HOTEL REVIEW: The Peninsula Tokyo – Near Perfect?

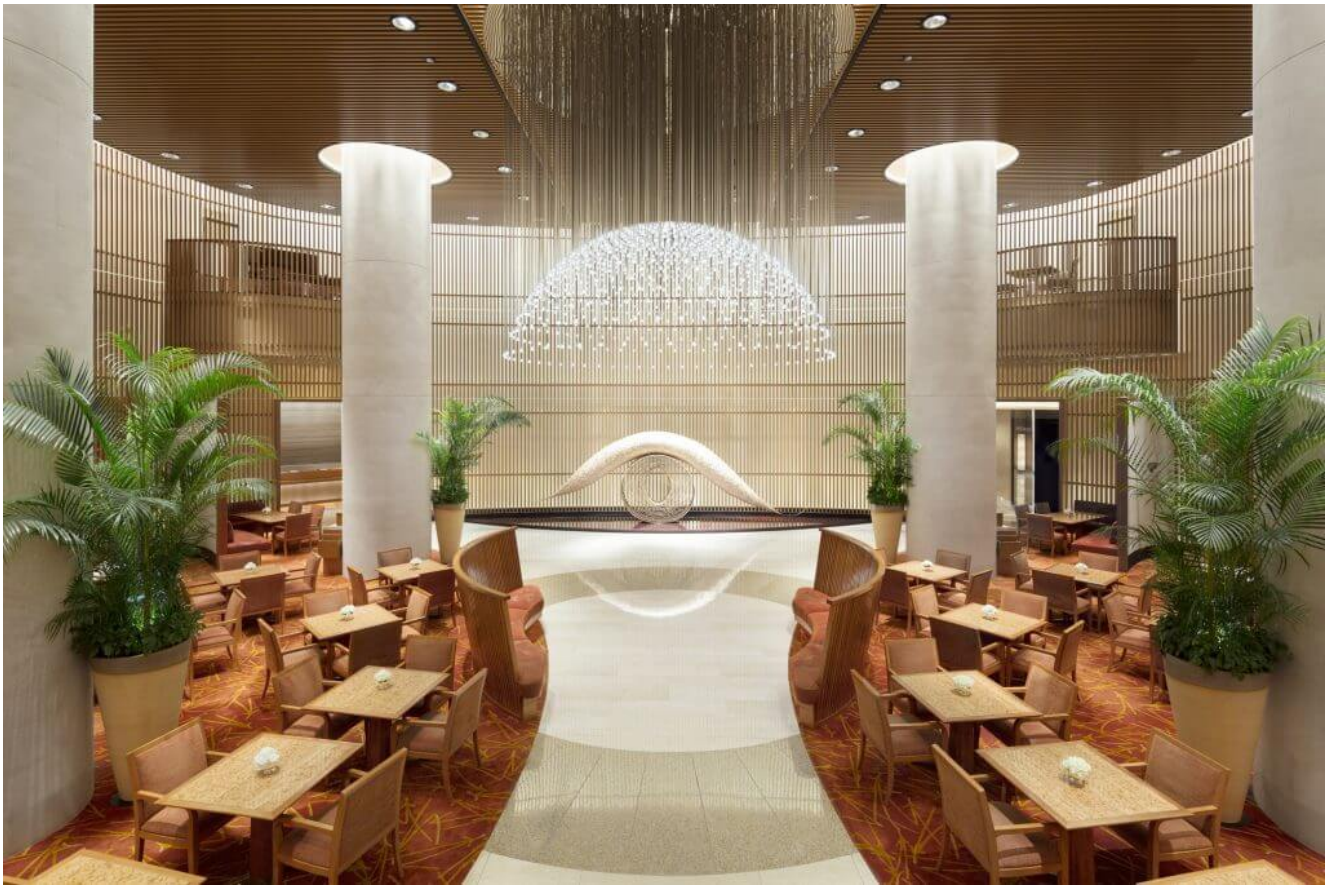
Let me preface this review with my opinion that there is NO modern place in the world currently like Japan (I'm writing in 2017 here folks). The country itself provides such a shell shock of an adventure in cultural amalgams, assaulting every one of the senses, and provides any traveler with stories to tell for days.

The Peninsula is a chain that prides itself on service and class. I would argue that in those regards, it stands at parity with the Four Seasons, the Ritz-Carlton or even the St. Regis. However, with only ten hotels in its chain as of this writing, it is relatively tough to find a Peninsula when traveling. If you're in Tokyo, however, I recommend you book here.

Lets start off with the physical details. The hotel is gorgeous with large suites, beautifully decorated and elegant public spaces, and impeccable attention to cleanliness and detail.



Right in the heart of Ginza!



The lobby is absolutely stunning

It’s tough to find sizable rooms in Japan, and especially in a great area with good value. Surprisingly, if you book far enough ahead, the Peninsula does so. As of this writing, the average prices about 30-50 days ahead are sub-$500 per night. Service is impeccable – one of my tests that I perform when at a hotel, is the purposeful littering of my socks, in order to test the efficacy of housekeeping. Not only did the staff at the Peninsula fold up my belongings during housekeeping service, but they also left a note with a pre-filled laundry service ticket, asking in a polite manner if I would like my laundry done.

There is also the added bonus of the house cars, one of which is a vintage Rolls Royce.



That’s the awesome vintage vehicle you can ride in

The location couldn’t be any better if you were trying to see

some action in the city. Ginza district is next to the Imperial palace and is known for its shopping. Japanese consumerism is unlike anything else in the world, there's stores in Ginza where you can create your own CD's, have custom decorated deserts made for you, buy luxury charcoal products, or pretty much find anything your consumerist heart desires.

There's tons of great options in Tokyo, but I cannot recommend more wholeheartedly – The Peninsula.



Did I mention the heated floors in the bathrooms?

PROS:

- Service here is bar-none
- Absolutely stunning bathrooms with heated floors and electronic bidets
- Location is great, walk everywhere in the Ginza district

CONS:

- Its so nice you don’t want to leave (I know, that’s not really a con)

SECRETS:

- There are often specials run at this hotel due to intense competition amongst the luxury chains in Japan and declining tourism. Make sure to do google searches when planning your trip for 4th night frees, or seasonal specials

THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

- Timeout has a great article on local shopping.

REVIEW: The Thompson in Seattle

Seattle has seen an arrival of quite a few new hotels in the past few years.

The conflux of fresh restaurants, retail shops, and convention spaces has led to the need for greater capacity. The Thompson is one of those new hotels, and those of you who have been to

Los Angeles or New York will probably recognize the boutique chain, known for the famous Roosevelt Hotel in Hollywood. The style is modern and hip, with a bit of art deco thrown in.

The hotel itself is centrally located next to the historic waterfront quarter of Downtown Seattle. It’s part of an entire “Condotel” complex, which includes residential units alongside hotel units. The lobby itself is a cozy affair, with a sitting room right next to the check-in desk. There is also an expansive restaurant in the lobby which makes incredible cocktails and serves a great Sunday Brunch.

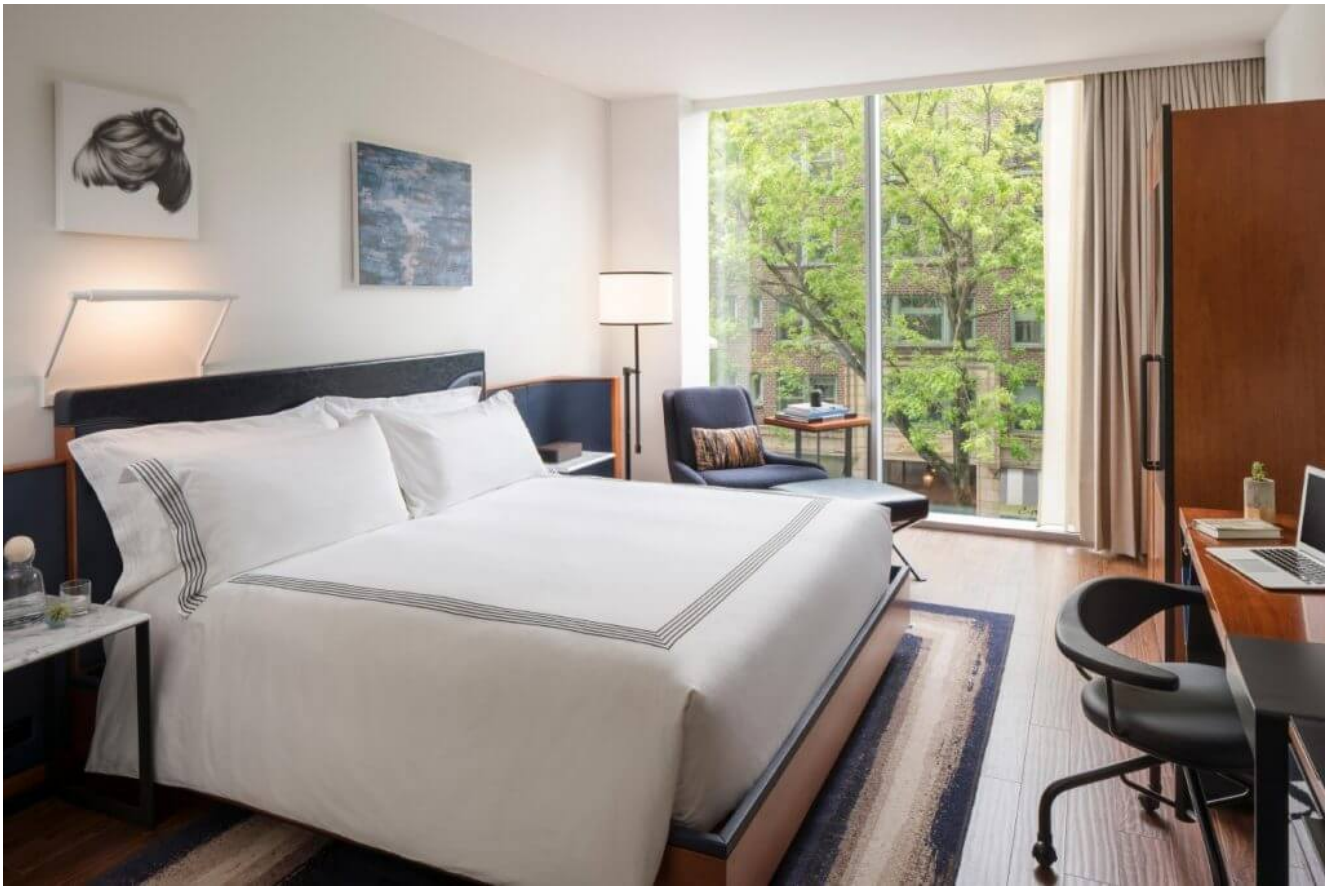


It’s a cozy lobby, which feels nice and homey in (sometimes) overcast Seattle

The rooms are well designed, albeit with cold bathroom surfaces, and the modern design has enough character to distinguish itself from the other bread and butter hotels such as the Hyatt or Westin.



It’s a nice bathroom, but a bit cold – especially in a city like Seattle



The rooms themselves are warm though…

Unfortunately, because of the location of the hotel, most of the rooms don't have views. There are obstructions on all sides unless you are on one of the higher floors, and this makes for a hard time when choosing a room at the property.

The service is also suffering, with staff that mean well, but appear to be new and not well versed (at the time of this writing in December 2016). I'm sure this will change as the hotel gets a bit more traffic.

The pinnacle of the property is NEST which boasts itself as the highest rooftop bar and lounge in Seattle. The views are outstanding up top, but the space is small, with half of it dedicated to an outdoor patio which is unusable most of the year.

Overall, I would recommend this property if you are looking for something hip and unique in Downtown Seattle. However, if you prefer a more seasoned hotel staff and consistent service,

I would recommend the Grand Hyatt, the W Seattle, or the Four Seasons.

PROS:

- New Rooms, you can still smell the fresh paint (December 2016 writing)
- Rooftop views from Nest are incredible and it’s a great place to hang
- Great food at the lobby restaurant – especially for Brunch

CONS:

- Staff are warm and hospitable, but seem to lack the experience and knowledge of more seasoned staff at other local hotels
- The bathrooms are very cold and sterile – albeit very cool to look

SECRETS:

- Nest is often booked for private events so be sure to check ahead of time before going upstairs or even booking a reservation at the hotel. This is one of the primary reasons to stay her and you want to make sure you get to experience it!

THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

- Check out the BEST clam chowder in the US at Pikes Place Chowder which is just down the street
- There is an oyster reverse happy hour also nearby at Elliots Oyster House and it is exquisite if you love Oysters. Their selection and freshness can’t be beat almost anywhere else in the country.

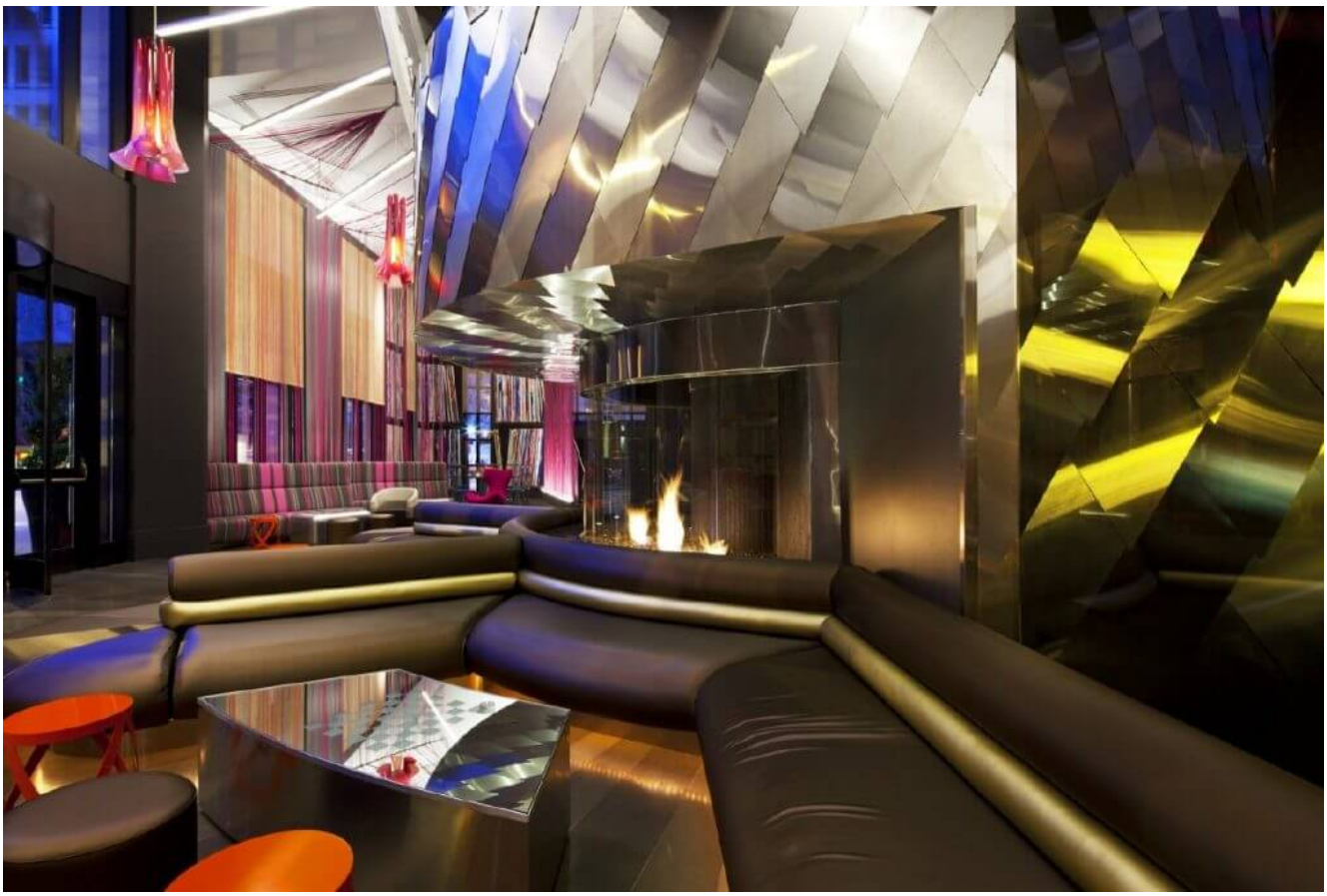
REVIEW: The W Hotel in Seattle has the BEST BED in the world

I always check out the W hotel in whichever city i'm in, and now that Marriott and SPG have merged, points can be transferred between the two – making life much easier if you're a fan of both brands.

The W in Seattle is an older property, but was recently renovated (in 2016). How is it now? Pretty darn good. Why would one choose the W Seattle with the dearth of luxury hotels in the city you ask? Well, the views are one reason, and two, the service.

I couldn't recommend the W in Seattle up until this year because it was getting a bit long in the tooth, but now with its renovation – it's one of the go-to's in Seattle.

When you enter, you're greeted by the expansive lobby which organically melds into the bar and the lounge area. It's a cozy space with an oversized fireplace and lots of secluded seating.



The Lobby, it’s nice

The rooms themselves are a nice size, which is hard to find in downtown Seattle. They’re also renovated and have some of THE comfiest beds i’ve ever experienced (Yes SPG, your beds ARE Heavenly). Now i’ve slept in Heavenly bed setups at other SPG properties, but this one was exceptional. I don’t know if it was because the rooms were so new, or because they had a different mattress top at this one but i’d love to hear reader’s opinions!

Now if you wanted to see what the views looked like check out the pic below. The combination of great location and height of the building makes this one of the nicest properties around for expansive views of the beautiful Seattle skyline. There’s only a handful of luxury hotels with views like this and the W Seattle is one of them. The icing on the cake is that most of the rooms at the W have a view because of how the building is situated on a hill.



That’s the renovated room there

The service is impeccable at this property, the gym has new equipment now, and did I mention the bed or the views?

PROS:

- VIEWS VIEWS VIEWS!
- Service is impeccable – I think it was on par with some Ritz-Carlton’s i’ve stayed at
- The remodel did this hotel good

CONS:

- It has low ceilings – I really had to reach here

SECRETS:

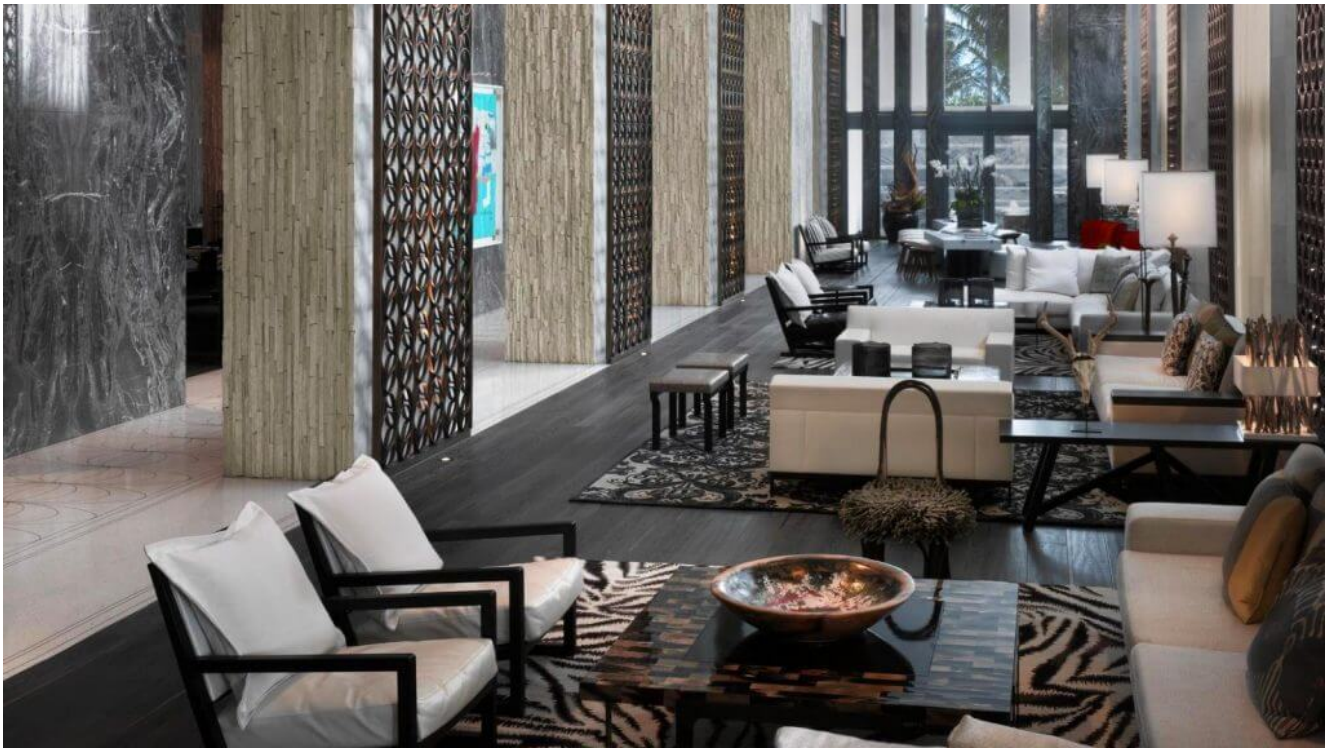
- If you’re an SPG member ask them for drink tickets, they’re usually pretty accommodating here!

REVIEW: The W Hotel in South Beach

So I visit South Beach quite often, and most of that is driven by the fact that there are so many cool hotels to explore and stay at. Yes, the beaches are nice, the scenery isn’t too shabby, and the food and entertainment scene really are about as close to Ibiza as you can get without hopping over the Atlantic, but I really have to give it up to the choices of hotels in Miami Beach.

The W Hotel there is no exception, and it is probably one of my favorite W’s that i’ve visited. There’s two reasons for that – the room selections, and the incredible pool area.

Lets start with the lobby – it’s a marble affair with plenty of seating areas and one of my favorite restaurants – Mr. Chow’s. The ceilings are magnificently tall, and there is a definite air of modern opulence that you feel the minute you walk in.



That’s the lobby, it’s pretty

However, lets get to the bread and butter – the rooms. It’s no secret that i’m usually a bigger fan of hotels that have a uniqueness to them. This can often be tough to find in chain hotels, but the W manages to do this quite often even while still instilling a “W-ness” to a property. At the South Beach location, you get a choice of over a dozen types of room categories. The result is some really cool floorplans including ones with staircases that lead to rooftop jacuzzis, and other rooms with their own gardens or multiple balconies. They do all possess the same styling, however, which is not a bad thing because the white wood and gloss black furniture gives a futuristic look to the hotel keeping in line with the Asian-mod-deco look of the entire place.



Check out that spiral staircase which leads to…



…a sweet rooftop jacuzzi

The other favorite feature of mine is the enormous pool and the surrounding pool deck area. There seems to always never be enough space to lounge around at most South Beach hotels, but this has never been a problem for me at the W. If you want a cabana, they've got plenty of those, and if you just want a chair, well they have plenty of those as well. The lush greenery, the dining tables spread amongst the palm tree forest, these are all calming and relaxing features that make this one of my favorite pools in South Beach.

PROS:

- Pool area is one of the best in a South Beach hotel
- Rooms are spectacular, great views and incredible floorplans

CONS:

- Often incredibly expensive, you do get what you pay for, however

SECRETS:

- If you are an SPG member, the combo points + cash works really well at this property for securing great deals

THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

- Check out my other South Beach articles to read more about this! I've covered it extensively in my review of the SOHO House: South Beach

---

REVIEW: The Modern Honolulu

This hotel is pretty unique in its own right, because if I were to drop you off here and you took a quick look around you'd probably think you were in Ibiza, or Miami, or somewhere else a bit hipper or party-oriented.

The Modern Honolulu is truly one of the only contemporary art-deco-esque hotels you can stay at in Hawaii, not just Honolulu, but at any of the islands (save maybe the Andaz Maui).

The hotel is a small one by Hawaii standards, with "only" 352 rooms. They're all beautifully decorated, however, with white contemporary furniture and artwork reminiscent of of 90's Miami. The common spaces, however, are what really make this hotel one of my favorites in Oahu.



Check out that awesome lobby. That bookcase opens and closes too!

The lobby hosts some really cool cocktail parties during the weekends, and the pool is a teak affair which makes you feel like you’re lounging on a very nice yacht.



Check out that pool deck. Got Teak?

Many people make the mistake of booking a hotel on Oahu on the beach, but that’s not why you visit Oahu. Sure, there are beautiful stretches on the North shore, near Hanauma bay, and even in Waikiki, but you visit Oahu because you want to take in the culture of Hawaiian living, the incredible cuisine, and because you want to mingle and socialize in paradise. Leave the beach time to places like Maui, the Big Island, and Kauai.



If you read the name of the hotel you'd know what you were to find in the rooms

Did I mention that the service is also impeccable at this property? The staff was willing to help in any way possible at all times, and they did an incredible job making sure my party and I were well taken care of.

PROS:

- The only option on the island for a modern hotel
- Amazing pool area with teak wood decks and a great view
- The service is top notch

CONS:

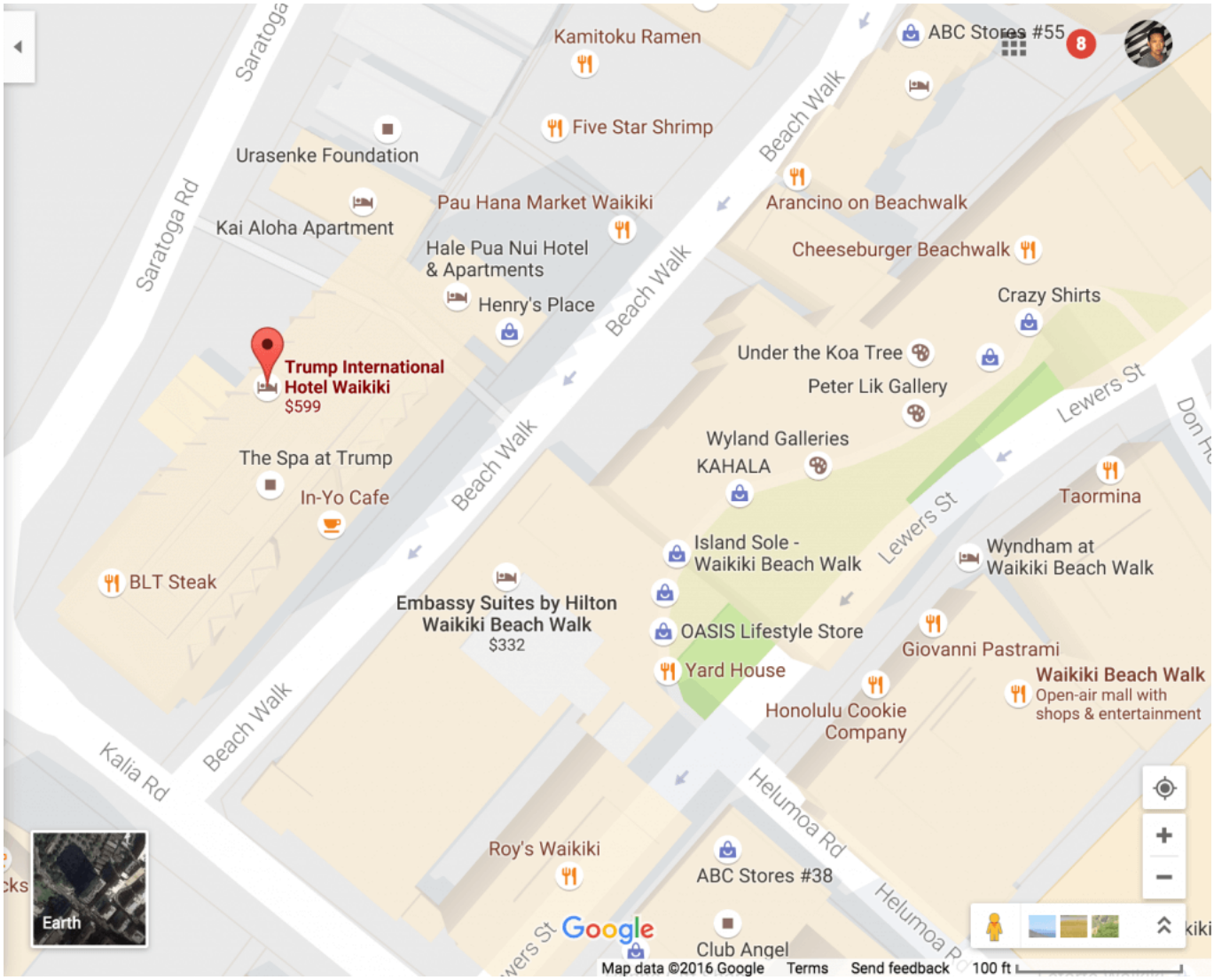
- There's no beachfront, but I don't consider this that necessary at a hotel on Oahu

SECRETS:

- The pool chairs get taken up pretty quickly, so I highly recommend calling ahead to reserve them, this is rare that a hotel lets you do that.

THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

- Food trucks in Oahu are huge, especially the well known shrimp truck – Giovannis. However, you can avoid the long drive and the line if you go to this little known food truck area in Waikiki right behind the Trump hotel. See the map below where it says Five Star Shrimp (north middle side of the map)



REVIEW: The New York EDITION is almost a Ritz-Carlton

If you've been following Marriott Group recently you'll see that there's a new chain of hotels that they have been adding to their roster, named the EDITION hotels. These have been marketed alongside the Ritz-Carlton group, and can be booked via Ritz-Carlton's app and website. They are, from what I can tell, the younger more fashionable outgoing sibling of the family.

One of my first stays at the EDITION happened in New York recently. Located at 24th and Madison, on the East side of Madison Square Park, the New York EDITION Is smack dab in lower midtown just above East Village. The location is pretty nice if you are looking to spend some time in downtown, and some time in uptown but want to avoid the mess that is known as Times Square. The hotel itself is a beautiful affair. When you walk in you're greeted by a sunken lobby built in marble hurricane candles (at night), and uplighting built into the ground. The feeling is sultry, sexy, and modern. Modern couches are draped in faux fur, and the far end of the lobby is adorned by a fireplace, giving the whole lobby a warmth and homey feel.



The beckoning lobby, fireplace, fur, and all

The elevators are also pretty unique, in that they’re electronic. You enter your floor number and an elevator bank

is assigned to you, some might say it feels a bit corporate, but I think it makes waiting for an elevator something of the past in this place. The rooms are on the smaller side, and extremely modern. I appreciated the decor but felt that the rooms were a little cold. You would think with the wood floors, the luxurious textures, and the small space they would feel cozier, but I think the use of all the off-palette white and tan resulted in a colder feel.



The rooms have a tan uniform color palette to them. This opens up the small spaces a lot

The second floor lobby is really a different affair in itself. It oddly looks nothing like the rest of the hotel, but hosts some incredible mixologists and a cool restaurant which I never got a chance to dine in. The bar itself is called the “Gold Bar”, which made no sense other than through the indication of portraits with gold frames. The common room

space next to it with the pool table was also an odd choice for this hotel, but only because in my mind the hotel was supposed to be an offshoot of a Ritz-Carlton.



Yes, it’s called the Gold Bar

Overall, my experience was almost exactly what I expected it to be. It was as if I was staying at a Ritz that wasn’t quite a Ritz, but could’ve been one with a little more grandeur and magnificence. All said, I’d love to check out more of these in the future!

PROS:

- Marriott Group rewards and benefits!
- Price wise, it’s a little more affordable than a comparable Ritz-Carlton in the area
- Very chic and modern, it felt like a luxe nouveau-riche hotel in a city that is constantly reinventing itself

CONS:

- The rooms felt a bit cold and austere to me

SECRETS:

- It is very easy to miss the bar which is on the third floor, and I highly recommend visiting it for a drink and a snack

THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

- This one is kind of a no-brainer. You have to visit the extremely close Shake Shack, which is in Madison Square Park right next to hotel less than a stone's throw away. This is a New York burger staple and one of my favorites!

REVIEW: Le Meridien New Orleans – The Newest Luxury Hotel in the City

So i've been to New Orleans a few times, and have had the pleasure of staying at quite a few hotels there. This one, is so far, one of my favorite. Let me tell you why. It's NEW! This used to be the W New Orleans (not to be confused with the W New Orleans in the French Quarter). The last time I visited this property it was back in 2014 and it was definitely showing its age. The renovation on the property and rebranding of it as a Le Meridien happened within the last year in 2016, and when I say renovation, I don't mean a fresh coat of paint and some lipstick. SPG pulled out all the stops on this one, gutting the building and changing the entire

layout of the common spaces.

The result, as you can see below… Is stunning!



This is the front desk. It’s nice.

You are greeted by stunning textures, surfaces, the combination of marble, antique wood, and mirrored surfaces is something that is a nice juxtaposition from the city of New Orleans, which itself has lots of character, but is older and antique in character.

The lobby is a great place to have a coffee, a drink (which you can walk around with in NOLA – just like in Vegas), and relax.

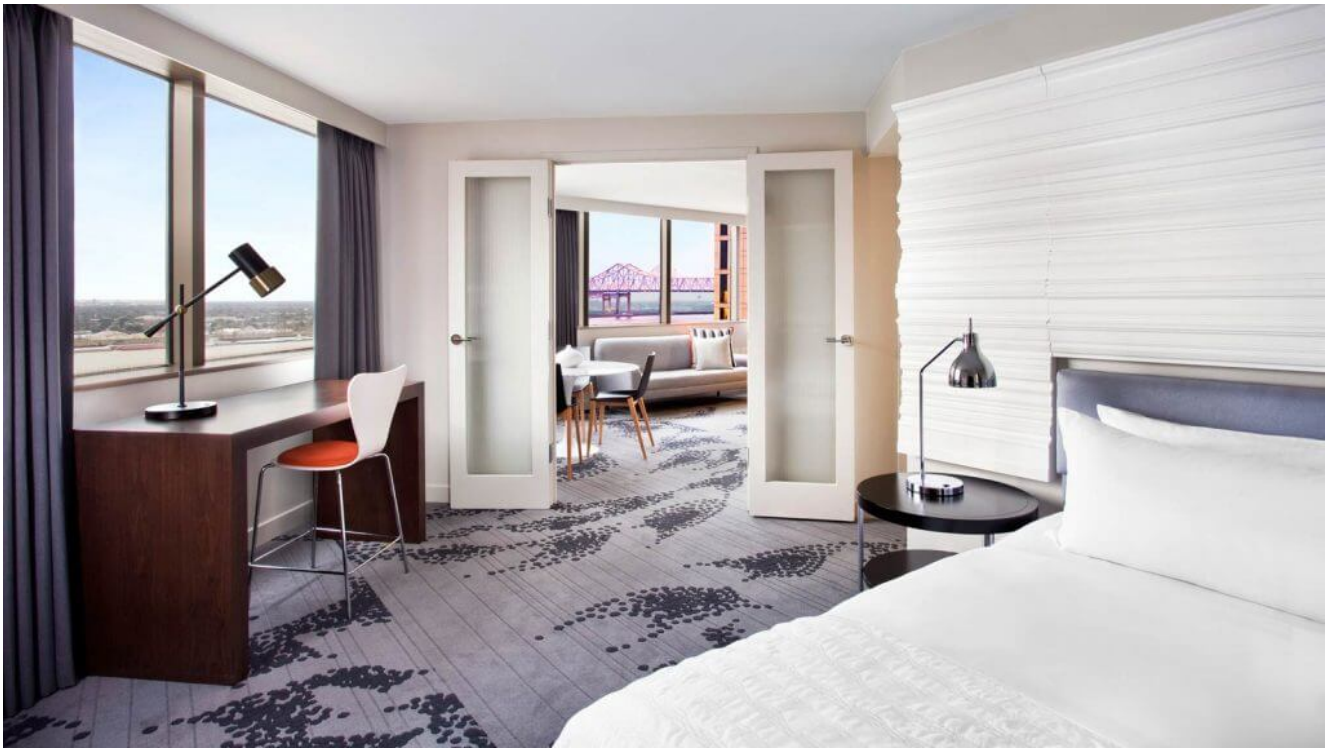


Yup. That’s an awesome lobby area too. Cozy, visually interesting, and thoroughly relaxing

The rooms themselves have gone through some pretty significant renovations. They have beautiful bathrooms in particular, with minimalist countertops and low edge sinks – my personal favorite. The building itself is pretty tall and centralized, next to the Harrah’s casino and only about 5 blocks away from Bourbon street.



The very sexy renovated bathrooms – if you can’t tell i’m a big fan



This is one of the smaller suites, notice the views, the textured walls, and the bright lighting

To top it off, the service is top notch, it is definitely a hotel where you get a great value, and the gym up top really takes the cake, with 360 degree views (if you actually decide to workout while you're in NOLA).

PROS:

- Newly renovated, it's a great place to be! (2016)
- It's got a great lobby to hangout in, with indoor and outdoor spaces
- Prices are highly competitive

CONS:

- Some would say location, since it's not directly on Bourbon Street, but this can be a personal preference

SECRETS:

- The hotel has high capacity, so more likely than not you

can ask for a late check-in and then ask for a higher floor with a great view

THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

- Everyone knows that New Orleans is the city of food and soul, and I highly recommend having breakfast over at the Ruby Slipper Cafe
- Of course there's the requisite Cafe Du Monde
- And lastly, Commander's Palace – with old school group waiters/waitresses and good ol' southern fare
- But, the one thing you NEVER want to miss, is a ride on an airboat to go into the swamps and see some Alligators. They're harder to spot in the winter time as the water gets cold, but if you choose a tour company that tends to take their airboats out on the side of the Gulf you're likely to see more of them. Airboat Adventures is one of those tour companies I highly recommend! (I've had bad luck with others)

REVIEW: The London Hotel in New York Is Just Plain Awesome

Lets just start by saying that there are a LOT of hotels in New York, just as there are a lot of people/restaurants/cars/pick your item here. I've managed to stay in approximately a dozen different ones but always seem to come back to the same handful. The London in New York is in that handful.



The London’s signature entrance, you go to enough of these around the world and you know what you’re gonna walk into

What makes this hotel unique amongst the sea of possibilities really is the simplicity of it. You know you’ll get modern accommodations, great service, and no frills. Some might call it austere, but I call it New York. Most of the times you choose a hotel in NY based on where in town you want to be. This one is great if you’re spending time uptown or midtown. Its prime location near MOMA, Times Square, and Central Park make it a holiday time favorite of mine.



The lobby is classic black and white, timeless and elegant

What I love the most about the London, though, are the views. It’s one of the tallest buildings in midtown, and with that comes some pretty epic straightline views all across the city. Make sure to ask for the highest room possible when staying here. The rooms themselves have these beautiful aged wood floors, and simple modern furnishings. I wouldn’t call this the plushiest hotel, but the simplicity of it sits well in my book.



The views. That’s the best part of this hotel by far

PROS:

- The Epic views
- The location puts you in midtown without putting you next to Times Square
- Did I mention the views?

CONS:

- Not a lot of frills at this hotel, what you see is what you get

SECRETS:

- The best views IMO are of Central Park so look for that north facing room if you can!

THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

- There’s too many things to mention in NYC, but one of my first stops is always one of the MomoFuku chain of restaurants.

REVIEW: The Island Hotel in Newport Beach – The Best spot for 4th of July Fireworks in Orange County

So for those who haven't been to the Orange County coast of California, you may not be familiar with the swathe of land that covers approximately 60 miles from Northern tip to Southern tip. This swathe of land also happens to have an incredible variety of hotels from resorts such as the Rancho Valencia in the south, to the Island Hotel in Newport Beach all the way on the North. My preference has always been for the resorts on the Southern end of Orange County (Including the Ritz-Carlton in Laguna, the Monarch Beach in Laguna, or the Montage also in Laguna).

However, sometimes you need to be in a particular place and don't feel like driving an hour just to get to somewhere you need to be. If it so happens that you need to be spending time in Huntington Beach or Newport Beach – then your best option, in my opinion, is the Island Hotel.

This property isn't particularly new, nor is it particularly flashy, but what it does have it does very well. The tone of the property is muted and beach-reminiscent. Pastel tones carry the property and make it feel light and airy and even though it is still a few miles from the Ocean one would think they were right on the beach when entering the lobby.



Check out those pastel beachy tones

The rooms themselves have great expansive views, as the building is exceptionally tall and although they’re not as updated as I would personally prefer, they still have a well-built luxurious quality to them and the mattresses are comfortable, the entertainment systems are updated, and bathrooms are kept exquisitely clean.



The rooms aren’t the most modern, but they’re comfy and luxurious still

My favorite features at the hotel are the poolside fireplace – a great place to have a glass of wine and unwind for the night, and the rooftop lounge – replete with awesome views all the way to Los Angeles and of course towards the Ocean.



This is where you want to spend your time when you're here



Oh yea, spend some time up top as well. It's on the 12th floor

PROS:

- This hotel has excellent service, and even though its not the newest property it has been very well maintained
- The fireplace and rooftop lounge really are excellent features that you don't find in many hotels in the area
- They have an incredible room service menu and it's 24/7

CONS:

- The hotel could use a slight update, things are wearing well but it wouldn't hurt to refresh the colors or furniture to something more modern

SECRETS:

- I highly recommend checking last minute rates at this hotel, they are often pretty cheap. Also, you can often get a good room upgrade once you get to the hotel, the suites are pretty great bargains and are very nice – a step up from the standard accommodations and worth the extra $$.

THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

- Check out Balboa Island – rent a Duffy and cruise the harbor, eat frozen dipped bananas at the original Banana Stand
- This is the best place to spend 4th of July, but book early, as the Island Hotel is the BEST place to watch fireworks down in Orange County (the height of the building really lends itself to this)

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!