

Barnett On Business Travel: Two historic hotels where thoughtfulness reigns

by *Chris_Barnett*

The old saying "It pays to do business with an experienced firm" can be good advice for travelers today looking for hotels.

Celebrating its 100th birthday this week, the 591-room Fairmont Hotel atop San Francisco's Nob Hill actually sparkled. A wide, crimson carpet crawled from the car park into the lobby. Banquettes, sofas and chairs looked newly upholstered. A smiling staffer gave me directions. Women in brocaded, trailing evening gowns, a lone peacock feather sticking out of their hair, were chatting with men in cutaway coats and watch fobs. A '30s-style big band played on the Venetian room stage where Tony Bennett belted out "I Left My Heart in San Francisco" for the very first time.

The nostalgia was nice. But it's clear this hotel was built for commerce by James Graham Fair, a silver baron who struck it rich in the Nevada mines in the 19th century. The stone and marble palace withstood the great quake and fire of '06 that delayed its opening for a year and now it's surviving an onslaught of sleek and stylish new hotels sprouting up in the city.

How? By spending lavishly on decor to keep up?

"No, we spent \$90 million on refurbishing it but that was nine years ago and it was designed to make it look old, not new, to bring back glamour and elegance," insists Francisco (yes, that's his name) Gomez, general manager who's also commander of all Fairmonts in California. "Business travelers like the glamour but have no time to soak it up," he says. "Our best service to them is no service."

What?

Gomez, who logged 14 years at Four Seasons before signing on with Fairmont, says it this way: "Really busy businesspeople arrive at 11:30 p.m., they go straight to bed - we know which pillows they like. They fill out the breakfast menu hung on the doorknob and get a wake-up call for 6 a.m. A light breakfast arrives at 6:15 a.m., with their favorite newspapers. They eat, read, check their e-mails, may watch CNBC for market news, shower, dress, repack, express check out. Their car picks them up at 7:15 a.m. They're gone in a blur. They want zero defects."

The price of efficiency starts at \$289 a room, a deal in San Francisco today, but check the Web (www.fairmont.com) for a better rate. In-room Internet access is \$10 and also covers WiFi in the lobby, bars and restaurants. But here's a tip: Join the Presidents Club - it doesn't cost a dime and all Internet connections are free. (I don't know why more luxury hotels don't duplicate that. They get a clean mailing list at no charge.)

Club members can also use the business center for free. It's currently outsourced, not open around the clock, but Gomez is putting in a fully equipped work center soon to lure the go-go, 24-7, high-tech crowd.

How does the hotel perform under pressure? Not sure, I didn't overnight. However, a recent weekend at the sister Fairmont Olympic in Seattle was a trip back through time in a luxury coach. The 450-room hotel, built in 1924, was managed by the Four Seasons until 2003, but it seems like most of the staff stayed on. Danny Shafer has been a parking valet for more than 20 years and he could probably get a job as ambassador in the next administration.

Shafer greets first-timers as if you were a visiting relative. Nothing perfunctory about him. He's like a concierge in an overcoat, has answers to any question and does little things like gladly park your car while you check in, drop your bags and run out for lunch. Many parking valets hate that.

It got better. A big, well-staffed concierge desk has stacks of newspapers - including Financial Times, Wall Street Journal, New York Times - that most hotels would love to sell to you in their gift shop. The concierge loaded me up with reading at no charge. The front desk had five check-in staffers on a late Friday afternoon, so we didn't wait a minute.

The rooms, starting at \$299 depending on how full Seattle is when you book, are comfortable but could use some sprucing up. Fairmont's not scrimping. A \$20 million renovation and upgrading of all rooms starts this October. Again, Internet is free to President's Club members, so sign up the minute you check in.

The Italian Renaissance-styled hotel has a massive lobby and the Terrace Lounge and Bar, where I just sat and watched the world go by. A barkeep named Charlie, who poured strong coffee and proffered cloth napkins, has worked at the Olympic for 23 years and he still has the enthusiasm of a rookie but the professionalism of seasoned pro. A cozy downstairs bar-seafood restaurant called Shuckers has an all-pro mixologist named David who regaled us with Seattle stories, hideaway eateries and cool neighborhoods.

But where the Olympic staffers proved their mettle was at 2 a.m. on a Saturday morning. I had a fierce deadline to meet but did not want to write in my room and wake my wife up. I called downstairs and the night auditor said to come on down with all my gear. She greeted me with two brawny coffees, opened up the business center and said, "Let me know if you need anything else at all." Great, how about writing it for me?

Chris Barnett writes on business travel strategies that save time, money and hassles.

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