

San Francisco inn captures city's history

1910 treasure is a B&B in Little Italy



ROCHELLE LASH
CHECKING IN

The 16-room Washington Square Inn is at the heart of Little Italy, part of San Francisco's fascinating North Beach neighbourhood, which is jumping with fabulous casual food and great urban legends.

The yellow stucco Edwardian house was built in 1910 after San Francisco's devastating earthquake — the big one. With dormer windows, fine wooden floors and interiors filled with ornate antiques and reproductions, it still has the vintage charm of a turn-of-the-20th-century treasure.

Today, the Washington Square Inn operates as a sophisticated B&B, with continental breakfast served at a Queen Anne-style table for eight and, at 5 p.m., wine and cheese laid out on a Louis XIV lookalike sideboard in the tiny parlour.

It's a remarkably convenient, civilized boutique hotel with thoroughly renovated public spaces and guest rooms. It's friendly, too. I met travellers from France and England who really appreciated the hotel's European style and elaborate furnishings inspired by Victorian, Rococo, Chippendale and neo-Classical periods.

Even though the Washington Square Inn is small in scale, someone has thought of everything. The hotel supplies newspapers, tourist maps, all-day coffee and tea, bathrobes in the rooms and a generous basket of essentials in the bathrooms. A hotel this compact is personal and intimate, and the lone manager at the 24-hour front desk was very helpful with sightseeing, restaurants and airport transportation on GO Lorries, a shared-ride van.

Breakfast is a sizeable continental spread — you order your preferences the night before — of fruit, toast and jam, smoked salmon and bagels, cereal and yogurt.

My room was a junior suite with a fancy writing desk, a large gilt-edge mirror, a window seat and king-sized bed topped by a gossamer canopy of draped fabric and silky tassels. The beds are layered in matlassé cotton spreads and the sheets are deluxe white

cotton jacquard, smooth and soft. Some rooms also have electric fireplaces.

My perch overlooking Washington Square Park turned out to be a great delight. I watched street musicians and locals practising Tai Chi and walking their dogs. And I had a bird's-eye view of a beautiful Catholic church, Saints Peter and Paul, where Marilyn Monroe married Joe DiMaggio in 1954 — or so his mother thinks. The lovers both were divorced, so the ceremony was at city hall, but the couple took photos at his family church to please Joltin' Joe's mom, who was too frail to attend.

You're on your own for lunch and dinner, and you couldn't be in a better location. At Mama's, people line up for great breakfasts of omelets with pancetta or crab, and such lunchtime comfort food as burgers and Cobb salads. Tony's, a pizzeria that has won awards in Naples and New York, is a half-block away. This Little Italy eatery takes pizza so seriously that it has nine types of crust baked in various ovens at different temperatures, and such ingredients as tomato sauce, burrata and mozzarella cheeses and pepperoni and pancetta from both Italy and California.

The Washington Square Inn's Footloose in San Francisco package runs in low season (Nov. 30 to April 30) and includes discounts on guided Walk SF Tours throughout North Beach's hot spots. The Chinatown and North Beach Tasting Tour goes Asian and Italian, and the Gold Rush Drinking Tour features crafted cocktails and appetizers.

The Beats in San Francisco Tour includes a visit to the Beat Museum (www.kerouac.com), which honours such literary lions as Lawrence Ferlinghetti, founder of City Lights Books, who still is writing and painting in his 90s; Allen Ginsberg, whose poem Howl caused his publishers to be prosecuted for obscenity; William S. Burroughs, the Harvard-educated, heroin-addicted author of *Naked Lunch*; and Jack Kerouac, whose novels *On the Road*, *The Dharma Bums* and *Big Sur*



Antiques and window seats add charm to the Washington Square Inn, a boutique hotel in San Francisco's North Beach.

FOUR SISTERS INNS

IF YOU GO

Washington Square Inn: 800-388-0220, www.wsisf.com; 1660 Stockton St., San Francisco, Calif. The Four Sisters Inns is composed of 15 hotels in California including Napa, Santa Monica and Newport Beach, www.foursisters.com.

Price: Depending on room, \$199-\$409 U.S. per night, including WiFi, breakfast and afternoon wine and cheese. Extras: parking, \$32. Footloose in San Francisco package, Nov. 30 to April 30, rooms \$159-\$279 U.S. plus

a \$10 p.p. credit on Walk SF Tours.

Walk SF Tours: 415-779-5879, www.walksf.com; Footloose package discount of \$10 p.p., Nov. 30 to April 30, applies to regular rates of \$30-\$70 U.S. p.p.

GO Lorries Shuttle: \$15-\$17 p.p., shared-ride van to/from SFO airport; 415-334-9000, www.gosfovan.com

San Francisco Travel Association: www.sanfrancisco.travel; 415-391-2000.

fuelled the hippie movement. In a trans-generational coup, Beat member Neil Cassady travelled with Kerouac in the 1940s and 1950s, and Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters in the psychedelic 1960s.

The Washington Square Inn is a 15-minute walk from Fisherman's Wharf, where all things touristic converge. San Francisco's famous cable car starts here and trundles up and down steep hills from the harbour to the shopping mecca of Union Square. A CityPASS will cover cable

cars, public transit, admission to several attractions and a Bay cruise. Hop-on-hop-off bus tours visit famous sights including Haight-Ashbury and the Golden Gate Bridge (www.city-sightseeing.us). Cruise ships leave port to tour San Francisco Bay with stops at Alcatraz.

The writer was a guest of the hotel, which did not review or approve the story.

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Wine and cheese are served daily in the inn's parlour.

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