REVIEW: The Four Seasons in Seattle



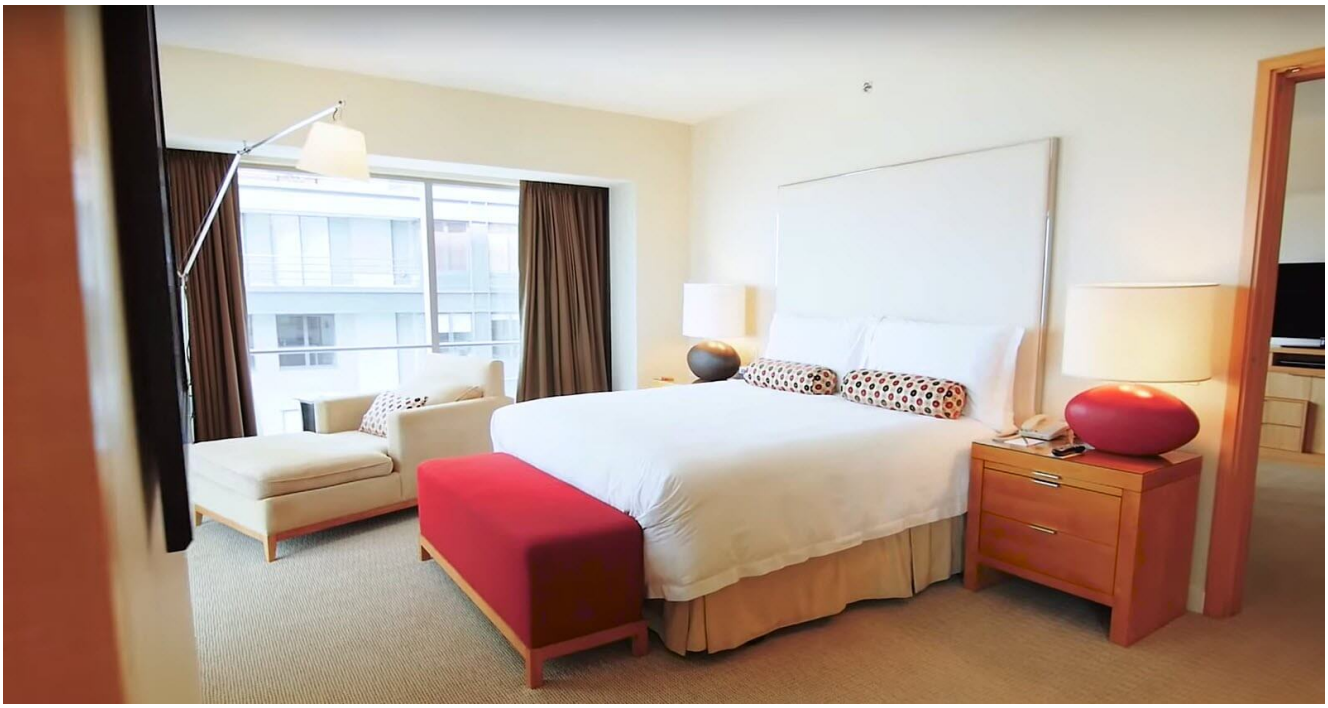
Seattle is one of those destinations that everyone should visit once in their lives. It’s a unique combination of city and forest, set amongst dozens of lakes and rivers and

bisected by the very large Lake Washington. In the summer when the weather is great there's almost no better place to be. The high latitudes allow for long summer days and warm summer nights.

For a very long time though, the city had a serious shortage of accommodations – and especially luxury accommodations. If you wanted to stay at a 5 star resort, you had to look to the Eastside – not Seattle downtown proper. This all changed when the Four Seasons came in with new construction right at the waterfront of downtown Seattle.

This is a smaller hotel but with luxury condominiums available for purchasers. It's got the feel of a boutique hotel but with all the luxuries that you would expect from a company such as the Four Seasons.

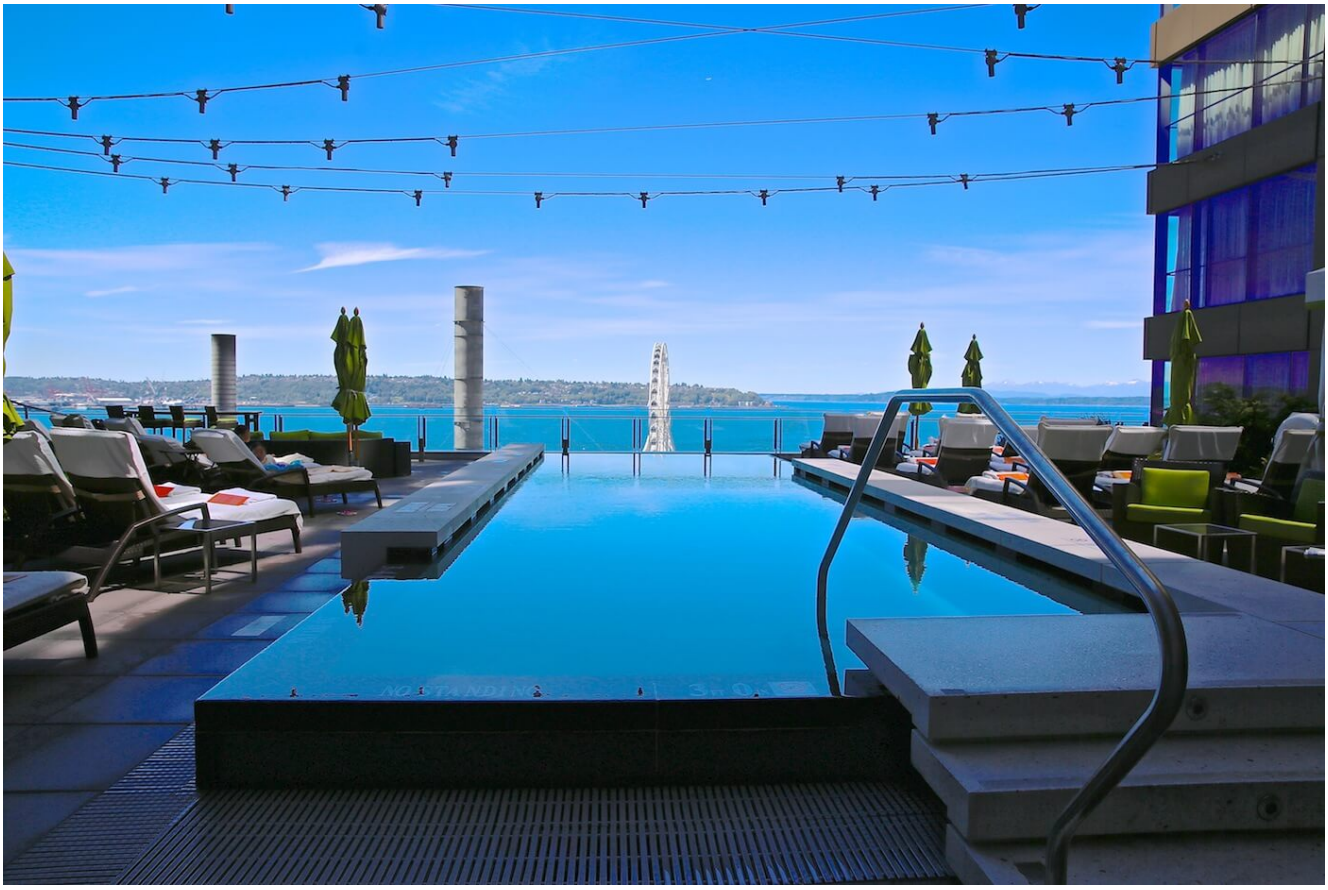
The rooms themselves are relatively plain and very Pacific Northwest with light woods and simplistic clean lines throughout.



Just a regular old room – nothin to see here

They are comfortable and materials are high quality but a bit lacking in depth and character.

What the rooms lack in effort though the hotel more than makes up for in its rooftop patio and pool. I love Seattle in the summer and the rooftop pool with its amazing vista over the waterfront is the perfect place to sit and relax for hours with a beer in hand.



The rooftop pool, I swear they’re needed in Seattle

So next time someone says Seattle is always raining remind them that they are referring to Portland or San Francisco, and that the rooftop at the Four Seasons is where you will be spending your summers.

PROS:

- The rooftop pool
- The rooftop pool
- Oh, it’s a Four Seasons – so the service is always impeccable

CONS:

- The rooms are luxuriously appointed but sort of boring
- There’s no grand lobby to hang out in

SECRETS:

- As previously mentioned, the rooftop pool – which many people overlook because it’s Seattle and they just assume its bad weather and no one would put an outdoor pool on the roof of a hotel

OTHER THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

- There’s a variety of restaurants up in South Lake Union (they’re constantly in flux), but check out the area and have a nice dinner during sunset – it’s relaxing and fun to watch the seaplanes flying in and out of Lake Union

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REVIEW: The Ritz-Carlton South Beach



When you think of South Beach you automatically conjure up thoughts of art-deco and 1980's glamour. All white decor and contemporary style.

The Ritz-Carlton in South Beach bucks this trend, severely. The first thing you notice about the Ritz here is how large the lobby is. Keeping in line with other Ritz properties this one is just as large, most of the other properties on Collins Avenue are relatively small in comparison, save for the Fontainebleau. The hotel's layout reminds me of a cruise ship with its multiple levels that jet out over each other, and the pool "deck" with rooms surrounding it on both sides with patios that mimic the look of outdoor balconies on upper level staterooms. If you're sitting at the pool it gives you the impression that you're on a cruise perpetually on its way towards the Atlantic Ocean – and i'm ok with it.



The pool overlooks the ocean and is surrounded on both sides by hotel rooms, mimicking the outlook of a cruise ship

Overall, the hotel is luxurious and modern yet retaining much of the feel of a Ritz-Carlton with dark woods and darker furniture.

I think it’s a great place if you’re looking to stay within the Ritz-Carlton or Marriott chain while in South Beach, but I can’t recommend it over a few other options that are unique to Miami Beach, including the SOHO Beach House, Delano South Beach, or the One Hotel.

If you DO want great service, and are used to a certain level of sophistication, then definitely check this out. However, I feel that there's other ways to experience the eclectic vibe of SoBe.

PROS:

- Cool pool area with a great view overlooking the ocean
- Excellent service, which is tough to normally get in South Beach

CONS:

- You won't be able to get the real South Beach feel, it doesn't have the uniqueness that some of the other art-deco properties in South Beach offer

SECRETS:

- You won't need a car, this hotel is RIGHT in the center of everything in South Beach

OTHER STUFF IN SOUTH BEACH:

- I've been to South Beach well over 20+ times so I have a long list, but always manage to walk down Ocean Blvd. You can't get the whole experience unless you do this



This is the quintessential part of South Beach – Ocean Blvd at night. In all it's Scarface glory

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REVIEW: Rancho Valencia Resort



This is by far one of my favorite resorts in California. It’s a large property, the type that requires you to get around by golf cart (don’t worry – they supply them). It’s got

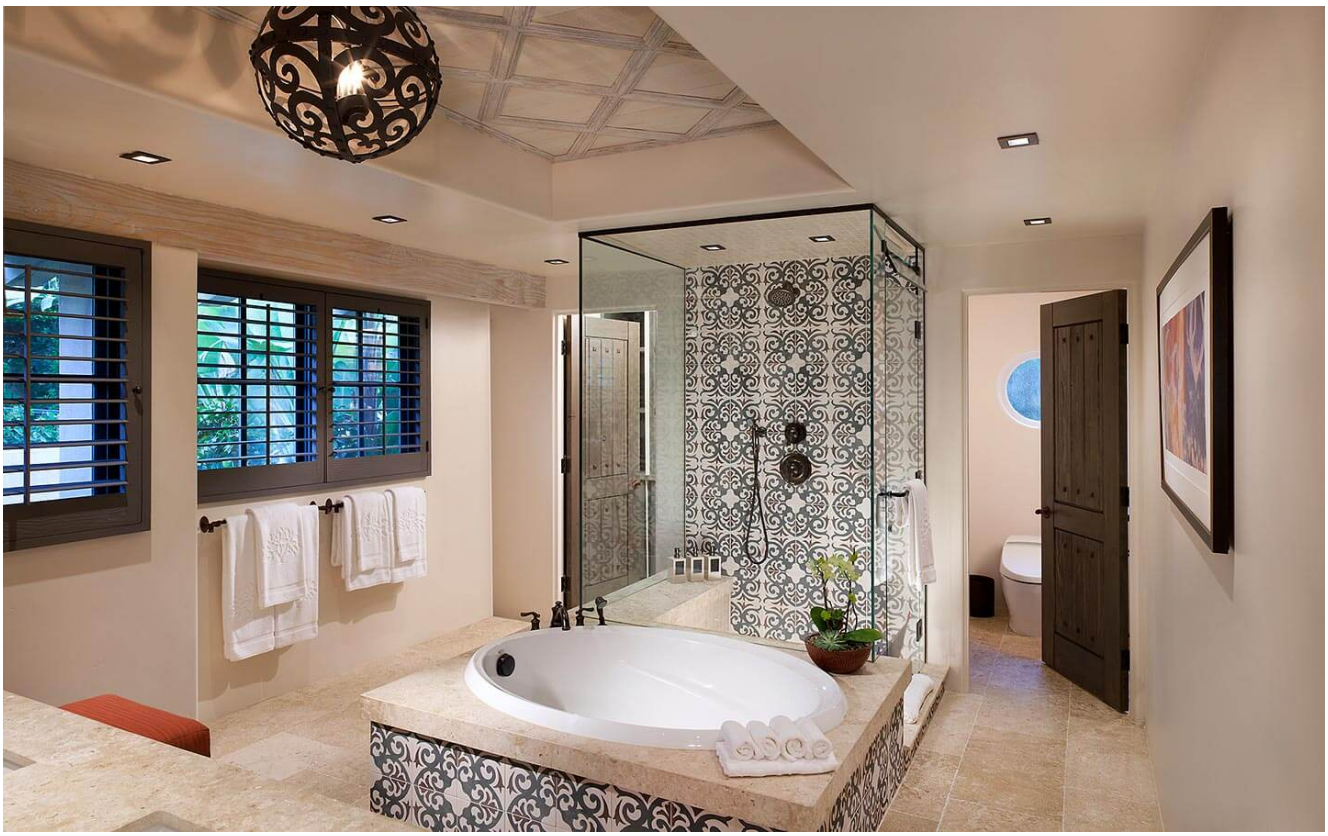
beautiful rooms – each one is considered a mini casa or “Casita” as they call them.



The not-so-mini Casita complete with sunken living room and a jacuzzi and fireplace inside AND out

The hotel has impeccable service, they know you by name and deliver some really cool fine touches, such as some really expensive bath products, a jacuzzi and fireplace in each individual outdoor patio, not just any espresso machine but world-class espresso machines, and my favorite part – the fresh orange juice service that is left at your room every morning (from the on-site orange grove). The property is exquisite and has some really great things going for it including an impeccably decorated restaurant and bar.

This is a resort you go to when you want to get away and relax for a few days – it’s not very close to much other than the Del Mar Racetrack, but the property itself has enough to keep one relatively busy – and by busy I mean relaxed.



Stunning spa-like bathrooms with views of the gardens will make you take extra long baths and showers. The toilet is even electronic and opens and closes its lid with a wave of your hand!



If you come here you'll be a spending a lot of time at this bar and restaurant in the lobby area

PROS:

- Rooms don't get much better than this. Fireplaces, private jacuzzis, beautifully appointed top of the line materials in the bathrooms. All with a modern-meets-rustic theme
- The food on this property is great, you won't want to leave
- The feeling of privacy makes this the perfect retreat

CONS:

- It books up quite far ahead of time, so make sure to put in your reservations early

SECRETS:

- You can actually go and pick oranges in the grove

OTHER STUFF IN THE AREA:

- Check out the Del Mar racetrack schedule to see if you can go to the races at the same time you're staying here. There's also a local fair that happens a few times a year next door.

REVIEW: The Ritz-Carlton Dove Mountain



The Dove Mountain Ritz-Carlton is a pretty awesome place to visit. The resort is a large property set in the side of Dove Mountain with lots of cool nooks and crannies to explore. The

feel is that of a modern hunting lodge, with high ceilings, large rooms with expansive views, and a rustic quality and vibe.

The Ritz here spent a lot of time and energy developing local activities such as sunset hikes, a traditional Native-American ceremony on certain days, and even outdoor games and a tangerine orchard.



A hunting lodge you ask? Ritz-Carlton has their interpretation of it here at Dove Mountain

My personal favorite area of the hotel, though, is the pool.

There's multiple decks, amazing views of the landscape around the hotel, and even a waterslide – if you feel so inclined.



Check out that waterslide!

Everything about this Ritz is a bit more special, and it reminds me a lot of a Ritz-Carlton Reserve. The service is a slight notch above the other properties, and the build quality of the hotel itself is higher. If you love the desert, I highly recommend visiting this property for a nice weekend getaway!

PROS:

- It's one of the nicer Ritz-Carltons in the chain – similar in feel to a Reserve
- It has lots to offer on the grounds and a wilderness center where you can book hikes and enjoy some really awesome desert activities

CONS:

- It's quite a far drive from anything in the Tucson area

SECRETS:

- Check the events calendar or call before you book.

There’s usually lots planned and it’s a smart move to book your stay around special events to take advantage of them
- The sushi is also really good here, trust me on this

OTHER THINGS TO DO:

- Biosphere 2 is a really cool biosphere habitat that is basically one of two in the world (as the name suggests). If you’re in the area you should definitely check it out!

REVIEW: The Ananda Boutique Hotel in Cartagena

If you’ve ever dreamt of that lazy getaway in a “cute” little hotel filled with luxurious amenities where you can wander into the streets and lose yourself in the middle of a UNESCO Heritage Site. Well, that’s the Ananda Boutique and that’s Cartagena.

REVIEW: Hotel Valley Ho in Scottsdale



This hotel feels like it should be set in the 60's. Everything from the architecture to the hip decor makes this hotel a choice that's not normal. When you walk in you notice

the flamboyant colors, the biomorphic shapes and shag carpet and wax vinyl surfaces.



Lets jus say that laminate floors are not the standard at the Ritz, but hey, this place is cooool

You choose the Valley Ho because you want something different, but at the end of the day you still want a bit of luxury and coddling.

The lobby is the focal point of this place, part of it is indoors and part of it is outdoors. The location is fantastic, just a few minutes by foot to the local art galleries and restaurants in the Scottsdale area. This is always my go to whenever I come to Scottsdale. The restaurant has great all american cuisine and I recommend it for the Sunday brunch.



You can’t look around at this place and not crack a smile – because it feels like you just woke up and Nixon is about to pop on TV

There are certainly other nicer hotels in the area, the W Scottsdale or further options if you’re there for the golfing, but there really is nothing else like the Hotel Valley Ho. And heck, at the least it’s fun to say.



Bet you haven’t been to a mid-century pool since…well, mid-century

PROS:

- Fun lobby and vibe – its super hip
- The showers are wide and open and the bathrooms and floorpans feel modern and different from anything else you’d see in the luxury category
- There’s really not much else quite like it in the area, especially walking distance to Scottsdale downtown shops and restaurants

CONS:

- It’s not a traditional luxury hotel
- The service is not quite that of a 4-5 star hotel, but somehow it just works with the laidback vibe
- The cuisine is all americana but if you want something different there’s not a lot of options

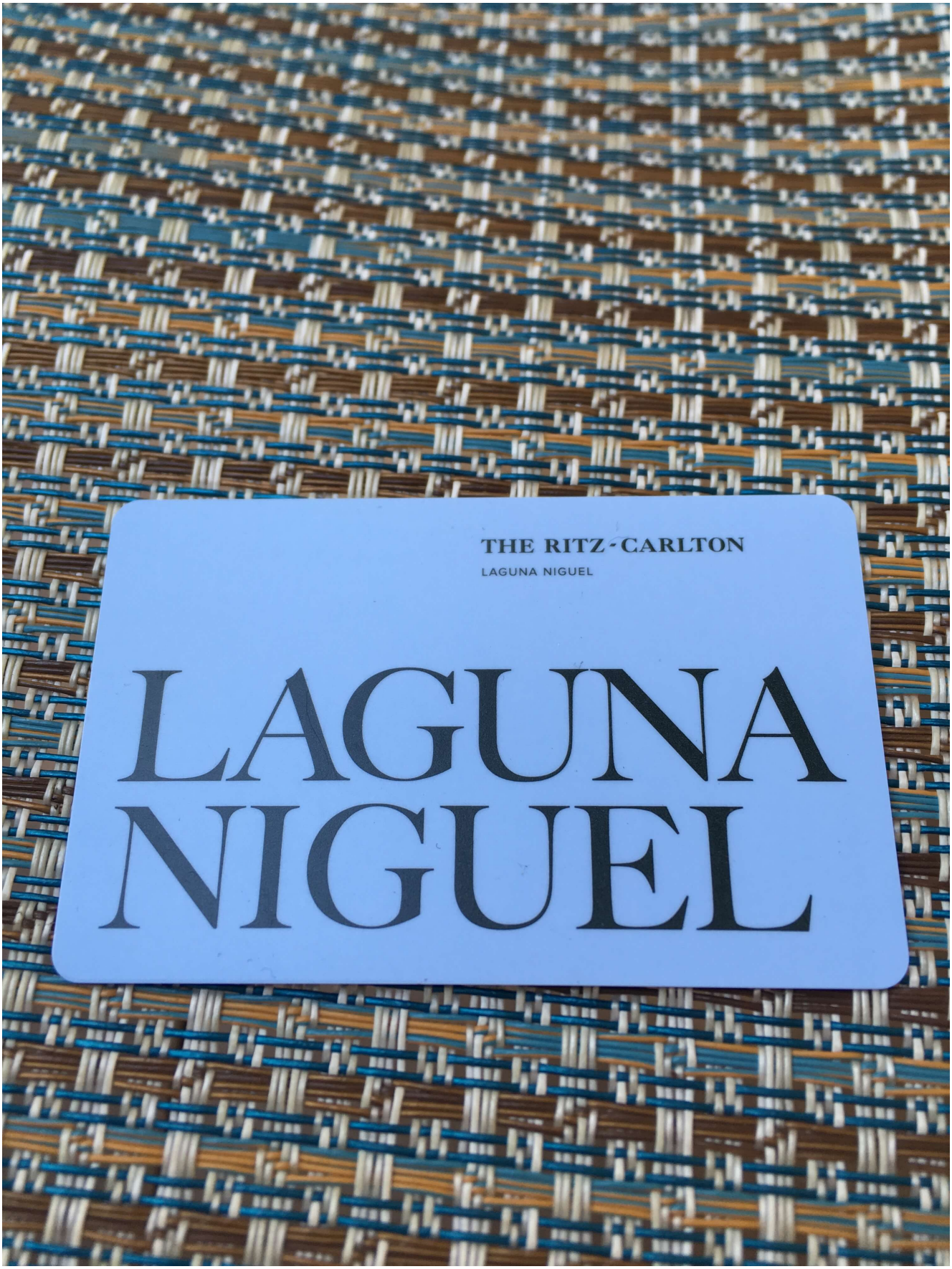
SECRETS:

- Check out the cool second story gym with its private yoga room which opens up to the pool
- The breakfast burrito on the menu is definitely what you want, I promise

OTHER THINGS TO DO:

- If you love good pizza (and who doesnt?), definitely visit Sauce Pizza & Wine. It’s one of my favorite pizza restaurants in the nation (and that includes comparison to places like Lou Malnati’s in Chicago or top NY pizza joints). Yes it’s that good, and they have a great selection of beers and wines!

REVIEW: The Ritz-Carlton Laguna Niguel



This one’s a keeper – as they say. The Ritz-Carlton Laguna Niguel is a mixture of old-world elegance and contemporary flair. The hotel is large but the intimate spaces hidden

within it make it feel homey and comforting rather than barren and excessive.



The Spanish villa look of the Ritz in Laguna gives it some old-world charm

The minute you walk in you're wowed by the depth of the hallway. It has a very similar feel to the Monarch Beach Resort in this respect, but with slightly lower ceilings which makes this hotel the perfect accessory for a romantic getaway.

The service here is impeccable, at the top of its class for Ritz-Carlton's, and the lobby bar here is a cool place to hang out. I had a chance to check out two of the restaurants here, EnoSteak and Raya and highly recommend both of them. Raya's floor to ceiling glass portals overlook the Pacific Coast and it's a dazzling place to have breakfast at a leisurely pace. Enosteak is the quintessential martini and ribeye spot which serves its purpose in this type of resort.

The rooms themselves are on the smaller side, and are not as new as the The Monarch Beach Resort in Dana Point but they are definitely still clean and luxurious. This is yet another hotel built with weddings in mind and as such there are

breathtaking vistas throughout.

I recommend checking out The Monarch Beach Resort in Dana Point and doing a spot compare between the two when booking to see which one is priced better during your stay as they both are comparable hotels, with the Ritz possibly edging on service, but slightly older in room quality.

PROS:

- Feels intimate yet maintains that large resort feel
- The pool area is well thought out to include private secludes so that not everyone is staring at each other when you're laying out
- The service is impeccable and the dining establishments at this hotel are above average

CONS:

- It could use some room refreshes

SECRETS:

- Check out the view at 180 Blu while enjoying a drink. It's easy to miss this part of the hotel

OTHER THINGS TO DO:

- Officially the second smallest church in the world, St Francis By the Sea is a pretty cool place to visit. Plus it's on the Guinness Book of World Records!
- This one's been written about but if you want to get around and you don't want to hire an uber. Check out the Laguna Beach Trolley. It's fun to use it as a method of hopping around town and checking out the sights.

REVIEW: The Monarch Beach Resort in Dana Point

The Monarch Beach Resort was formerly a SPG St Regis property, one of the top ones in the portfolio, but as of mid 2016 was purchased by KSL group after a lengthy renovation. I went to stay at the hotel shortly after the renovation so this review reflects what the hotel currently is like (as of Q3 2016).

REVIEW: The SkyLofts at the MGM Grand

So there’s nice hotel rooms in Las Vegas, because there’s a lot of room to play with, and because there’s a lot of money at stake, but one of the biggest issues if you’re seeking high quality service is that the staff often has to deal with 10,000 other people at the same time.

REVIEW: Trump International in Panama



I had very high expectations for this hotel. It was essentially the highest rated luxury hotel in Panama City, and Trump hotels generally have great service and well thought out

and luxurious accommodations. However, I should've known something was off when I arrived and the front desk wasn't even staffed.

You see, this hotel was originally developed as a condotel (Hotel + Condo units). Many didn't sell, and as a result this happened: Condos not doing so well at Trump Panama. The result is a grand plan for a stunning hotel, crippled by high vacancy rates and low staffing. The rooms at the hotel weren't terrible, except that they hadn't seemed to have been well thought out. For one, Panama is a very hot environment, and there's a significant amount of humidity. Whenever the patio door was opened, condensation would form on the massive marble floors making them downright scary to walk on.

The rooms also lacked any real separation between the bathroom and the beds which was odd, and due to the shape of the building there were odd acute angles which made the rooms seem smaller than they actually were. My neighbor also approached me in the hallway one day to tell me his A/C hadn't been working the entire duration of his stay and the front desk wouldn't give him a different room when it was obvious that the hotel was at high vacancy.

The gym was large, but the equipment was old and needed changing. The pool had an amazing view, but the chairs had rust developing on them, and there never seemed to be sun because most of the pool area was blocked by the building during the middle of the day.



The rooms weren’t terribly decorated but had odd space planning



The pool may look stunning in the pictures but the view is of swampland and the building blocks most of the sun

PROS:

- The low price of the hotel makes up for its lackluster performance
- The hotel is easy to find because of its size

CONS:

- The decor is spartan and of low quality
- The dining options at the hotel are subpar
- The pool is one of the highlights due to its view, but look closely and you'll notice that its located right above swampland and the sun is blocked most of the time by the building itself
- The service is mediocre at best

SECRETS:

- Use UBER for quick travel to and from destinations
- Check out the rooftop bar which is accessible from the side entrance where the Casino is
- Before booking here, I would recommend looking at the Hard Rock International as an alternative option

OTHER STUFF IN PANAMA:

- Getting lost in Casco Viejo is a great way to spend a day or two (or three in my case). There's a lot of restaurants and other interesting sights in the old section of Panama but one place that I really enjoyed was Tantalo. It's a hotel but with a restaurant downstairs and a bar upstairs. It's got great views of the city from the rooftop, and when downstairs you've got a variety of delicious tapas and drinks. Definitely check this place out!

REVIEW: The Ritz-Carlton Dorado Beach Reserve (it's a special one)

This was my first time at a Ritz-Carlton reserve and it will not be my last. I usually have a rule that I won't go to the same place twice (this was a rule I instated after realizing I had spent much of my money over many years getting incremental returns on visiting the same hotels/locations repeatedly). However, the Ritz-Carlton Reserve is something special.



A view of a portion of the property

Upon arrival at the front gates of the property you are given a fresh towel, a fruit popsicle of your choice (made from fresh fruit grown on the property), and introduced to your own private concierge which they call your "Ambassador". One of the overwhelming themes of this hotel is the ultra-personalized service. Your ambassador can reach you via your cell phone, and make pretty much anything come true (including running to the local store and picking up an iPhone cord or

other sundry you're missing).

The rooms are all incredibly spacious, with the smallest ones starting at 1000 square feet and some of the large units being as big as 10,000 square feet and over $100,000 a night. The difference between the Ritz-Carlton Reserves is that they are integrated into the environment they're set in. This one was melded directly into the rainforest around it, every bike and golf cart path was surrounded by lush greenery and the associated sounds of the forest – tropical birds singing and geckos running around. This isn't a hotel for those who don't like nature, because it really is part of the environment.



Even the spa is immersed within the rainforest, set in a treehouse

The food was incredible at each one of the establishments on the property. This included Mi Casa by Jose Andres – the leading Spanish tapas chef, Encanto – a beachside bar with great local style cuisine, La Cocina – where you can eat directly at the chef's table, and my personal favorite – Positivo, which served some of the best Mahi Mahi tacos i've ever had. I would say that by far the food at this property

was some of the best i’ve had at any hotel i’ve been to (yes, all 500 of them).



Want to have breakfast where the chef serves you directly? Do it at La Cocina

I’ve never felt more relaxed at a property, and spent all of my time without leaving Dorado beach, even though I knew Puerto Rico had much to offer – and this was because the experience at the Ritz-Carlton Reserve left me with nothing to ask for. I truly cannot remember an experience as fully immersive, well thought out, and luxurious as my stay at this hotel. It is by far my favorite relaxing experience that i’ve ever had at a resort.



The massive infinity pool overlooks the ocean with plenty of chairs and lounge areas around it

Every room has an incredible view



…and an indoor and outdoor shower

PROS:

- Impeccable service through your own private concierge
- Stunning environment and rooms with some of the nicest bathrooms – the outdoor shower in a tropical setting just makes sense
- The food at every place on the property had incredible dishes
- Well thought out and relaxing, to the point that I didn’t want to ever leave the property
- The private beach with its own cove was stunning

CONS:

- One of the only hotels where I couldn’t come up with a con

SECRETS:

- Have the front desk give you a free bike to use during your trip, and ride around the trails on the Dorado Beach property – explore the gym at the country club, it’s stunning
- On weekends the water park on the Dorado Beach property is open, and it has a bar!
- Cooking classes are taught at La Cocina, they book up early so ask your Ambassador to help you with a reservation before you even get to the hotel

OTHER STUFF IN PUERTO RICO:

- Cueva Ventana which translates to window cave is a cool rock formation that looks over a lush green valley. I didn’t really leave the resort much but after a ton of research I thought this was one of the cooler things to do. Check out the pic below!

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REVIEW: The Ritz-Carlton in Santiago



The rooftop indoor pool

So let me start by saying, I had really high expectations for this one. I had just come in from the Four Seasons in Buenos Aires which was a newly renovated hotel with great rooms and service, and was expecting the Santiago Ritz to be on the same level. Unfortunately, it left me wanting for a few reasons.

At first glance and walk-in the hotel has a grand appearance and the feel of a cultured residence. Aged dark wood paneling and marble floors give the hotel a stately appearance and the travelers were mostly of the business variety.



The impressive lobby

Upon closer glance, however, you find that the hotel needs some updating. The carpets are well worn, and the rooms themselves left quite a bit to be desired. The room that I was given had mold in certain areas of the bathroom, and there was an effervescent musk in the room as if it had been around for too long without a renewal or upgrades.

The colors were also drab and didn’t match the initial look of the lobby. The decor was aged and the beds were highly uncomfortable.



The stock room photo looks enticing, but don’t be fooled. Lots of contrast image processing here



Mold in the bathroom – Needed a repainting

What the rooms lacked, however, the hotel made up for in service. I happened to be at this hotel during my birthday

and they were kind enough to send me a bottle of champagne and even a birthday cake. The overall experience was great even though the rooms just needed a little more updating than what I was used to seeing at a Ritz-Carlton.



The Ritz Carlton Service – Birthday cake and champagne for my birthday and a nice handwritten note

PROS:

- The service was impeccable, white glove treatment everywhere
- The concierge was highly knowledgable and even arranged a city tour through a local contact of his
- The lobby is warm and inviting and a great place to hang out and have meetings or just a drink

CONS:

- The rooms need updating, the bathrooms were particularly old, and the furniture and bed were old – cushions needed changing and mattresses needed to be changed
- The food in the main lobby bar left quite a bit to be desired. In a city with many food choices it was disappointing that the Ritz didn't have a particularly great menu

SECRET(S):

- Walk just outside the hotel to the local restaurants on Isidora Goyenechea

OTHER STUFF IN SANTIAGO:

- Go and visit San Cristobal hill. The view from the top is stunning. It's totally worth the climb. Check locally, but on most weekends they even close off the road so it's a great hike
- Want to see something unique and different? The locals (especially in government) have coffee about 10 times a day, but at coffee shops resembling bikini parlors. Read about it here: Coffee with legs