



The Gasparilla Inn & Club

I'VE LIVED UP AND DOWN the Gulf Coast of Florida for most of the past 30 years, and I can't name many places that make you feel like you're entering a Time Machine to a kinder and gentler era.

A place where people are friendly, everything is clean, convertibles are left with the tops down, doors aren't double-bolted and it's a getaway like none other.

And there—in the epicenter of this paradise—is a beautiful quaint but large yellow mansion that's been welcoming guests since 1913.

While paying our \$6 toll and driving across the causeway, Erin and I felt like we were driving to Sanibel Island. But this barrier island—Boca Grande—is farther north, in fact smack-dab between Sarasota and Ft. Myers.

When we turned down the side street to approach The Gasparilla Inn—and it was like a mirage in the

distance. Tall palm trees frame a three-story pillared palace. They've even copyrighted "Florida as it was meant to be." It's true.

It's one of the largest surviving resort hotels built in the early 1900's. It was originally built for wealthy northerners—and some may say that part hasn't changed that much. But nothing pretentious, just down-to-earth friendliness and quality service.

A bellman parked our car on the crushed seashells directly across the street from the Inn and guided us up

to our Terrace Suite that overlooked the front entrance. Everything felt clean and was decorated for Florida.

After lunch and dessert (ice cream) and exploring the little "village" of Boca Grande, we wound down the afternoon sitting on our private balcony overlooking the entrance. There were two weddings planned for the evening—and the front desk clerk even braced us that the music may be loud in the backyard—"but they have to stop at 11pm." (We never heard the music anyway!)





The Gasparilla Inn's dining room has dress codes pending the season—which, if you're like me, you prefer. It's refreshing to get away from a sea of baseball hats, flip-flops and cell phones for an evening. This place is first-class all the way.

We were sitting down for food that surpassed Ruth's Chris or Flemings, and with a level of service and ambiance that I've not experienced in many places. We were fortunate that Stone Crabs were in season—and decided to enjoy them as appetizers before our meal. Our waiter, Garth from Jamaica, explained they get them fresh off the boat at 4pm when they're available.

We cleansed our pallets sharing a Wedge Salad.

And then the main course: Filet Mignon. It was perfectly prepared to our request, with asparagus and potatoes.

Simon is the Inn's beverage manager. After spending 17 years at another top-notch resort in Northern Virginia he's now on Boca Grande, helping pair the right wine with meals. He suggested a white wine with our seafood starter and a pinot noir with our meal.

The meal looked and tasted as good—if not better—than anything either of us have ever experienced before.

The next morning we went off-campus to find brunch in the "village" of Boca Grande. We stumbled upon the 3rd Street Cafe and experienced more laid-back elegance. It's a few blocks from the Inn and a nice way to continue our dream-like weekend.

We each had an omelet and it was prepared to perfection. We loved the atmosphere and both felt it would be a great place to have lunch or dinner. There's a secret garden—or courtyard—that allows diners to enjoy the Florida weather. We recommend this place highly.

After brunch, we reluctantly packed up and walked across the street to our car and pulled away. We had only been there about 18 hours, but it was such a refreshing retreat, long enough to recharge batteries and allow us to re-enter civilization.

Erin and I are fortunate to have visited dozens of resorts on behalf of Family Beautiful over the years, and, frankly, this trip put the others in perspective. Very few match the level of service and quality that we experienced at The Gasparilla Inn.

– Ray Collins