Barnett on Business Travel: 'Summer of love' 40 years later

by Chris_Barnett

SAN FRANCISCO - Sami Sunchild missed the free rock concerts in Golden Gate Park, the love-ins, the drop-outs and the mellow madness in the summer of '67 when the counterculture went mainstream. But today as owner of the 18-room Red Victorian Bed and Breakfast Inn on Haight Street, she's still stumping for peace and freedom - this time for global travelers.

Sunchild woos nostalgic, cost-conscious road soldiers with WiFi, a spirit at a communal table in the Peace Cafe and room rates starting at $88 a night up to $220 nightly for the Peacock Suite with its Persian temple-style sitting room. She's also a Hashbury historian of sorts.

"This inn was built as the Jefferson Hotel in 1904 and survived the earthquake and fire two years later," she explains. "But during the summer of love when San Francisco was flooded with a half million wannabe hippies, it was a crash pad known as the Jeffrey Haight."

"Room rates were free, food was no charge," says Sunchild. "People would meet other flower children in the park and say 'come in and crash in our room.'"

Nowadays, even though Haight St. still looks like 1967, the inn is home to Sunchild's newest passion-global inns where "travelers cannot just sleep but meet, get involved with other travelers and have great conversations on world peace." Makes sense to me.

Check www.peacefulworldtravel.org and www.redvic.com.

MORE DIAMOND JIM BRADY, LESS WAVY GRAVY

Less funky but no less authentic is the Stanyan Park Hotel, a magnificently restored 36-room Victorian that is a block away from Haight and opposite Golden Gate Park. This is a gem, a refuge for businesspeople, creatives or anyone who wants to think, write, number crunch or meet discreetly.

Built in 1905, it's outfitted with free WiFi in the parlor and public areas, and broadband Internet in the guest rooms. A Dell PC and printer in the lobby serves as a "business center." In the 1880s, the site was a saloon and small boarding house before a mogul named Heagerty gambled on a hotel.

The Stanyan Park is reasonably priced. I was quoted $152 nightly with an "expanded" continental breakfast for a queen-sized bed late June. But its guest service could use a serious tune-up. My first two calls requesting information were met with a chilly to non-existent response from the front desk. Left a note and sent an e-mail but nothing triggered a response. On the third call, I reached a charmer who was helpful, but had some "summer of love lore" that had been passed down to her. Still, this hotel feels more gracious than gritty.

Visit www.stanyanpark.com.

ORCHARD GARDEN HOTEL: ROOTED IN A NEW REALITY

Grace Slick, lead singer of the Jefferson Airplane fame and now a painter living in Malibu, Calif., told a San Francisco Chronicle reporter recently the seismic explosion of the youth movement in San Francisco "would change people's minds" from rigid to receptive. Ironically, it took nearly 40 years for corporate America to embrace environmentalism in more than a token way. Consider the new Orchard Garden Hotel near the financial district and Union Square.

The 86-room hotel with a cool rooftop for relaxing (sorry, no herb gardens) is California's first to earn the coveted U.S. sanctioned "Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design" (LEED) certification. To garner its 100 percent 'green' rating, the hotel uses chemical-free cleaners, recycled papers, soy-based inks, right down to special recycled toilet paper. Every guestroom has recycling bins.

Rooms - I was quoted $179 a night for late June - are muted with light maplewood cut from trees custom grown to be made into furniture. Egyptian cotton linens, an oversized desk and gratis Internet access plus WiFi are included. There's a business center - small with two Dell PCs - but, mercifully, the Orchard doesn't soak you to use it. The fitness center has the basic equipment, but it's available 24/7.

If this sounds like some Birkenstock, Berkeleyesque bunkhouse, think again. Interior design is contemporary and practical with soothing architectural curves. Walk in the front door and you're face-to-face with a recycling, cascading fountain. The front desk is to the left and to the right is a curvaceous bar and restaurant called - no surprise - Roots. Lobby seating is a bit skimpy with just two curved sofas.

Roots is reasonably priced ($7 to $27) serving contemporary American food, but not some raw vegan sanctuary, I had a scallop cerviche with blood orange and Buddha's hand oil as well as a perfectly grilled Niman Ranch flatiron steak with Romano beans and bacon. Service was pleasant and efficient; no flower garlands or love beads. A taste of irony: the green hotel is the brainchild of a Chinese woman living in Perth, Australia, not some eco-savvy San Franciscan.

Visit www.theorchardgardenhotel.com for more information.

GALLERIA PARK GOES ART DECO

Built downtown five years after the 'great quake and fire' as the Sutter Hotel, the 177-room Galleria Park, has had an extreme makeover and is now art-deco circa 1930s aimed at business travelers. It works. Now managed by Chip Connelly's hip Joie de Vivre group, the hotel gives away Internet and WiFi, complimentary wine in the lobby nightly, plenty of newspapers, flat-screen TVs, alarm clocks that work, MP3 connections for your music, pricey Frette linens and bathrobes.

Connelly, an imaginative hotelier - his first San Francisco hotel had IBM PCs in every room along with a fully-equipped kitchen - has installed 'business honor bars' with office supplies in Galleria Park rooms plus ergonomic desk chairs, even free BART passes to the airport - a convenient money saver. Connelly describes the place as "BusinessWeek meets Vanity Fair."

A bonus: Perry's, longtime bustling bar and bistro, is attached to the hotel and guests get preferential treatment on reservations.

Rates start at $139 a night. Check www.galleriapark.com for more information.

CAMPTON PLACE GOES INTERNATIONAL

San Francisco hotels have undergone changes not fueled by "flower power." Long a quiet hideout for visiting corporate executives and Wall Street wheeler-dealers, 110-room Campton Place on the edge of Union Square is now owned by Taj Hotels and Palaces, which invests in considerable wealth in luxury lodgings worldwide.

No surprise that a new general manager is at the helm. Vikram Singh, who set up Taj Wilderness Lodges and Safaris as well as running a 62-villa super luxury resort and spa called Taj Exotica in the Maldives, has some changes and upgrades in store for what he calls the "discerning traveler."

Among them: bypassing the front desk and checking into your room and possibly trained butlers for certain room categories.

"We did highly personalized service in the Maldives and it's very well-received," says Singh, who is also a Four Seasons alum.

Currently, rooms start at $300 nightly. Visit www.tajhotels.com.

HOMECOMING

The entire city of San Francisco is celebrating this anniversary now and all summer long, calling it a "homecoming for hippies, hipsters and historians." Dozens of hotels have deals and Golden Gate Park will again be alive with music.

Will another 20,000 kids come to the party like the 1967 Be-In? No, but their sushi-eating, chardonnay-sipping, BMW-driving parents (or grandparents) might make the scene to relive an era of memories. And this time they won't be crashing on communal mattresses.

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

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