Presidio caters to the comforts of civilians



The national cemetery at the Presidio with Angel Island in the San Francisco Bay. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

SAN FRANCISCO – Who slept here? What were their communal meals like? What were there conversations? If only walls could talk.

The Inn at the Presidio used to be where single officers would reside when this was an Army base. Today it is upscale lodging for civilians.

Since the Army left in 1994 the entire Presidio has slowly been evolving into a neighborhood of its own in San Francisco, historical landmark and recreation destination. The Presidio is a national park site within the greater Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

(The Presidio Trust manages most of the Presidio. The trust is not within the Department of Interior like the National Park Service so officials differentiate the Presidio by referring to it as a "park site.")

The 22-room inn opened in 2012 and is the first lodging – other than camping – within the 1,491-acre park.

The three-story brick building built in 1903 is on the National Registrar of Historic Properties. The white columns along the front porch give it a Southern feel.

A sense of history fills the inn without its feeling old and musty. Adding an authentic charm, some of the décor came from the salvage yard. Walking in one notices the display of bugles. Old photographs transport you to another era.

Despite its age, the renovation is modern without being over the top. An eye toward today's traveler with the appropriate lighting, a desk for those needing to do a bit of work and enough outlets for gadgets make it contemporary.

Warm colors, soft fabrics and a plush robe have guests collapsing onto the comfortable couch or bed.

Each night wine, cheese and other snacks are put out. Dreaming Tree, the Geyserville winery in which musician Dave Matthews is a partner, is the featured wine. We share conversation around an outdoor fire pit with a woman from El Dorado Hills on a repeat visit, a woman moving back to San Francisco wanting to relax before unpacking, and a family of four from Texas on their first trip to The City.

Cookies and milk are available for the younger crowd. A few families are staying at the inn. Some of the rooms have couches that fold into a bed.

To take off the chill from the evening and morning fog we turn on the gas fireplace. Reclining on the couch or sitting in the

chair by the fire we finish off a glass of wine we brought up from the evening reception.

It’s hard not to feel at home. The empty mantel above the fireplace made me have thoughts of adding personal items. But then I might not have left.

The bathroom is plenty large enough for two to use at the same time, though the tub is ordinary in size. It’s doubtful any soldier ever bathed in this exact tub based on the newness of the fixtures. And why change the plumbing? After all, a bachelor in the Army would have no need for an oversized tub.

In the morning we sit at the long communal table as we eat what is more of a traditional European continental breakfast.

The staff is unobtrusive, yet accommodating.

From the shared balcony part, of the western tower of the Golden Gate Bridge is visible. Expanding from the front of the inn are myriad buildings that once bustled with men and women in uniform.

The Presidio has been home to three armies dating to 1776 – Spain, Mexico and the United States. The U.S. Army occupied the site from 1846-1994.

The only negative of the inn is how early trucks arrive. Both mornings at about 5:30 that annoying beep-beep-beep of a truck backing up woke us up. We heard others complain about it as well.

Rooms start at $195 per night. But two of the nice things about pricing at the inn are parking is $6 per night and the taxes are much less, being on federal land so guests aren’t paying The City’s hotel tax.

Things to do

One of the best things about the inn is the proximity to

trails. Out the back door is the Ecology Trail that leads to Inspiration Point and Mountain Lake. The lake, which is one of two natural lakes in The City, is being rehabbed.

We end up walking about seven of the 24 miles within the park. (Some of the trails allow mountain bikes.)

We connect with the Bay Area Ridge Trail that takes us through a massive eucalyptus grove where artist Andy Goldsworthy's Spire is located. His third piece of art in the park is slated to be installed this fall.

Most of the trees in the Presidio are not native. Still, as ones die off some non-native trees are being replanted to keep with the historical nature of the area that people are accustomed to. There are, however, 300 native plant species in the park. And more than 300 bird species call the Presidio home.

Walking along it's peaceful, even when we're by a road. The traffic is so light.

With eight scenic and historic overlooks, it's hard to keep walking. Instead we just want to absorb the surroundings. Breathtaking is an understatement. At one point we are halfway between Baker Beach and the Golden Gate Bridge. This has us seeing the bridge looking into the bay instead of out to the ocean, which is the common view.

Concrete bunkers are artifacts from days gone by when the military had weapons at the ready to attack anyone who might invade.

Those iconic towers scratch the blue sky. A day without fog. We opt not to walk the 1.7 miles across the bridge, but instead get on the Presidio Promenade.

This leads us past the national cemetery. Row after row of white tombstones bring back memories of Arlington National

Cemetery. It is a stark reminder of what this plot of land was originally used for.

Around the bend is Crissy Field. This area has been completely renovated. It would be hard to know it was once an airstrip. This was the military's first Air Coast Defense Station on the Pacific Coast.

Presidio Trust

The Presidio Trust was established in 1998 to be the caretaker of the Presidio after the Army left. A nonprofit board, staff of 340 and army of volunteers run the operation much like this were a city unto itself.

This is the first year the Presidio Trust has not received a subsidy from the federal government to keep it functioning.

Most of the money comes from rent collected from the 3,000 people who live in one of the 1,200 houses. Housing that was for soldiers is available to anyone. It ranges from apartment style to a seven-bedroom house that used to be the home of a general that goes for about $15,000/month.

The trust brings in about $5 million a year from Lucas Films, which opened a 23-acre digital arts campus in 2005.

Rehabbing old buildings, bringing in commercial entities, attracting the public and creating easier access from the Golden Gate Bridge are all ongoing endeavors of the trust. At the forefront is preserving the historical integrity of the buildings and the land.

The trust is balancing the need to refurbish buildings while keeping the historical nature of them. It also means dealing with current building codes and seismic standards.

When the Army pulled out there were those who wanted to keep the base's golf course just for military use – something about needing it for national security reasons. That argument didn't

have legs and the course is open to the public.

One of the bunkers on the grounds has been transformed into storage for wine. Collectors and restaurants rent the storage facility.

Talks are under way with a chef – whose name is not being disclosed – about creating a fine-dining restaurant.

More tourist accommodations are likely in the future, too. It’s the trust that runs the Inn at the Presidio. And the response to it has been greater than expected.

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