



Guest Travel Writer MPT, Portland OR: 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 starting at about \$400 a night, but before booking, check every possible source for discount deals.

A random first choice happens to be the Mark Hopkins InterContinental, celebrating its 90th birthday this year. It's 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 time 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. Mostly teenagers just out of Navy boot camp, we newly arrived were invited by our captain to join him and other crew members for a pre-sailing party at the Top of the Mark. While the older guys drank, we could only watch, or get older 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 course, it has continued to be a tradition through all the wars since.

The Top was featured in several movies about the WW II 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 Captain Queeg (Humphrey Bogart).

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

If you listen closely when you're there, you may hear haunting laughter and songs echoing from bygone Navy, Coast Guard, Marine, Air Force and Army guys and gals who celebrated going to or returning from WW 2 to Korea to Vietnam to Desert Storm to Iraq and Afghanistan.

My close second choice, the St. Francis, now over 100 years old, is in two major buildings. The vintage hotel is still grand, with the iconic 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 and restaurants. It's a short walk to Market Street, the theater district, as well as the largest Chinatown in the world, except for China itself.

Since 1875, the Palace Hotel has been right in the middle of the city's main thoroughfare, Market Street. It's within easy walking distance of the financial district south of Market, and many of the city's top stores, restaurants, theaters and other tourist attractions.

When I returned from service in the Philippines at the end of World War II, I headed for the Palace, rented a classy room for \$8 just so I could take a luxurious tub bath. It was after a year of living in a tent next to an outside water bag shower 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 palatial stained glass restaurant within the Palace. I paid the enormous sum of \$5 for a steak dinner with all the trimmings. If you have to ask what room and meals cost today at the Palace, you can't afford them.

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