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

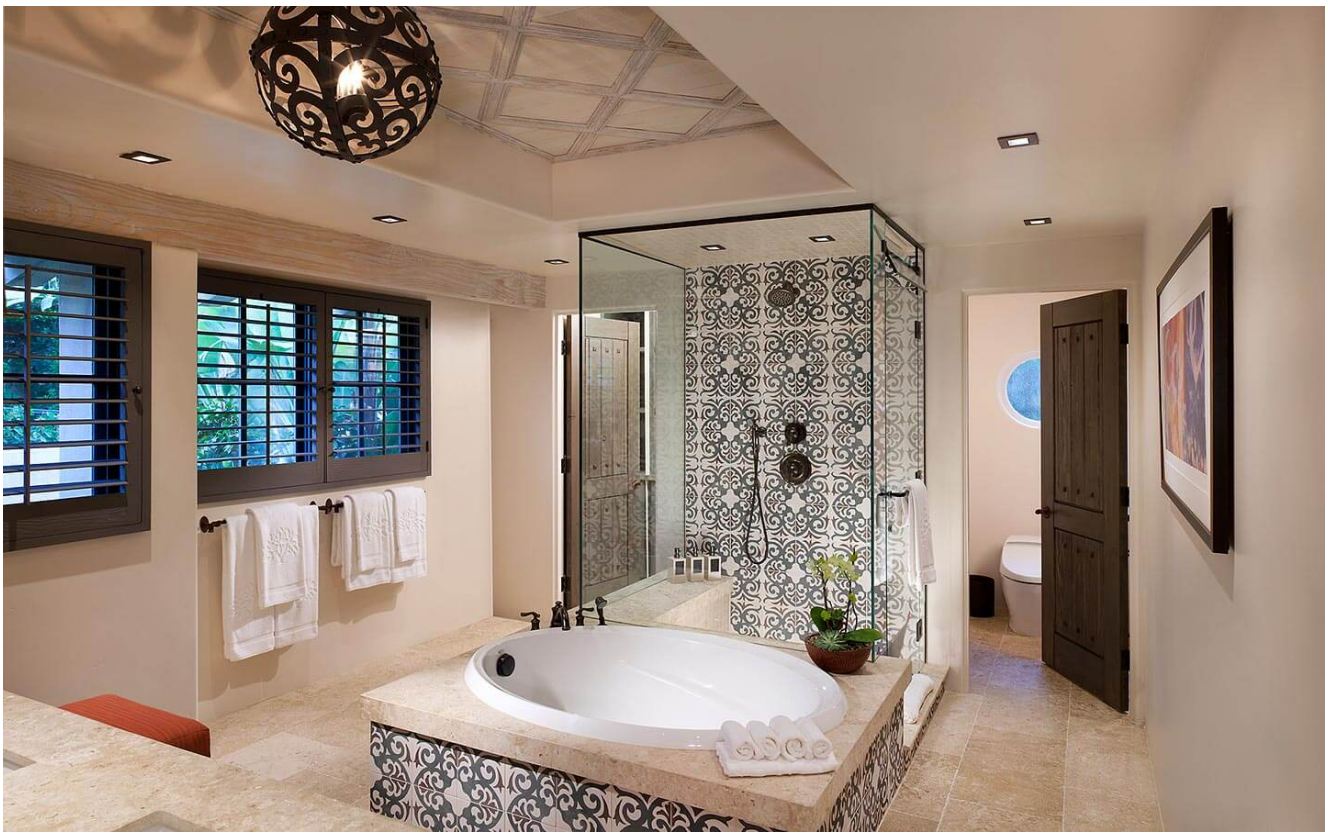
beautiful rooms – each one is considered a mini casa or “Casita” as they call them.



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

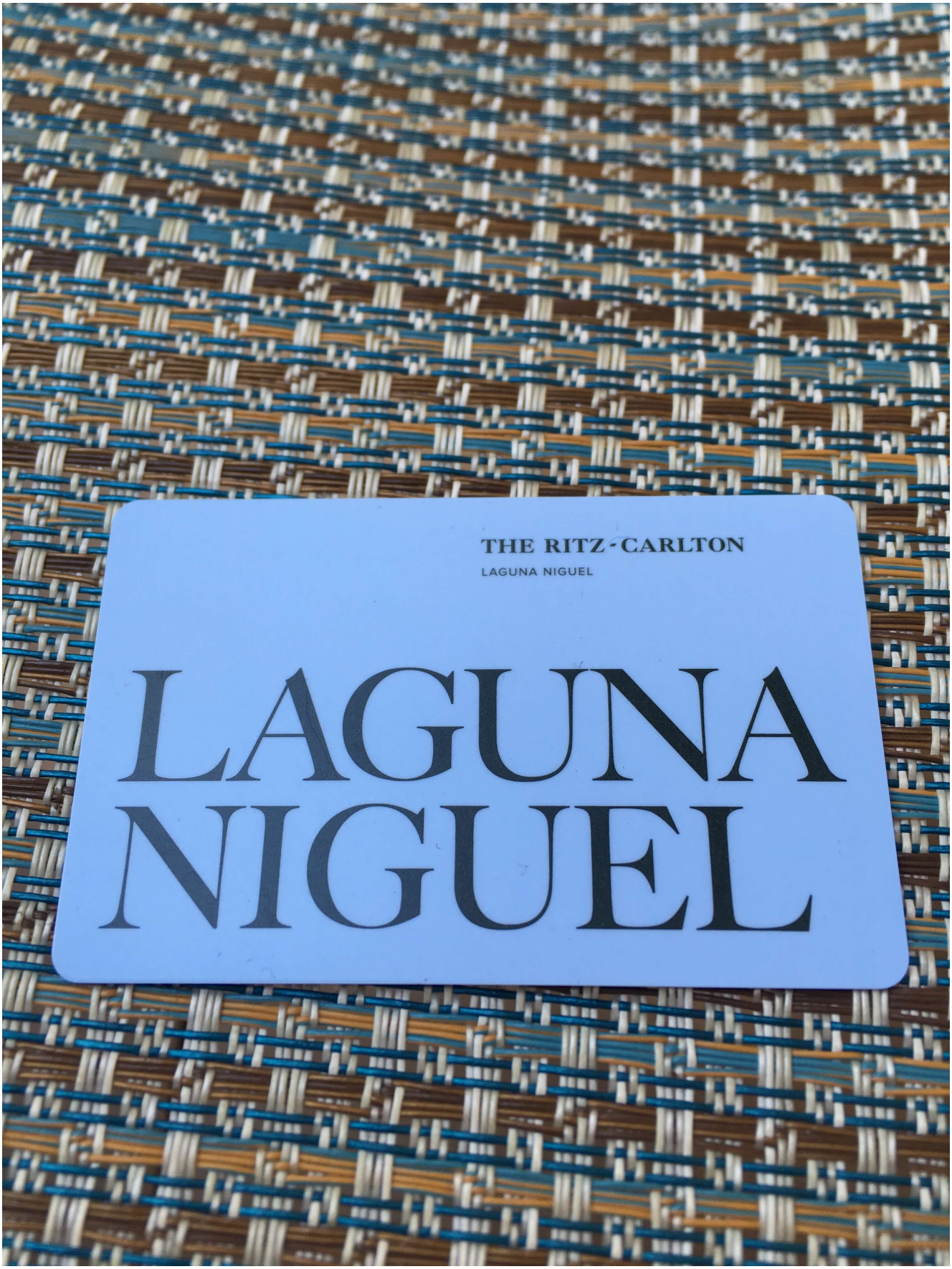
SECRETS:

- 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: 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: Four Seasons Buenos Aires



It’s not the Ritz. But it might still be just as good.

On a recent trip to four South American countries – Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and Colombia, I tried to stay at as many Ritz Carlton’s as I could find. Turns out, I couldn’t find many.

Being as how this was my first time to Buenos Aires, I started off on Tripadvisor and looked up the best 4 and 5 star hotels. It all came down to three choices if you were looking for the top-ranked luxury hotels in the city – The Alvear, the Park Hyatt, and the Four Seasons. I ended up choosing the Four Seasons because of its centralized location, the quality of the restaurants that it contained, and because of the relatively competitive rate. What I have never liked about

the Four Seasons, however, is their lack of a competitive loyalty program. It's not a part of a large chain like the Ritz is (Marriott), or something like the St. Regis (SPG). That meant that the $1800 or so I would spend over a few nights would only go onto my Chase Sapphire as double hotel points, but I would not receive any preferential treatment as I would have with my Marriott or SPG status'.

The hotel is awfully pretty at night, and as is the case with Buenos Aires there was always something going on until the wee hours of the night. I returned from a discoteque one morning at 3AM just to see that the lobby bar was still relatively crowded and full of people dancing and drinking.



As for the rooms and service it was the small things that counted and made me smile. The bathrooms contained L'Occitane products, the building, although retro in character, had upgrades throughout. The gym had a barbell which is very rare in many places (I'm often relegated to weight machines which I hate), and the staff went above and

beyond during m stay. For example, the spa was supposed to be open when I had come back from a day of sightseeing, but 25 minutes before the steam room/spa amenities were supposed to be closed the doors were already locked. A quick visit to the front desk and security came to open up the entire spa – which ended up being a private spa experience. In another instance, I needed extra travel power adapters. I asked for a few and the front desk sent up a total of five!

With luxury hotels so close in 90% of the experience, it is always the extra few small touches that set aside one property from another. It was nice to see that the Four Seasons took those extra steps to make their guests' experience stellar and above and beyond!



You can’t have proper tea/coffee time if you don’t have trays for those tea cups!



Incredible Alfajores that the hotel made in-house. These are a national snack in Argentina, they’re a flaky pastry-like cookie with dulce de leche in the middle.

PROS:

- Check out the gym – not everyone works out when they're traveling but this one is especially nice and has a great view out the rooftop of the hotel
- The concierge's really know what they're talking about. Came to Buenos with a list of things I already wanted to do based off of other friend's suggestions and tripadvisor but the concierge's had some really good insight and other similar places to suggest based on my list coming in

CONS:

- There was a lapse in service when we tried to get reservations at either the lounge or the restaurant last minute. The concierge and front desk were not able to accommodate our small (2-person) party even though we were guests of the hotel – you don't see this often at a 4-5 star property

SECRETS:

- Argentina is known for its meat, and the steakhouse in the hotel lobby is impressive. Be sure to have a meal in Elena which is downstairs – but make reservations if it's a Thursday-Saturday because they do get booked.

OTHER STUFF TO DO IN BUENOS AIRES:

- Food is superb here but by far my favorite thing in Buenos Aires (After going to about 10 different restaurants) were the empanadas at 1810. Try the Humitas, a corn ground and wrapped in husks then stuffed. It's a contentious issue when you ask the locals who makes the best Empanadas but more times than not 1810 is at the top of most of the local's lists.
- Check out Uruguay! Take the BuqueBus Express which for about $150 R/T gets you to Uruguay and back for a day

trip in Colonia del Sacramento. It's a beautiful UNESCO heritage site, and eat at the quaintly beautiful Charco Hotel. It's right on the water and has an amazing selection of wines and beautifully executed flavorful dishes.

REVIEW: The Turtle Bay Resort in Oahu

The very last trip I took before throwing my life on the internets was this one a few weeks ago at the end of April. I will **preface this by saying, It's Not the Ritz, but it ain't bad.**

I attended my buddy's wedding and stayed at two different locations while on the trip. The first few days were at the Turtle Bay North Shore Resort which happened to be my very first experience there. The last few days were at the Trump Waikiki.



The views from the hotel were exquisite, and although I was a bit hesitant to pay the close to $3,000 tab for just a short three nights (In their defense I did book very last minute, and opted for an UPGRADED ROOM – be careful to do this as some of the other rooms are OLD), I must say that it was quite an experience and well worth it. A majority of my expenses also coincided with in-resort activities such as the spa (well worth it), and the dining experiences throughout the hotel.

Total Payments **-2941.98**

Balance Due **0.00**

I have received the goods and / or services in the amount shown hereon. I agree that my liability for this bill is not waived and agree to be held personally liable in the event that the indicated person, company, or association fails to pay for any part or the full amount of these charges. If a credit card charge, I further agree to perform the obligations set forth in the cardholder's agreement with the issuer.

Guest Signature: _____

57-091 Kamehameha Hwy, Kahuku, Oahu, Hawaii 96731
Phone 808.293.6000 | Toll Free 1.800.203.3650 | Reservations 1.866.827.5321



So as I test and iterate my blog i'm going to start off with a format where I go with the pro's and con's of the hotel that I chose (usually a Ritz, but not in all cases), and then a synopsis of whether I think it was a good choice. I'll also throw in some interesting tidbits of the actual location and places I think are worth visiting while you're at the locale that i'm blogging about.

PROS:

- Lots of privacy – this place is on a peninsula, and it is beautiful, surrounded by water on almost 270 degrees and with its own private beach, cabanas, an incredible restaurant at the golf course, and its own nightclub where locals from the North shore come to hang out
- Impeccable attention to service and detail – the staff were well trained, greeted everyone and tried their best to remember names when they could. One day the elevator went out and we had to use the service elevator and staff did their best to maintain decorum even when they had to use the service elevator for purposes of running the hotel
- I'm a foodie, and the food here was actually pretty impressive for being a resort. Most resorts suffer greatly when it comes to dining options, but knowing

that their guests are basically 20-30 miles from the nearest major city (Remember, this is North Shore Oahu), they went ahead and spent the money to develop a stand up menu.



- The food options on the North Shore aren't actually terrible. There is a conglomerate of food trucks just a few miles southwest of Turtle Bay towards Hale Ewa town and you can find plenty of grub there

CONS:

- Well if you like nightlife, the only option is the club downstairs in the hotel, that's about it. Unless you want to ride in a (often hard to find) uber/lyft back to the south shore of the island and hang out in Honolulu
- The rooms, albeit nice, have very thin walls. You would think for resort oriented towards couples and umm, lovers, you'd have thicker walls, unless the concert of

love is what they were going for.
- The pool was very nice but needed some upgrades, it was showing some wear and tear

SECRETS:

- If you get a chance, try to book the oceanside villas, or one of the Turtle Bay multi-bedroom villas and split it with your friends. The Oceanside Villas come with some cool little toys including a **very badass Hawaiian wood guitar** for you to play with and some **high end binoculars** from which you can watch the whales all in the comfort of your own room. The multi-bedroom villas are relatively cheap for what you get and the price breakdown makes more sense than the regular rooms. They are spacious, newly appointed, and well equipped.
- If you need a drink early in the morning (don't judge), you can always go to the bar at the golf club, it's 5'o clock there 24/7.

OTHER STUFF IN OAHU

- Having been to the islands quite a bit growing up, due to family being there and all, i'm often asked what to do when you're in Oahu. Here are a few of my faves:
    - Visit the trucks on the North Shore, Giovanni's is the original shrimp truck and go for the garlic scampi, but if you can't make it there, there's another group of trucks next to the Trump Hotel in Honolulu which does the same job
    - Go to Hanauama Bay and snorkel the hell out of that place. Try to go early in the morning before there's too many people in the water and the sediment is kicked up – making it hard to see the fishies. Bring your own packed lunch because its hard to find food around there when you're exhausted and done trying to maintain flotation trying to snap that perfect fish selfie

- Eat Eat Eat – Yelp has a great variety of suggestions but I recommended Sweet E's Cafe for brunch or breakfast, it's incredible stuff-yourself-to-the-gills breakfast and brunch food. There's a reason why people get big on the islands, the food is amazing, and you couldn't surf enough to salvage that calories in vs. calories out thing if you started exploring all the spots in Honolulu
- Have a drink at the original Dukes Waikiki. This is where the King drank, and surfed, and drank some more. Beautiful views at sunset, add a 151 floater to your drink and be a beast about it, I swear all your worries will melt away. If this place is too busy, go next door to the beautifully restored plantation-esque environment that is the Moana Surfrider and enjoy those same views next to 100+ year old Banyan tree sitting right in the middle of the bar.
- If you want to go to one of the top 10 beaches in the world, it's at Kailua, on the Northeast side of Oahu. This white sand stretch is beautiful, and one of my favorite things to do is rent a car, throw on my board shorts and sandals, pick a direction, and just drive from beach to beach until the sun sets. Hawaii was made for this type of lackadaisical approach and I recommend you try it out!

