

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD

OVER THE TOP

Doing indulgence tastefully, in San Francisco

By Anthony Flint
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It's become fashionable of late to bemoan the gilded excesses of San Francisco, land of the \$8 doughnut, and where tidy neighborhoods busily fortify against new affordable housing. Similar things could be said about New York and London, but the Bay Area gets special grief for its streets being paved with gold.

There's no missing the white-hot energy of the place right now, flying into SFO and witnessing the new downtown skyline, where the iconic skyscraper is no longer the TransAmerica building but the shiny, 1,070-foot-tall Salesforce tower. Once-dicey neighborhoods like Dogpatch seem to reassemble almost overnight: the Dutchman's Flats cannabis dispensary, as tidy as a museum gift shop, is across from Magnolia Brewing Co., and just down from Velocipede Cyclery and a leather-rich hip-hop boutique.

Recently, inevitably, several new places to stay are attempting to join this party, but for those with conscience, the risk is one of caricature. How to be over the top, but not obnoxiously so? If there's a way to do indulgence tastefully, the new Virgin Hotel comes close.

Sir Richard Branson's Virgin Group chose an unassuming site at 4th Street near the corner with Folsom in South of Market to open the second property in the Virgin Hotels portfolio (the first was in Chicago; many more are planned, including in Boston). The 12-story new construction is a perfect spot to contemplate the "new" San Francisco, overlooking the Yerba Buena gardens and Moscone convention center complex, which is so low-slung it allows unfettered views to the burgeoning metropolis.

The Virgin Hotel was my choice of accommodations for a big urban planning conference in the spring. It's literally one block from where most of the sessions were. Let others stay in the Marriott; this conventioneer was all-in returning to the red-splashed hipness of the lobby, bar, coffee shop, and restaurant, and grand staircase shrouded in 30-foot-tall velvet curtains. I just needed to keep reminding myself to remove my geeky lanyard.

The 192 rooms — sorry, "chambers" — are succinct without feeling cramped, helped in no small part by floor-to-ceiling windows letting the sunshine in. Lots of white, but not so much you feel like sleeping in ABBA's dressing room. The red Smeg retro mini fridge in the corner is stocked with drinks, snacks, and other items at what the property proudly calls "street prices." Free Laughing Man coffee, cofounded by actor Hugh Jackman, is prepared using the British method of water boiled in an electric tea kettle and poured over a filter-topped mug. The rates are reasonable, starting at \$200, there are no pesky resort fees or charges for WiFi, and the place is 100 percent pet-friendly with no size or breed restrictions. Indeed the "Pet-Menities" include dog beds, food and water dishes, and a Virgin Hotels bandana.

The property's description of the intent of the designers (Gensler San Francisco, Hager Design International,



The 192 rooms — sorry, "chambers" — at the Virgin Hotel in San Francisco are succinct without feeling cramped, helped in no small part by floor-to-ceiling windows letting the sunshine in. The closets and bathrooms are stylish.

Matthew Rolston) sums it up: "an ultimate hospitality destination for the savvy, tech-forward business and leisure traveler, merging an eclectic architectural and decorative mix between San Francisco's Victorian-era past, the city's 1960s rock 'n' roll appropriation of Victorian styling, and a 19th-century British feel."

Big ambitions, to be sure. The British part certainly rings true, what with the red London telephone booth outside the front doors, already a well-established Instagram moment.

And boy, is this place a scene at night, when the velvet ropes go up and beautiful people arrive. The rooftop bar, Everdene, has quickly become a destination for locals; raw speculation, of course, but that had to be a group from LinkedIn or Twitter lounging around the couches over Far Niente chardonnay. It takes a long time to get the bartender's attention, making any veteran of SoHo nightclubs feel right at home.

The Commons Club, under the direction of head chef Adrian Garcia, is quite serviceable, and the bars and restaurants in walking distance make for a lovely post-prandial stroll. Options include Zero Zero around the corner, Tropisueno, Fang, and of course, the House of Shields, site of the demise of a philandering president (no, Warren Harding).

Among the other new options for boutique and "micro" hotels are the Yotel in Mid-Market, and the Proper Hotel, with yet another super-hip rooftop bar. The SOMA Mission Bay hotel is set to open next year. Suffice to say, there are many more choices beyond the Fairmont and the Kimpton, for both business and leisure travel. San Francisco anticipates steep growth in both, all the while determined to keep its heart and soul.

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HERE

Boston's new marketplace

Enjoy top cuisine, live music, and culinary demos at a new marketplace in the Fenway, located in a historic Art Deco-style building at 401 Park Drive. Time Out Market Boston, modeled after similar concepts in New York, Miami, and Lisbon, features two bars and 15 eateries with food from some of Boston's best chefs. Enjoy chicken and dumplings with an Asian twist at Ms. Clucks Deluxe, juicy burgers at Craigie on Main (made by Tony Maws, named Best Chef Northeast by the James Beard Foundation), Roman-style pizza at chef Michael Schlow's Roman Pizzeria, and Armenian-Lebanese favorites at anoush'ella. Also, don't miss fresh seafood dishes at the award-winning Saltie Girl restaurant and mouthwatering donuts at Union Square Donuts (try a sea salt bourbon caramel donut). You'll also find 14 local craft beers, two local ciders, 22 wines, and plenty of non-alcoholic beverages from Portland-based Urban Farm Fermentory. The culinary demo kitchen and live music from local bands will be on the calendar soon. 978-393-8088, www.timeoutmarket.com/boston

NH's largest crafts fair

See juried exhibits, live demonstrations, and one-of-a-kind crafts at one of the nation's oldest crafts fairs. The League of NH Craftsmen, a nonprofit arts organization, hosts the 86th annual Craftsmen's Fair at Mount Sunapee Resort in New Hampshire Aug. 3-11. The exhibits feature intricate baskets, handblown glass, folk art, quilts,

and functional and decorative ceramics, among other treasures. Learn how to make raku pottery and hand-forged hardware during artist demonstrations, and see "Art, Craft, and Design: The Exhibition," which explores how to use fine craft in everyday life. The event includes live music, and wood-fired pizza, Thai food, and more from local vendors. Admission is \$15 for 13 and older; free ages 12 and under; discounts for seniors, veterans, active duty military, and large groups. 603-224-3375, www.nhcrafts.org/annual-craftsmens-fair

Get a day pass to waterparks

Want to enjoy the fun of a Great Wolf Lodge without staying overnight? The company now offers a Waterpark Day Pass to its properties nationwide that lets visitors enjoy a full day of playing in wave pools, in lazy rivers, and on water slides even if they don't spend the night. Passes are valid from 10 a.m. to closing. Book early, since day passes will be limited to avoid over-



crowding and ensure a fun experience for visitors and guests. Passes must be purchased online at least one day in advance. Prices start at \$50 per person; pass not required for ages 2 and under when accompanied by an adult with a valid pass. 888-960-9653, www.greatwolf.com/daypass

THERE

Philly hotel gets the stamp of approval

Stay in a new boutique hotel in Philadelphia's former City Hall Annex and enjoy a property that blends 1920s grand décor with a sophisticated modern vibe. The Notary Hotel, located in a 1926 building and listed on the National Registry of Historic Places, opens its doors this month. It celebrates the building's place in history and its new role in the Penn Square community. The 499-room hotel, located near the Philadelphia Convention Center, blends elements of its historic past (check out the collection of antique typewriters in the

lobby, and the marble floors and decorative bronze molding throughout) with more modern décor (think spacious rooms with high ceilings, luxury bathrooms, and custom upholstery) and some of the latest technology, including 55-inch smart TVs. The hotel's Sabroso+Sorbo restaurant features Spanish tapas and house-made sangrias, and an onsite coffee shop offers beverages from local brewer La Colombe. Rates start at \$299, based on season. 215-564-1020, www.autograph-hotels.marriott.com/hotel/the-notary

EVERYWHERE

Keep on motoring with this device

Jump start the battery in your car or RV while road tripping, your motorboat during a summer adventure, or even the lawn mower or ATV at your vacation cabin. NOCO's super-compact yet powerful GB40 Boost Jump Starter provides 1,000 amps (7,000 joules) for jump-starting the dead battery of a gas-powered car, truck, or other motor up to 6.0 liters or a diesel engine up to 3.0 liters. The lithium-ion device lets you jump start a motor without the need for another vehicle

and has built-in protection for reverse polarity (in case you accidentally attach the clamps to the wrong battery terminals). The portable device — small enough to stash in the glove compartment or under a seat — can also charge USB devices, from smartphones to tablets, action cameras, and GPS devices. It even has a handy 100-lumen LED flashlight with emergency strobe settings and a battery power indicator, so you know when to recharge the GB40. \$99 on Amazon.com. no.co

A stylish and functional travel bag

KeySmart's new Urban 21 backpack boasts all the features you need for a smart-looking, functional travel bag: It's made of a water-resistant, anti-theft ripstop nylon fabric so it fends off drizzle and intruding hands. The spacious main compartment has two padded sleeves for protecting a laptop or tablet, plenty of space for a warm layer, snacks, and other travel items, and a Velcro tab for securing KeySmart's handy Pocket Organizer (sold separately), which includes an iPad storage pocket, two zippered pockets, and two pen holders. The front of the pack has a hard-shell zippered compartment for storing sunglasses and other fragile items, and several RFID-blocking pouches for keeping your credit cards and other data safe. The pack also comes with a sternum strap, a zippered pouch on the bottom for storing a rain cover (not included), and one mesh water bottle sleeve on each side. \$240 backpack; \$20 Pocket Organizer; \$14.50 rain cover. 888-900-5947, www.getkeysmart.com

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