

A look at what makes San Francisco special



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Carmel's fairytale architecture. See more photos online at www.moultrienews.com.

BY SHARON BAKER
Special to the Moultrie News

Doesn't every happy couple have their special place? Somewhere on the planet where they fell in love and got engaged? For Kenny and me, the magic began in San Francisco, continued to Muir Woods and swelled to a crescendo in Carmel.

Yes, it's corny and melodramatic, but hey, that's our love story.

We decided to celebrate our engagement and first wedding anniversary by retracing steps from our first visit. So leaving summery Hilton Head Island on a May afternoon, we flew all day, arriving in San Francisco on a chilly evening. So glad we brought sweaters and jackets! A half-hour cab ride later and we checked into the Kensington Park, an elegant boutique city hotel. Too tired for dinner, we went right to bed.

Tuesday, we awoke to clanging trolley cars and awesome city views from our cozy corner room on the 12th floor. Lucky us, the Kensington Park is right in the heart of the Union Square district, on Post Street at the Powell Street cable car line.

The 93-room hotel is inside a gorgeous 1925 Moorish/Gothic-style building, with hand-painted ceilings, mosaic tiles, crystal chandeliers and classic Queen Anne antiques. In the lobby, guests relax on velvet couches reading the San Francisco Chronicle, chatting with each other over morning coffee. Unlike the city's many impersonal chain hotels, at the Kensington Park, guests look up from their phones, smile and talk! It's not that often where strangers share small talk and exchange travel experiences. I met a couple from West Virginia who were heading out to cycle in Napa Valley, wine tasting along the way. "More sipping great wines than bike

riding," they laughingly admitted. Turned out we had a friend in common in Charleston, South Carolina, and they gave me her email so we could reconnect. Six degrees of separation: still alive and well.

Other Kensington Park perks: Complimentary coffee and tea are served each morning, and afternoons, complimentary sherry and tea is served. On Wednesdays/Fridays, travelers are regaled with classical music on the hotel's baby grand piano. The hotel is also home to San Francisco's celebrated restaurant Farallon.

Chef/owner Mark Franz and executive chef Ryan Simas change the menu daily according to what is seasonally fresh and available. One could happily feast on appetizers alone: American paddlefish caviar, chilled Maine lobster, oysters on ice from New York, British Columbia, Washington and California. Or sample the Hawaiian tombo tuna tartare, smoked sturgeon, Hudson Valley foie gras or octopus carpaccio. Even the organic mixed greens salad surprises with swanton strawberries and Shelburne farmhouse cheddar crostini.

Kenny and I chose the Fruits de Mer, an extravagant platter festooned with dungeness crab, Maine lobster, Florida prawns and Washington state oysters, accompanied by cocktail and champagne sauces. We shared the fabulous fresh mixed greens salad, and then devoured a satisfying portion of house-

made linguini in parmesan-rosemary cream. We considered moving on to one of the entrees, like poached Alaskan halibut, veal sweetbreads or the grilled 16-ounce dry-aged prime rib-eye in béarnaise sauce, but our appetites were completely sated. Our waitress Lash Himes charmed us into trying a fruity pastry that was pure delight. We merely stepped back into the Kensington Park lobby, hailed the elevator, and in minutes were ensconced in our wonderful bedroom.

Happy tourists

The next few days we happily played tourists. We shopped the sales at Nordstrom, Neiman Marcus, Macy's and four floors of the coolest trendy shoes at DSW. We rode the trolley up and down Mission Street with no itinerary, except ogling San Francisco's painted lady row houses, ethnic restaurants and fashionably dressed locals.

Our city pass gave us easy access to San Francisco's Blue and Gold Fleet, a one-hour cruise under the Golden Gate Bridge and around Alcatraz. What a perfect way to learn about the city's history, not to mention photographing the glorious skyline and those adorable sea lions lazing and barking on the docks near Pier 39.

Don't miss a visit to the Aquarium of the Bay at Pier 39. Walk among tanks home to 20,000 local sea creatures, like moon jellies, sturgeon,

stingrays, purple starfish and the ominous 100-pound giant Pacific octopus.

Muir Woods

Kenny wanted to drive a convertible along the stunning California coastline. So we rented one from Enterprise and off we went. First stop: Muir Woods National Monument.

Few places are more serene and romantic than this forest of 600-1,000 year old trees. In 1905, businessman William Kent and his wife Elizabeth bought land here to protect one of the last uncut stands of redwoods. They donated it to the federal government and in 1908, President Roosevelt proclaimed it a national monument, named in honor of conservationist John Muir.

Last time we visited, Kenny had a diamond engagement ring secretly hidden in his jeans pocket. This time, the ring was on my left hand alongside a wedding band. Now I was happily Mrs. Kenny Baker.

Touring Carmel

Carmel is one of those super charming towns; each artfully designed home boasts a perfect magic garden. A hundred boutiques beckon with trendy fashions, jewelry, paintings and unusual collectibles. Restaurants beckon with divine menus. Just ambling down to the beach is pure pleasure.

We happily enjoyed three nights at Tradewinds Carmel,

a 2013 Forbes Recommended Hotel. This three-story Asian-style boutique hotel has 26 guest rooms and two suites, three blocks from the town's main street. Architect Richard M. Catlin Senior's seven years living in Japan is evident everywhere, from the gorgeous Buddha Meditation Garden, to the elegant kimono robes you wear in your room. We also loved the antique furniture and art from Bali and China, a cozy fireplace and the chocolate-covered strawberries the staff brought us. Included in our room rate was a fabulous breakfast of fresh fruit, pastries, cereal, bagels, hard-boiled eggs and delicious coffee. The staff was welcoming and helpful in planning our dinner reservations. Our favorite? Patisserie Boissiere, where we devoured sensational homemade clam chowder, roasted chicken on a fresh baguette, chicken and spinach salad with caramelized walnuts and just about the most decadent slice of flourless chocolate cake on the planet.

Engaged

Our convertible zipped along an incredible 17-mile

drive, where the sapphire Pacific crashes against craggy cliffs and moon-shaped beaches beckon you to stop and play.

This famous road ribbons past grand estates, opulent gardens, bent Monterey cypresses and the world's most famous golf courses. Of course Kenny enjoyed the challenge of playing 18 beautiful oceanside holes at The Links at Spanish Bay.

But we both wanted to revisit the even more famous Pebble Beach Golf Resort. On the 18th green, Kenny had dropped to one knee, surprising me with a romantic proposal of marriage and a stunning diamond ring.

Of course I said, "Yes!" that day.

Now, back at our special place, we hugged happily and declared we would do it all over again. Yes, it's corny and melodramatic, but that's our love story. And I'm stickin' with it.

Sharon and Kenny Baker live happily near Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, with their stay-at-home cat, Sage. Sharon contributes to magazines, newspapers and webzines worldwide.

(Editor's note: Sharon Baker is the Moultrie News' former Globetrotters columnist. She and her former husband submitted regular travel articles and photos for many years. After her husband Warren's death, she has since remarried).