

TRAVEL

When you drive onto the bay front in St. Petersburg, you see it looming in the distance. A pink palace standing watch over Tampa Bay.

RENAISSANCE at the VINOY

I last visited The Vinoy Renaissance Resort & Golf Club in 2009, and doubted much had changed. I quickly found out how wrong I was when I walked in the lobby and found the previous front desk had been replaced by a plush sitting area. Toward the middle of the lobby sits two podiums that now serve as a “front desk.” Less is more! We were escorted to our rooms by a smooth bell-hop who was well-versed in customer service. “Yes sir” and “no sir” at every turn.

The rooms were also updated. I even had “bed-spread envy”; usually you get these quilted paisley blankets that look like they’ve been there since the Nixon Administration. Not the case here!



Our room had a view of the water, the pool and a large courtyard where we saw a wedding reception in full swing. It was one of two big parties going on that afternoon.

We arrived late in the day so we dressed up for dinner at the resort’s signature restaurant, “Marchand’s Bar & Grill.” The maitre d’ said the table was especially chosen for us – but I didn’t want to face out a window, and the waitress was happy to let us switch to an adjacent two-top. It wasn’t the last time “Kyle” was accommodating. When she asked if we wanted bread and I told her I had a gluten allergy, she surprised me with a basket of gluten-free bread! What a treat!

Holly and I both had the tenderloin, medium, and it was

indeed tender. It was served on a long rectangular plate with potatoes and veggies that were just as appealing. One of the best meals I’ve had in a long time. (The restaurant features a “Farm-to-Fork” menu that highlights local cuisine.) The pinot noir she chose was a perfect complement to the meal. We lingered around over carrot cake and decaf coffee while we watched the bar fill up with people having a good time. The restaurant is a beautiful big room, with hard-wood floors, pillars and high-back chairs. Restored ceiling frescoes from the 1920’s line the walls. A trio of musicians added a classy touch to the evening.

The next morning we grabbed a quick bite at the Veranda Cafe off the lobby and headed for a quick work-out at the health club. After that we went for massages at the Salon & Day Spa. We were scheduled for a couples massage, but when Holly said she likes it quiet, and I tend to be a chatter-box we decided to go our separate ways for the hour. We showered and went down to brunch in Marchand’s. Last time I was here, the resort had a big elaborate buffet – but now it’s all ordering off the menu. I skipped the usual omelet and went for lunch with shrimp scampi. Excellent. Nice

atmosphere. I was once again in a jacket and open collar shirt, and I was once again sitting next to diners in flip flops and shorts. I later asked somebody connected to the resort why they allowed that in the nicest of the five restaurants there, and I was told that's "Florida style," or something. Oh well, the food was still VERY good. (They also had more live music—this time from a horn player named Chuck Weirich who played along with classics and occasionally sang as well. Surprisingly good!

We changed into tennis clothes and rented a ball machine to work on our ground strokes. I even used my video camera to watch how we looked. Very instructive. Having access to a ball machine is a rare treat. The next morning I had a private lesson and Holly played in a clinic with two other women. I was pleasantly surprised at the caliber of my teacher. Ashley Fischer rose to 19th in the world in doubles and is now an announcer on the Tennis Channel.

RENAISSANCE VINOY Fast Facts:

Restaurants: 5
Tennis Courts: 12
Golf Holes: 18
Meeting Rooms: 36
Boat Slips: 74
Rooms: 361

We went "off campus" for our final night and had dinner at one of the many choices along the sidewalk on Beach Drive. The bay front has a cool vibe to parts almost felt like South Beach, as we walked under awnings with hostesses trying to lure us in their establishment. We had a nightcap at a fun place called Tryst.

We headed back to Sarasota early the next morning and couldn't believe how fast we got back. Forty minutes. It felt like we were far from home, but not the case. That's the sign of a good resort, one that whisks you away for a week-end in your own backyard. RAY COLLINS

More information: www.RenaissanceVinoy.com



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