

Call me sentimental. Call me ancient. You'd be right on both counts. My favorite four hotels in San Francisco are the Fairmont, Mark Hopkins, Palace and Westin St. Francis.



OK, so they're among the oldest hotels in the famed Bay City, but are still wonderfully multi-star, luxurious places to meet, sleep, drink, dance, romance and dine. All list current room rates at about \$300 a night, but before booking, check every possible source for discount deals.

My first choice has to be the Mark Hopkins (InterContinental), perched atop Nob Hill, across the street from the equally classic St. Francis. If you get a room with a big window or balcony overlooking the city and the bay, spend some time sitting there sipping a drink just to enjoy the magnificent views, both day and night.

My first contact with the vintage Mark was in 1944, when just assigned to my first ship. A bunch of us, mostly teenagers just out of Navy boot camp, were invited by our CO to join him and other crew members for a pre-sailing party at the Top of the Mark. While the older ones drank, we could only watch, or depend on 21-year-old shipmates to slip us booze and beer.

The Top is a restaurant/nightclub/meeting room suite on the hotel's highest floor, and throughout World War II, served as a last hurrah for Navy guys before they shipped out to the Pacific. When they returned, it was also traditional to celebrate their survival at the Top of the Mark. Of course, it has continued to be a tradition through all the wars that have followed.

The Top was featured in several movies about the WWII Navy. Among them was 1957's, "Kiss Them For Me", starring Cary Grant. In the 1954 movie, "The Caine Mutiny", the officers of the Navy minesweeper gathered there to celebrate winning their court martial against insane skipper Queeg (Humphrey Bogart).

Despite its age, the stately Mark Hopkins has every up-to-date luxurious and electronic facility for the traveling business person or vacationer. The hotel offers great restaurants, meeting rooms, and if you're feeling sentimental, some precious memories to visit at the Top of the Mark.

If you listen closely when you're there, you may hear some of the haunting laughter echoing from bygone Navy, Coast Guard, Marine, Air Force and Army guys and gals who celebrated going to or returning from combat from World War I to Korea to Vietnam to Desert Storm to Iraq and Afghanistan.

The St. Francis, now over 100 years old, is in two major buildings. The old hotel is still grand, with the enormous atrium lobby, full of magnificent marble and crystal. The newer structure is just as luxurious, and boasts an all-glass outdoor elevator for looking out on the beautiful cityscape. The hotel sits on Union Square, across from a park, surrounded by posh stores, restaurants and hordes of tourists. It's a short walk to Market Street, the theater district, as well as the largest Chinatown in the world, except for China itself.

The stately Palace Hotel celebrates its 100th birthday in 2009, and the landmark building is located right in the middle of the city's main thoroughfare, Market Street. It's within easy walking distance of the business district south of Market, and many of the city's top stores, restaurants, theaters and other tourist attractions, including the downtown turnaround terminal of the famed cable cars.

When I returned from service in the Philippines at the end of World War II, I headed for the Palace, rented a luxurious room for \$8 just so I could take a luxurious tub bath after a year of living in a tent in the bombed-out city of Manila. I also enjoyed my escape from K-rations by dining in the hotel's famed Garden Court, a stained glass palace within the Palace. I remember I paid the enormous sum of \$5 for a steak dinner with all the trimmings.

The Fairmont San Francisco, rated at five stars, has definitely earned its title as Queen of Nob Hill. Also more than a century old, the royal lady doesn't show her age. She is decorated in marble, polished brass and luxury all the way.

Several years ago, my son and I stayed high up in a balcony room, and spent several evenings eating dinner outside while watching nightfall gently cover the city below us. We also partied in the hotel's elegant Tonga Room, where kings, queens, mobsters, presidents, generals, South American dictators, racketeers and admirals have dined and wined since the days of Teddy Roosevelt.

Next time you travel to the beautiful City by the Bay, consider staying in one of my quartet of stately senior hotels. Each is dedicated to make veteran wanderers feel they've traveled back in time to the good old days of unrivaled luxury and sentimentality.

Submitted by Paul Scofield □