

REVIEW: A little slice of heaven – Andaz Papagayo

Staying at this hotel was one of the best experiences I have had in a while. I know, it may sound like hyperbole, but the Andaz really knows how to do things right when it comes to their resort in Costa Rica. I was lucky enough to stay here during low season which turned out to be a blessing in disguise as the resort was exceptionally placid and relaxing with only a few people around.



This is the view that you'll be seeing every morning as you have an amazing breakfast

One of the first things you'll notice when you enter the

Papagayo Peninsula and then the Andaz is just how secluded it all is. Costa Rica, in general is already a getaway, but at the Andaz the buildings just meld into their environment making guests feel at one with the nature around them. When I was choosing whether to stay at this hotel, or the Four-Seasons down the street I decided upon the Andaz due to its newer build and more zen-like atmosphere. I did get a chance to visit the Four Seasons one night and my decision, in retrospect, was correct.

There's a lot of things to love about this property, its direct beach access and water-based activities, including jet-skiing, snorkeling, paddle-boarding, and snorkeling, to its beautiful set of infinity edge pools that span across the entire width of the resort. What I love most about the hotel, however, was the fact that the management has spent a lot of time training the staff to make you feel as if you were an old friend, and valued guest. This is especially important when you're at a secluded resort and spend a significant amount of time on the property.



Modern, relaxing, and awesomely integrated into the mountainside – Big ups to the Andaz hotel chain for this one!

The staff went out of their way at each moment to know the names of the guests, to know my personal preferences in drinks and food, and to impart some personal tidbits about Costa Rica – once they knew it was my first time there. The concierge was extremely helpful in planning activities, and one of my favorite things about the resort was the mixology bar and the mixologists on staff. The complexity and innovation that went into some of the beverages that the staff made for me was almost incomprehensible (yes, it's that good).



They take mixology to a whole 'nother level here. I really can't begin to describe how amazing the drinks are at the Andad Papagayo

The spirit of "Pura Vida" (Google it, because that's a whole 'nother article in itself), is especially prevalent here, and I cannot hesitate to recommend this as a must-see and must-stay at property if you're ever in Costa Rica.

PROS:

- Beautiful modern property with amazing rooms/bathrooms, it's a lot newer than the more expensive Four Seasons next door, and a lovely property
- The service is bar-none. I would put it at the same level as a Ritz-Carlton Reserve, which is saying a lot
- All the awesome activities were put together with lots of planning and thought, the mixology classes, coffee classes, forest hikes – you won't feel at a loss when

finding things to do here

- The food is incredible, lots of amazing cuisine for vegetarians to meat lovers alike

CONS:

- Some of the restaurants were closed on certain days due to it being low season, but that ended up not being an issue as there were shuttles to the Four Seasons next door when added variety was needed

SECRETS:

- Check out the adults-only pool next to the spa, it's got a nice secluded atmosphere to it
- The ceviche at Ostra is incredible and a must have

THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

- I highly recommend the ATV tours through the company that Andaz's concierge uses, it's a fun adventure through rivers and rainforest that shows some of the beauty of Costa Rica (hidden waterfalls, local towns, etc)

REVIEW: The W Scottsdale Hotel

So I already wrote about one of my favorite hotel's in Scottsdale (you can read about it here), but the W is probably my second favorite and depending on my mood it sometimes comes in #1 as well (Variety and all that jazz).



Probably the #1 reason why I like the W in Scottsdale – its pool – and let's not forget, it's always hot in Scottsdale so this is of prime importance.

So you're probably wondering, how does it compare to the Valley Ho? Well, they're two different spots. The Valley Ho is very much a boutique hotel with all the associated qualities, there's less of a corporate feel, some cheeky elements and details, and a property that feels much more tailored to an off-the-beaten-path experience. The W, however, does much of this in the traditional W manner – which is to say, corporate but still with some passion and uniqueness.

The rooms are probably the second best part of this hotel (after its very cool elevated rooftop pool area). They are clean, modern, large, and have great views of the surrounding area.



Clean, warm, modern, and luxurious. It matches the desert vibe quite well

Lastly, I can't help but mention that the lobby and public spaces are spot on (albeit a bit small) for a W. The fireplace and little cubby areas throughout the lobby make for great spots to hideaway and have a drink and some great conversation – just what hotel lobbies were meant for.

PROS:

- Great pool, like really great – lots of space, lots of chairs, and lots of fun
- Even though it's not the newest hotel it's still got a modernity and class to it

CONS:

- Not necessarily a con, but across town there exists a pretty good hotel called the Valley Ho, you'll just have to pick your poison

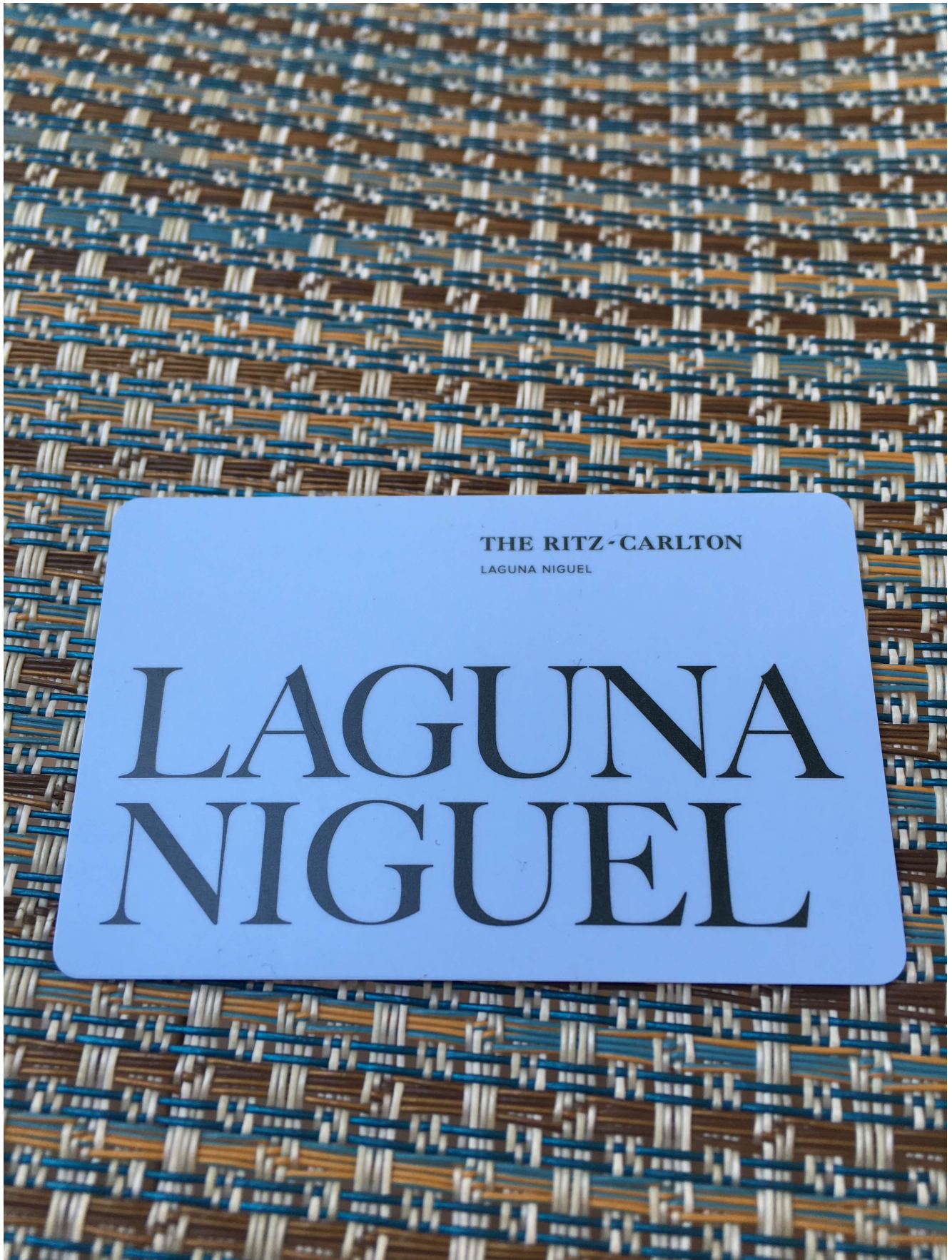
SECRETS:

- You have to check out the SPG points + cash options on this one, because it's an expensive hotel in general and you can save a lot of money with the cash + points booking options

THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

- Take a golf cart ride with one of the local carts that roams around downtown Scottsdale, and have them give you a tour. It's a cool little town with some pretty unique dive bars, restaurants, and art galleries and the best way to get a lay of the land is to have a golf-cart tour!

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.
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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).