REVIEW: Montage Laguna Beach



The Montage is one of those hotels I've grouped into "wedding hotels" of Laguna Beach – alongside the The Ritz-Carlton Laguna Niguel and the The Monarch Beach Resort in Dana Point. They're all relatively close to each other, within a few miles, and they all have very similar features – grand entrances and public spaces, large pools with lots of chairs to lay out in, wedding-ready venues within the properties, and very similarly styled rooms that won't offend anyone.

These aren't the types of hotels i'd normally recommend when traveling – because I feel that there are so many different options out there to spend your money at and my personal preferences skew towards the unique. However, between the three I would recommend the Montage or the Ritz. Why you ask? The Montage and Ritz both have a bit more character than the

Monarch Beach. They feel like they have a bit more soul and offer something slightly different than the standard large beachside resort. That being said, you really can't go wrong with any one of these hotels.



My favorite part of the Montage is the restaurant there – The Studio

The best part of the Montage Laguna Beach is the separate standing restaurant the Studio. It's got incredible fare and the view during sunset is outstanding, if you stay at the Montage (or if you're around the Montage Laguna) I highly recommend visiting the Studio.

PROS:

- Grounds are incredibly beautiful, and the restaurant "The Studio" is a great place to check out
- Location is superb, within walking distance of Laguna Beach shops
- Service is impeccable, on par with the Ritz in Laguna

and slightly better than the Monarch Beach

CONS:

- The decor, although classic, is slightly bland
- The pool area and cabanas can be pretty crowded on weekends when the hotel is full

SECRETS:

- Ask for a room further away from the lobby in order to gain more privacy. The hotel has some more secluded wings which are great for a romantic getaway

OTHER THINGS IN THE AREA:

- Who doesn’t like ice cream? Or its Italian brethren – Gelato? One of my favorite spots down the street from the Montage is Gelato Paradiso. Take a walk, grab some ice cream, and enjoy the quaintness that is Laguna Beach

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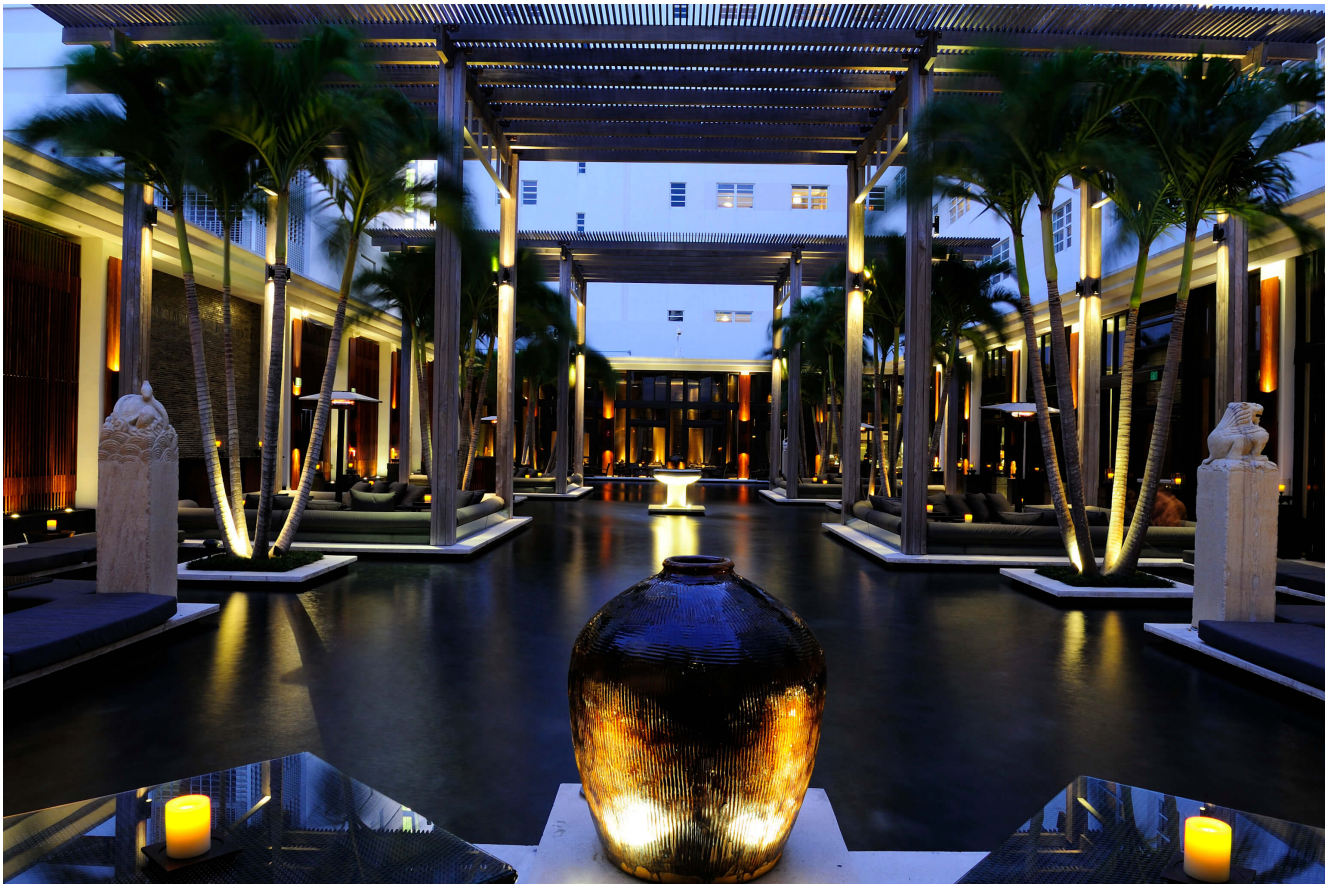
REVIEW: The Setai Miami



The Setai is quite a fancy place – this area outside of the main lobby is where they regularly hold bikini shows during swim week in Miami

This hotel was one of my first forays into luxury travel shortly after I made my first monies (I can't say money – I swear). Consequently, it holds a dear place in my heart, and I have been back many times since the hotel was first opened back in 2004. It's gone through quite a few owners and phases since, and I can't say that it's as great as it was back in 2004-2007 but it is still an amazing property and still ranks at the top of my list for quality of service and luxuriousness.

The first thing you notice when you enter the Setai is the very unique decor. This is because the builders were Indonesian and imported most of the materials from Southeast Asia, opting for teak from that region and exotic manta ray skins and handmade items imported specifically for the hotel from Indo, Philippines, and Malaysia.

The result is stunning, with a sexy Asian elegance that you won't find in many US based hotels other than a few select Mandarin Orientals (like the one in Vegas).

There are two distinct areas to the hotel, the standard hotel room side with its own lobby, and the suite towers which have their own entrance and smaller lobby.

The pool is also one of my favorite aspects of this hotel, with three pools each at a different temperature so that you can roam from one to the other based on your whim.



Three pools each with their own temperature

I highly recommend checking out the suite towers when you book, although they are not reasonably priced by a long shot, they're worthy of special occasions, and the corner units with their floor to ceiling glass walls and the height of the building (it's one of the tallest in South Beach) makes for spectacular views that you won't find anywhere else on Collins Ave.



The Asian theme is throughout, the rooms are relatively small by suite standards but the glass makes you forget about the size

Before the Fontainebleau was rebuilt, and the Soho Beach House was established this was always my first choice, but since those two have come into existence I only choose the Setai if there's a great deal to be had.

The service is bar-none though, and the concierge service is exquisite. However, since the changes in ownership some of the previous amenities have been deleted, including complimentary service in a fleet of Range Rover's and Rolls-Royces.

PROS:

- You can't beat the views here, it's one of the tallest buildings on South Beach
- The pools are spectacular, and if you want to relax in South Beach it really doesn't get better than this.

CONS:

- The price is pretty high even for a luxury hotel

- The service is not as good as it used to be, and they have deleted many amenities

SECRETS:

- Try out the Passion Fruit Martini, it’s one of my favorite drinks ever, and i’m not into sweet drinks normally. It has a nice spicy kick to it!
- If you are trying to get a great rate, google “Setai Miami Rentals”. The condo units owned here often have great rental rates, especially off-season



Order the Passion-Fruit Chili Martini (or two)

OTHER THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

- I’ve mentioned some of these in my other post from South Beach here

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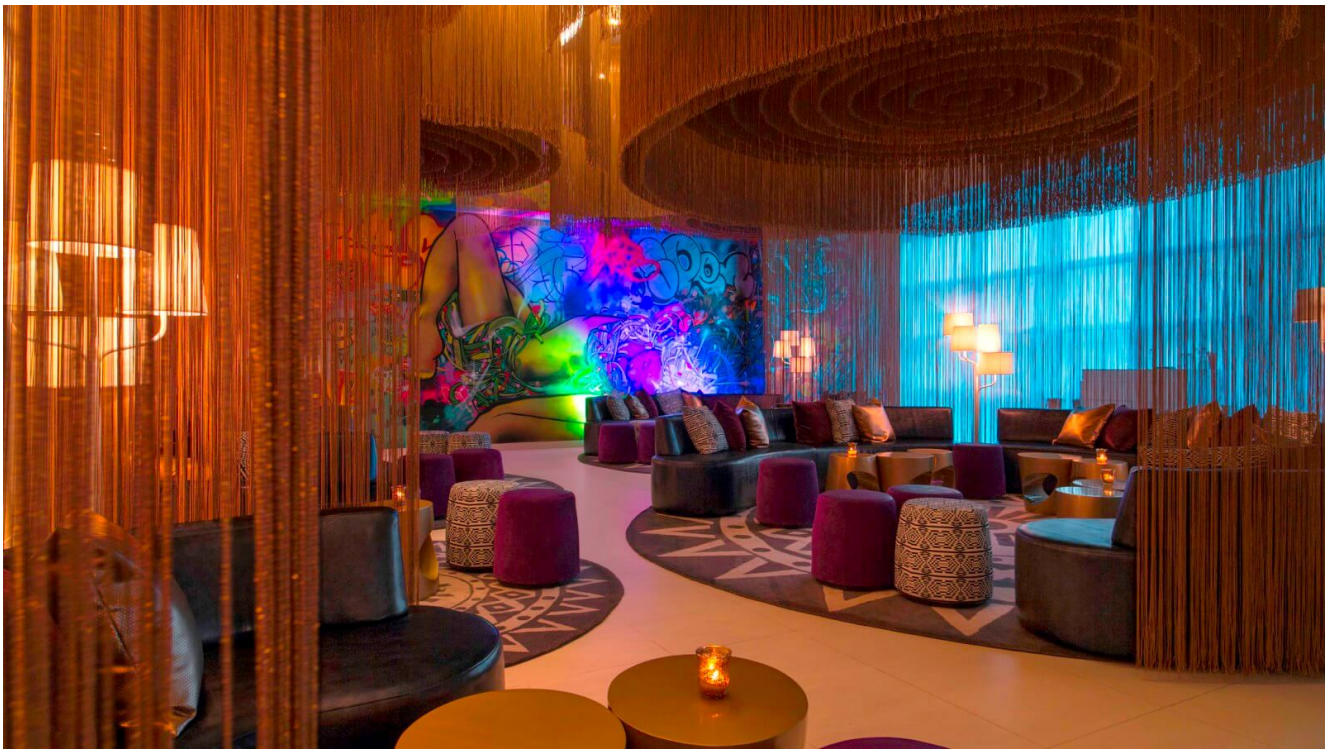
REVIEW: W Bogota – It's real Colombian here!

This has got to be one of the cooler W hotels in terms of design and style. Its a small one but its great location and great room rates make it a great home base if you find yourself in the city of Bogota.

What you immediately notice when you enter this property is the moodiness of the place. This is not unlike most W hotels which have slightly darker surroundings and evoke a sense of sensualness and mystery.



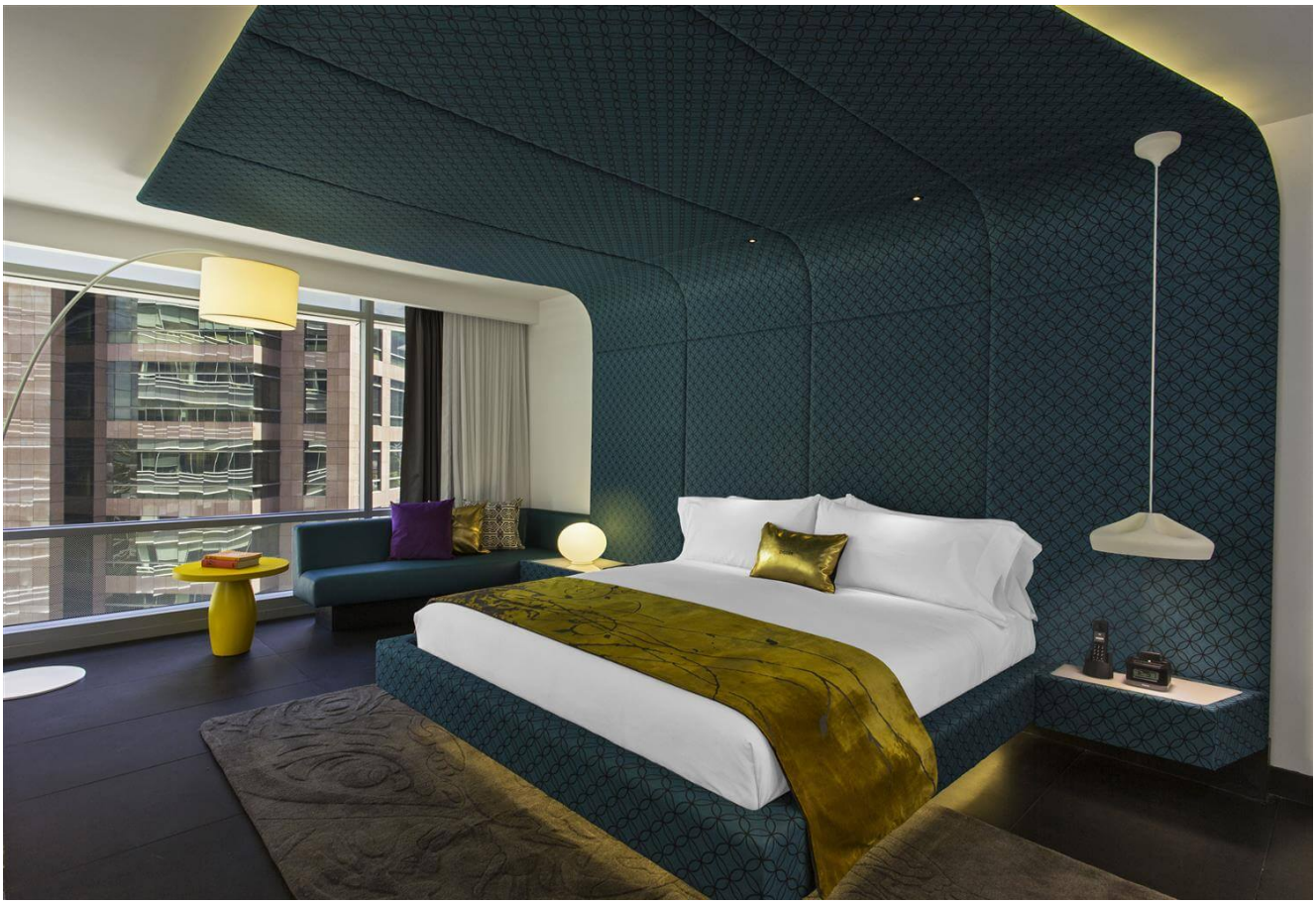
That's one sexy lounge. It's also a great place to hang out in before you head out for the night!

If you book early enough, check out the suites – they go for great prices, and they're totally worth the price. For less than $200 I was able to get a suite with its own game room and pool table, and this was during peak holiday season!

The service was above average for a W hotel, they were

extremely accommodating when we needed to check in early and even though the room wasn’t ready they gave us complimentary spa access in order for us to freshen ourselves from our journey.

The rooms themselves were in great condition as of this writing, and had a whimsical and charming quality to them. Especially awesome were the bathrooms, with LED lighting in the showers and gold fixtures that couldn’t help but remind me of something that would be in the infamous Pablo Escobar Mansion.



The gold touches really make this room pop visually. It’s got some of the most interesting contemporary furnishings i’ve ever seen in a room. Clean yet warm and inviting



Gold tiles, a gold shower, and gold fixtures. Remember, gold is best!

PROS:

- Its got a bathroom that stands out and makes you wanna smile
- The service is on par with some higher tier hotels
- The rates are phenomenal for the quality of hotel you are getting into

CONS:

- It’s a smaller property so it doesn’t have a grand feeling to it

SECRETS:

- They really appreciate SPG loyalty here so remember to use your SPG card if you have one. Also, they have a disproportionate amount of suites so it’s relatively easy to upgrade at the front desk, I highly recommend

trying that out if you didn’t book a suite ahead of time

THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

- You really should check out Tabula when you’re here. Anthony Bourdain recommends this restaurant and so do I.

REVIEW: Rosewood London (It’s pretty awesome)

This hotel is one that makes an immediate impression on you the minute you walk through the double gates.

The movie-esque entrance with gates manned by attendants in British Peacoats leads you to a courtyard complete with British house cars – Jaguars, Land Rovers, Aston Martin’s. This is one hotel that takes elegance and sophistication to a completely different level.

REVIEW: The Nines in Portland



The Nines in Portland is an interesting property. It was recently remodeled, and has a lot to offer in terms of location and contemporary style, but what detracted me from giving it a full recommendation are the smallish rooms and

mediocre bathrooms.

Located centrally in downtown Portland – the Nines is the hip luxury hotel in the SPG group. It's got a very cool farm to table restaurant, a very comfy lobby that I could spend hours in, and really great service from the staff.

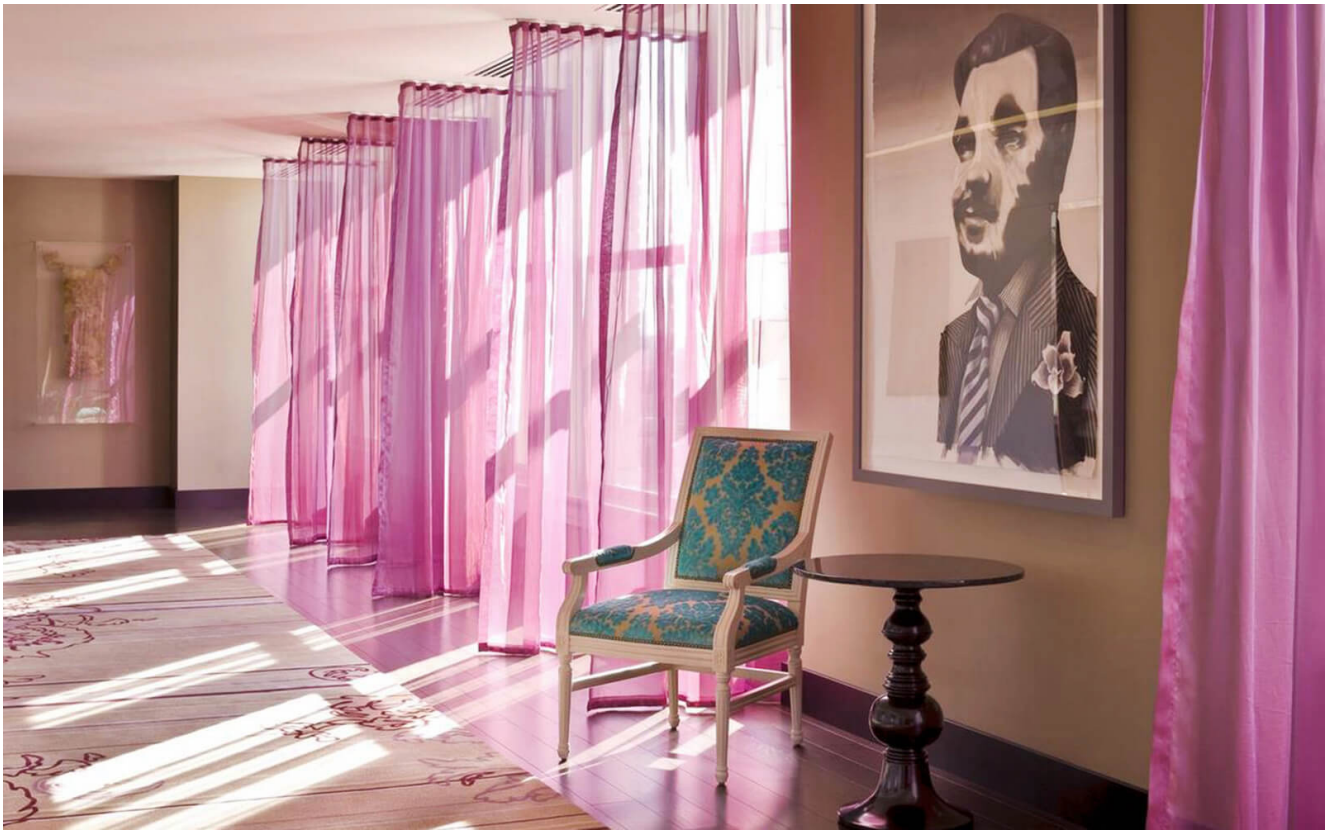


The rooms are small, but luxuriously appointed – however they do need a little more love and upkeep

I did get a chance to visit some other high end hotels in Portland, and I will say, if you're visiting the city – you should still stick with the Nines. It's got the combination of style and luxury – even if it's getting a bit long in the tooth, but location is very important in a city where you can walk to most places, and the service goes a long way.



The coolest part of this hotel is the greenhouse above the entire lobby – It gives what little natural light there is in Portland a chance at illuminating the interior of the building



Translucent pink curtains? It’s gotta be hip…

PROS:

- It’s trendy, contemporary, and I like the interior decor of this place
- The service is great – they’re attentive and quick at handling issues

CONS:

- Rooms are small and could use some upgrades

SECRETS:

- The bar in the lobby has an incredible selection of dark liquors

OTHER THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

- If you love Nike, I HIGHLY recommend getting some coupons off of Craiglist and checking out the factory store, there’s lots of great savings to be had there!
- Walk around downtown and just wander – there’s lots of

cool little nooks and crannies around, this is a town where you can just casually meander around without a plan and have a great time doing it

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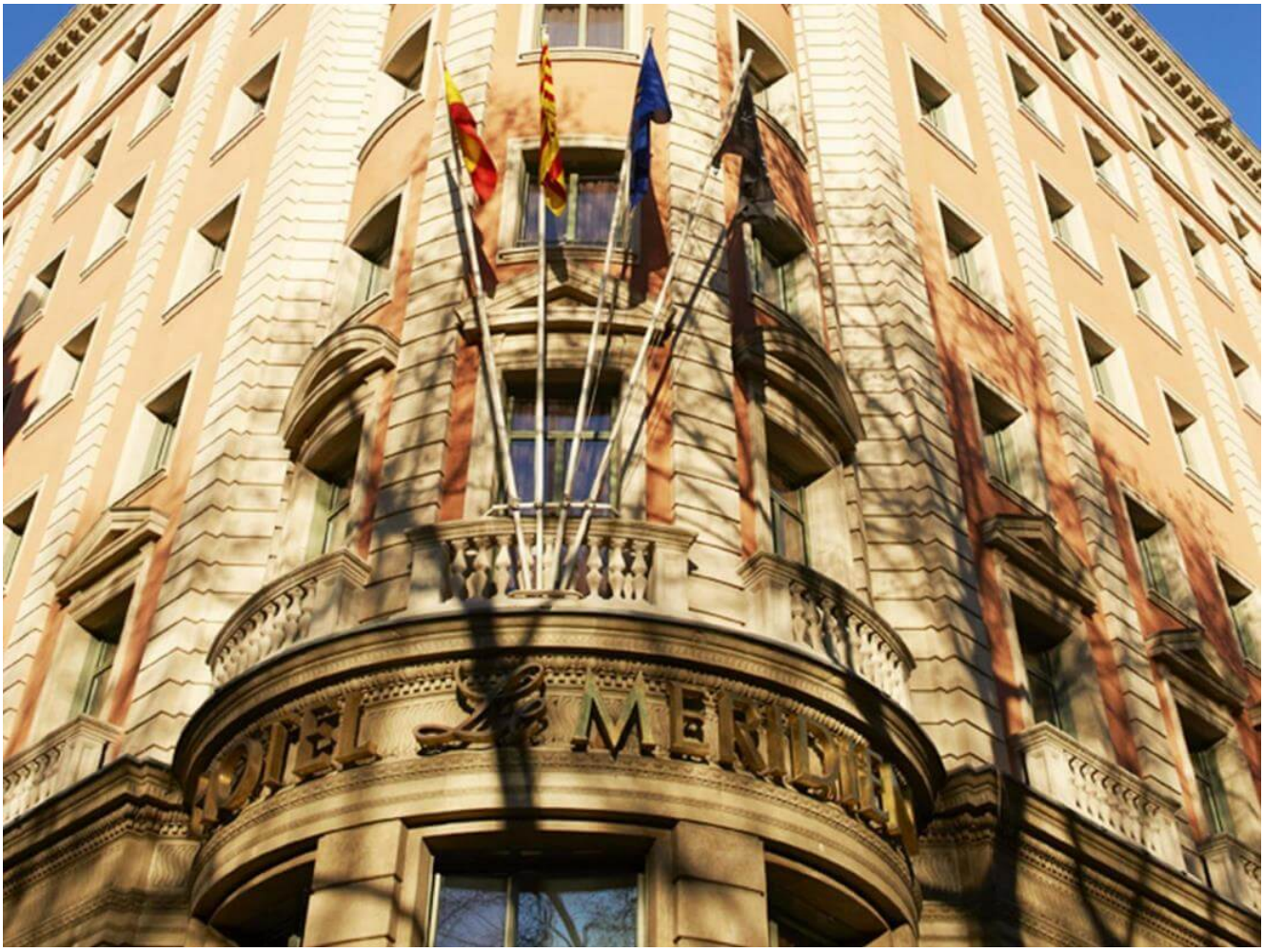
REVIEW: The Roosevelt – A Hollywood Staple

The Roosevelt – I have been to this hotel many times, because it’s the center of Hollywood when it comes to hotels. Drop by this place any random weekend and there’s an event happening, the pool is packed with fun-loving people, and the bars are flowing.

REVIEW: The Le Meridien Barcelona



This hotel is a little gem in the middle of Las Ramblas. Le Meridien's are often overlooked by travelers in lieu of larger name chain hotels, but they usually provide the boutique service and luxury that you would expect to find at something comparably higher in price.

I chose this hotel for an extended stay in Barcelona, which resulted in me actually calling this place my home for a bit of time in late Fall a few years back. It is set in a very centralized part of Barcelona – right in the middle of Las Ramblas, which is essentially the main street in the city. This made for extremely easy access to shops, restaurants, bars, cafe's, and pretty much everything else you could ask for when roaming and getting lost in Spain's best city metropolis (Madrid just isn't Barcelona if you ask me).

The lobby was a great place to have an afternoon cocktail, and the rooms were modernly appointed and clean with great

attentive staff. Although the property has over 200 rooms it felt much more like a boutique hotel where they knew your name and service was remarkably quick everytime I needed something brought to my room.



Modern rooms here felt cozy, sophisticated, and noticeably well insulated, making for some very restful nights in the city

The hotel really embodies something which I find to be an epitome of European cities that have been around for centuries but have since grown up with the times, beautiful old world exteriors – but with modern luxurious interiors. This is the city of Gaudi after all, and interior decor and character and soul should be present at any hotel worth its price of admission. I felt as if Miro inspired some of the furnishings, colors, and overall decor of this place.



Modern bathrooms with granite, wood, and clean lines made this place feel like it had more character than your average luxury hotel

Of course, the best part of this hotel is and always will be its location. I don’t think Le Meridien will ever let go of this property. I highly recommend it if you’re visiting Barcelona.



Barcelona is all about lounging, and this lobby was built specifically for that purpose. Kudos to SPG & Le Meridien!

PROS:

- Great lobby to socialize in and hang out during nighttime hours
- Rooms were modern but with lots of character and warmth
- Staff was very attentive for what is a relatively large hotel
- The location couldn’t be any better for walking to lots of great destinations

CONS:

- There are certainly many newer choices and I haven’t reviewed some other top hotels in Barcelona but this one is a solid choice

SECRETS:

- Eat breakfast here at the restaurant downstairs, it’s magnificent

THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

- I’m biased, but I think everyone should visit the Miro museum while in Barcelona

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REVIEW: Melia Cohiba Havana in Cuba



Yes I went to Cuba, and yes it was a pretty awesome time. If you are thinking of going I highly recommend booking immediately. The country is in flux and massive amounts of investment is going in and when that happens things will just

not be the same.

Part of the charm of Cuba is how quaint it is. It's lifted straight out of the 1950's and 60's, complete with oil burning Studebakers and bright yellow and green Ladas, buildings with the architecture of a completely different era, and sensibilities of the people that you wouldn't find anywhere else in the world. Whatever romantic notions of Cuba you might have, you'll want to experience them in person before it all changes.

Hotels in Cuba are far and few in between, especially when it comes to luxury accommodations. The Melia chain is a well respected Spanish hotel chain with quite a few properties just in Cuba alone. This is one of their premier properties located right on the waterfront and in the center of Havana.

We found this property through pure serendipity, as I was planning a last minute bachelor party for one of my best friends and it just so happened to fall on "Cigar Festival week" in Cuba. This was almost a non-starter for our trip until we found the Melia Cohiba.

When we got to the hotel we realized something that all American travelers should be aware of. They don't accept credit cards from US banks! So travelers beware, bring lots of cash!



Our rooms were pretty large and decently appointed, but if you don’t like hard beds – well, tough luck

Rooms were decently sized, clean and hospitable, but in most other countries this 5-star establishment would be more comparable to a 3-star hotel, imagine a Garden Inn or basic Hilton property.



This is the best it’ll ever look at a 5-star resort in Cuba. Come in with modified expectations and you’ll be just fine!

Staff were extremely courteous, the concierge was beyond

helpful in a country where internet is sparse and you can't just Google or Yelp something on a whim, and the bar was open till very late at night – also a godsend when you're not a native Spanish speaker and television options are scarce at best.

My favorite part of the hotel? The concierge – whom was kind enough to setup activities for us on a strict budget (remember how I said how we did not anticipate having to pay the hotel in cash? Well that took a big chunk out of what we had on hand). A rum & cigar factory visit, a ride around town in a convertible, a picnic up in the hills, and even a visit to a Paladres that was highly recommended. If we had not stayed at this hotel, we would've been SOL what with the last minute planning and lack of information accessible to us.

PROS:

- The concierges at the hotel really made our trip, they knew what to do and how to do it on a budget which was important to our group during this trip, and accommodated some very last minute reservations during what was a very busy week in Havana
- Large rooms which were great for our group, it's actually very tough to find 2-3 bedroom options at hotels which aren't exorbitantly expensive

CONS:

- There was a certain air of staleness throughout the property, but this was probably just because Cuba is still in its early stages of modernization. Take it for what it is when you go!
- The pool food is absolutely terrible at the hotel, I highly recommend against it. Go for the buffet which is much better on the second floor

SECRETS:

- Buy cigars at the hotel, you’re less likely to get fake ones from here than at shady vendors out in the city

OTHER THINGS TO DO IN HAVANA:

- Check out the dance halls and bars and clubs in the city. The Cuban people are extremely kind and they love to dance and you’re not getting the full experience if you don’t go out and mingle and dance with the locals. I promise you’ll have a great time!

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

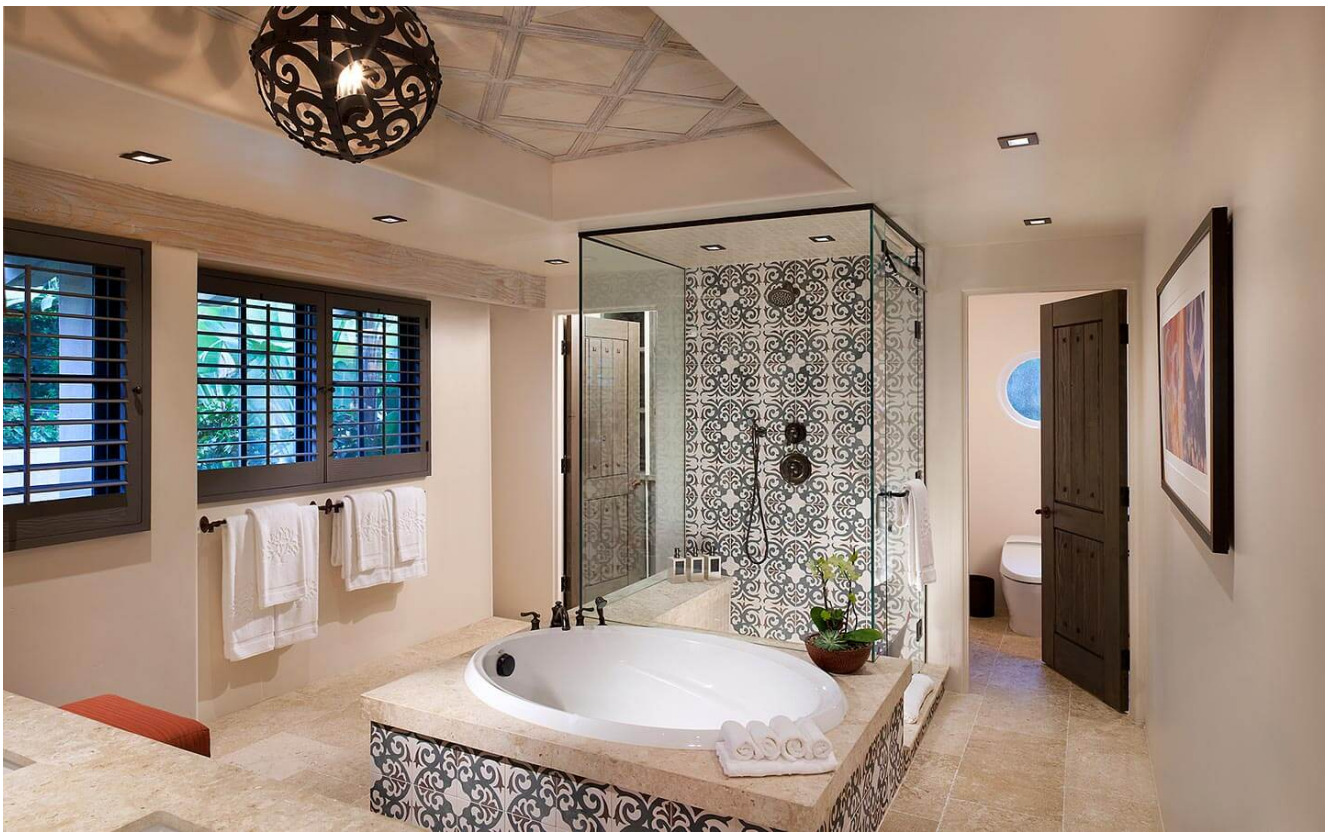
beautiful rooms – each one is considered a mini casa or “Casita” as they call them.



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 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: 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: 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!