



diva

Blink and you'll miss it. Diva doesn't exactly have an imposing presence on San Francisco's Geary Street. The first time I walked by I thought it was a contemporary furniture shop. Even when I knew better, I didn't investigate any further because of all the cities in the United States, San Francisco probably has the greatest diversity of interesting places to stay. For bookish types there's the literary-inspired Rex, complete with library-style breakfast room. For the rock and roll set, there's the Phoenix, where even roadies (not exactly known for their sensitive side) are welcome – with their trucks. For the style-conscious on a budget there's the Commodore, with its monochrome landmark bar the Red Room. Then there's the rather grand Mark Hopkins for traditionalists, and the Clift for devoted fans of Schragger hotels. And even this list is a much abbreviated version of the possibilities on offer.

Three years were to go by before I made it past the same unassuming but unusual facade again. But this time I did investigate. In a city of individual hotels catering to particular target tastes, Diva is the hotel for dedicated fans of contemporary design: clean and modern, without the frills. With its bold cobalt blue carpets and floor-to-ceiling sculpted stainless

steel bedheads, metallic Noguchi-style coffee tables and black leather modern couches, it's a hotel that doesn't really care if a lot of people say "I couldn't possibly stay in a place like that." Hotel Diva is different, and that is its strength.

As is often the case, the impression of simplicity belies the sophistication that went into creating this interior. The streetfront facade, for example, may be small but it is strikingly unusual. It is glass, that much is clear (no pun intended). But its refractive quality is due to the fact that it is formed of stacked sheeted glass. Inside, the elegant reception desk is made from a chunk of dark granite with backlit panels of onyx. Proprietor Yvonne Detert, together with designer Olle Lundberg, has achieved an effect that is sleek, sophisticated and space-age, but simple – a white, silver, gray and cobalt-colored statement of originality that more than lives up to the hotel's name.

But aside from its individuality, what else does Diva have to offer? The most obvious answer is location. Shops, theaters, restaurants, bars and nightlife – everything is in walking distance. Turn left out of the hotel entrance and in less than half a block you're on Union



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Square, the heart of downtown San Francisco. This is hardly a city where you could be short of things to do, and Union Square is the perfect place to start. You could begin the day by taking a cable car to the top of Nob Hill to see the views over Golden Gate Bridge and Alcatraz. Back in town, one of the best places for lunch is the Grand Café brasserie of the Monaco Hotel, diagonally across the street from Diva. Then in the afternoon you could sample some of San Francisco's abundant Old World gentility, settling in for a proper afternoon tea amid the Rococo splendor of the Westin, one of the city's grandest hotels, which also happens to be right on Union Square. A short walk from the square is San Francisco's famous Chinatown. You can't miss it – the entrance is marked by a huge red gate adorned with Chinese dragons.

For shoppers too, Union Square is the place to be. All the most glamorous department stores are right here – Saks Fifth Avenue, Bergdorf Goodman, Neiman Marcus. The

myriad of boutiques for which the city is renowned are on the smaller streets leading off the square. And at night you only have to cross the street to visit some of San Francisco's most popular new restaurants.

That's the beauty of Hotel Diva. It even has a Starbucks right next to reception, and the city's best newsstand just next door to that. Staying here is like having your own slick ultra-modern studio apartment in the very heart of the city – and at a price that usually equates with mediocre out-of-town accommodation.

The San Francisco hotel scene brings to mind a comment by a distinguished architect friend of mine in India, Aman Nath. "These days," he observed, "we are well-off enough to design our lifestyle. It is no longer dictated by need but rather by the desire to imagine ourselves in a particular way. We style our lives." Hotel Diva is for people who like their comfort without fuss and their San Francisco entertainment without in-house obligation.

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room rates from \$125

