

THE FINICKY TRAVELER by Laura Landro

## Downhill on Nob Hill

San Francisco

**F**OLLOWING THE BELLMAN down the dimly lit, musty corridor, I'm having second thoughts about my decision to revisit the storied Huntington Hotel on the top of Nob Hill here after a 20-year absence.

In my memory, the landmark Huntington was the height of elegance, with a clubby, intimate feel, white-glove service and posh, spacious suites that made it feel like a luxurious home away from home. But as I soon discover, sometimes you can't go home again.

The suite I'm given is spacious, all right, but it looks like it hasn't changed in those two decades, from the aging Pullman kitchen with the tacky plastic floor covering to the dingy upholstery and carpets, to the bulky TV perched on an unsightly rolling cart. Stepping into the small, old-fashioned bathroom, I pull back the thin cloth curtain to find a rust-colored, moldy-looking substance covering the metal soap dish built into the tile wall. At this point, the music from the shower scene in "Psycho" could best describe my reaction.

Although I have a soft spot for grand dames with history and atmosphere, let's face it: Hotels need continuous investment and a lot of TLC to overcome time's wear and tear, and there hasn't been enough of either at the Huntington. To attract new guests and keep loyal clientele from defecting to newer, glitzier rivals, many historic hotels in big cities around the country have closed down for major facelifts. The Plaza in New York just reopened after a major restoration that included converting part of the hotel to condos, and Chicago's circa-1910 Blackstone Hotel recently reopened after \$128 million of renovations, while Boston's 1891 Copley Square will reopen next fall after a makeover. In Dallas, the 85-year-old Stoneleigh recently completed a \$36 million overhaul.

**T**HE HUNTINGTON OPENED in 1924 as a residential apartment-hotel, which is why its 95 rooms and 40 suites are so large and several have kitchens. In its heyday, its elegant décor and chic nightclub drew the likes of Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. It still is run by the third generation of the Cope family. To its credit, the family hasn't jumped on the trendy boutique bandwagon, keeping the historic bones and old-world vibe of the Huntington. And to be sure, the owners have made some major investments over time, tearing out an old restaurant to make room for the airy Nob Hill Spa, which has a pool, sundeck and 10 treatment rooms, adding a spa suite for party groups and a Mullolland Suite with designs from the luxury-leather-goods retailer of the same name. (Rates for hotel rooms and suites range from \$365 to \$1,200 nightly, although some packages start at \$325.)

But the owners still have considerably more to do, both in physical improvements and service. While the Huntington is smaller, more elegant and less touristy than other Nob Hill hotels such as the Fairmont and the Mark Hopkins, newer and snazzier competitors with top-notch service have



Laura Landro/WJSJ (right)

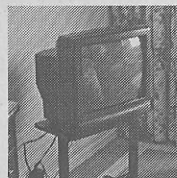
## Huntington Hang-Ups

Above, the entrance of the San Francisco hotel; left, the pool in its spa. Below, some issues:



## Tired Bedding

A bedspread of the type most hotels have dispensed with for both aesthetic and sanitary reasons.'



## Bulky Television

Room No. 1 had a 'bulky TV perched on an ugly metal rolling cart.' (But room No. 2 had flat-panels.)

come to town in recent years, including the nearby Ritz-Carlton, a Four Seasons, a W and a Mandarin Oriental. At the Huntington, the fellows at the front desk and the concierge, although brisk and efficient, weren't exactly warm and welcoming. I stopped by once or twice to ask about something or arrange transportation, and they often seemed harried rather than helpful.

I was lucky to find an ally in the bellman, a hotel veteran who accompanied me to the room. He was sympathetic when I asked if there was a more recently renovated suite with a nicer bathroom—and said I didn't really need a kitchen (seven suites have them). He told me he knew of a suite he

thought I'd like much better, called the front desk and soon was back with keys.

The second room, also a one-bedroom suite but with no kitchen, was a considerable improvement with nicer furnishings, a pretty wood-and-glass case displaying Asian porcelain, and flat-panel TVs. But it still had a slightly rundown look, with stains splattered on the living-room carpet, too much clutter, and a heavy chintz bedspread of the type most hotels have eliminated for both aesthetic and sanitary reasons. Although the bathroom was more modern (with marbled walls), the paint on the wood trim was peeling away. Nevertheless, the new room had a sunny view of the city, and I felt more