. (650) 366 1200. fourseasons.com/siliconvalley

The Four Seasons Silicon Valley doubles as a business and leisure hotel. Among its amenities are a rooftop pool with private cabanas, a luxury spa and Quattro restaurant with its California-influenced Italian cuisine. From $US335 ($355).

GARDEN COURT HOTEL
520 Cowper Street, Palo Alto. (650) 332 3000. gardencourt.com

This long time favourite in downtown Palo Alto is within walking distance of the trendy restaurants, bars and boutiques along University Avenue and within easy driving distance of the Stanford campus. From $US329 ($347).

FOR AIRFARES TO CALIFORNIA CALL QANTAS ON 13 13 13 OR VISIT QANTAS.COM

Hotel Avante
860 East El Camino Real, Mountain View. (650) 940 1000. jdvhotels.com

Down at the bottom end of Silicon Valley, this hip little hotel features offbeat modern decor, interesting art works, complimentary breakfast and cocktail hour, and a “toy box” in every room filled with brain-challenging toys. From $US129 ($137).

For airfares to California call Qantas on 13 13 13 or visit qantas.com