



HOME IS WHERE THE HOTEL IS

There are some properties that call us back throughout our lives. While they may renovate or change hands, a sense of familiarity remains. **SARAH BRUNING** reflects on the evolution of a childhood refuge.

IT'S BEEN TWO years since my last visit, but I can still trace the hallways of the Langham Huntington, Pasadena, in my mind as easily as I can navigate my own home. My first trip to the hotel was in the late 1980s, when I was five years old and the hotel was a Ritz-Carlton. My mother dressed me and my younger brother in matching smocked outfits, and we made the 10-minute drive from our home for the children's Christmas tea. The Lobby Lounge had morphed into a

festive wonderland, with faux snow that felt particularly transportive given L.A.'s balmy Decembers. As we waited for Santa, we sat at a table sipping Earl Grey from porcelain cups and eating dainty egg sandwiches. It all felt incredibly grown-up—a far cry from serving imaginary tea to my Barbies from a plastic Fisher-Price set.

The Langham has been a fixture in my hometown since the 1920s, when it was a winter-only resort. Fashionable guests and business moguls flocked there to escape the frigid East Coast and mingle with



the Hollywood crowd. (Jean Harlow would stop by to play badminton in the 30s.) As decades passed, it remained a social hub and became an iconic filming location for movies and TV shows as varied as *Knots Landing*, *Saving Mr. Banks*, and Lindsay Lohan's *Parent Trap* remake. It was, in many ways, Pasadena's answer to Claridge's or the Plaza.

Over time, it became a center of gravity in my own life. We'd head to the Terrace Restaurant for brunch on Easter, Mother's Day, and Father's Day, when I'd load up my buffet

We're so eager to visit the newest hotels that we neglect the ones that have long been our touchstones.

plate with crisp slices of bacon and enormous pancakes topped with berries and whipped cream. The Thanksgiving my brother got chicken pox, my poor (immune) mom stayed home and made him Stouffer's Mac & Cheese while my father, grandparents, and I stuffed ourselves with turkey and fixings at the Grill. I'd like to say I felt guilty, but my inner Augustus Gloop was perfectly content to scarf down creamy mashed potatoes while the waitstaff patiently indulged my requests for Shirley Temples.

In my late teens, my classmates and I marked rites of passage at the hotel. My best friend Amy's debutante ball was held in the Viennese Ballroom. Sure, big white dresses were involved, but to us, the event was less about signifying a readiness for marriage and more about celebrating her accomplishments at the swankiest venue in town. That same room was the setting for countless graduation parties, and while earlier generations might've waltzed beneath the crystal chandeliers, we gyrated suggestively to the steady bass line of Eminem's "Without Me." No one thought twice about it because we were 17 and the hotel felt like a second home.

After everyone left for college, the Langham became the place we gathered every Christmas Eve to catch up—at first over Diet Cokes, then eventually cocktails. Amy or our friend Jamie would text a couple

other close pals to convene in the Tap Room once family festivities wrapped. Hunkered down on the leather couches, we'd trade stories about what our old peers were up to. Inevitably, a handful of those familiar faces would show up because their crews had forged the same tradition. So it felt like a fitting capstone when Amy and her high-school sweetheart got married at the hotel, just after it became a Langham.

Gradually, our holiday gatherings dwindled in size as friends and their families moved away. Each year, we lost more of the private places that had formed the backdrops of our childhood—the bedrooms where we'd held sleepovers, the backyards where we'd swung at birthday piñatas. But there's comfort in knowing that not everything has to change. I can still go to the Langham and order an Old-Fashioned from the polished dark-wood bar—or a Shirley Temple, if I'm feeling especially nostalgic.

Those of us who thrive on travel often obsess over the next adventure—our minds wandering so far from where we've planted our feet that we lose sight of the places around us. We're so eager to visit the newest hotels that we neglect the ones that have long been our touchstones. For Londoners, it might be the Savoy. For Singaporeans, the Raffles. But in this year of extreme hardship, when we haven't been able to go far, we've rekindled our appreciation for beloved local spots, stopping by for a meal or staycation to help them stay afloat.

My parents relocated to Santa Fe last fall, so this Christmas, maybe we'll converge at the Inn & Spa at Loretto to sip hot toddies in the club chairs by the fireplace. Or perhaps we'll head to San Francisco to see my brother and revisit the Westin St. Francis for a grand afternoon tea. But when we do all gather in Pasadena again, I know it will be at the Langham. ■

langhamhotels.com; doubles from \$248.