

It's All Right Here At SADDLEBROOK!

I've had the good fortune of being a travel writer for several years and have visited dozens of resorts—from Florida to California to Hawaii...but there's only one I've come back to a second time.

Imagine a resort where you are always a minute's walk from your room, the pool, the tennis courts, the spa, and the restaurants? There's no need to wait for a shuttle bus, no need to get back in your car—and no need to even rent a bike—until you want to get some exercise. As the title suggests, it's all right here at this quaint resort just north of Tampa, an hour's drive from Sarasota. Saddlebrook is minutes away from Interstate 75, making it easy to get to no matter how you're arriving.

Erin and I pulled in early Saturday morning in time to join the 8am tennis clinic with a few dozen other adults. Howard Moore has been the director of tennis for decades, and he acts each time like he's still auditioning for the job. He works seven days a week, welcoming amateur tennis players from around the world to his little slice of paradise. (I asked Howard why he still works every day after all these years and he said, "because these people are smart. If they don't feel they're getting top-quality service, they'll look elsewhere." Refreshing.)

We played tennis for three hours before checking in to our suite overlooking one of the fairways. After a shower and a change of clothes, we had lunch in "T.D.'s Sports Bar." A T-bone steak with spinach and tomato was just the protein we needed to get back out for a couple more hours of tennis lessons on one of their 45 courts.

Erin was grouped with her level and I was directed to my tennis counterparts (2-4 per court.). My instructor was a Russian native named Oleg Mironchikov who showed us lots of "tough love." He broke down my tennis game, showed me where I could improve and then helped me do it better with lots of encouragement and repetition. I wasn't surprised when he said his boss, Howard, was his mentor. Both good people who know customer service. After our fifth hour of lessons, we put on our swimsuits and cooled down in one



of the three pools on campus, called the "super pool." (500,000 gallons!) That big pool area is the centerpiece of the resort, with all the amenities framed around it. We were there on a holiday weekend where it was a little more crowded than usual, but still never cramped. A DJ played good songs and a wait-staff helped serve drinks.

We dried off and headed to the spa for massages. It's a 7,000 square foot European-style spa with just the right music and robes. I wanted the aromatherapy combined with a sports massage—while Erin went for the deep-tissue. We both came away happy.

Back to the rooms, showers, and a short walk to dinner at the premier restaurant of their five choices, "Dempsey's Steak House." Our waiter made it fun, which can make all the difference. He prepared a table-side Caesar salad for two before we enjoyed our dinner. I had the lobster, Erin had the sea bass. (We had steak for lunch!) We shared carrot cake and coffee over a long lazy dessert. It was amazing how fast we were back in the room. I almost wanted a longer walk to work off that dinner! (We stayed in a two-bedroom suite with a living room, dining area and full-kitchen. There are 800 rooms on-site, 75% of which are suites.)

The next morning, we had coffee in the room, yogurt at a snack bar and joined Howard and his staff for our third tennis clinic in the past 24 hours. It's fun to meet dozens of players with so many backgrounds, all sharing a love for tennis.

Creatures of habit, we returned to the sports bar where I had the same lunch as the day before and Erin branched out to a chopped Greek salad. We made friends with another tennis player, Mike, visiting from Austin, Texas. He said he'd come to Saddlebrook many times because "there's nothing as good in Texas."

We bypassed the tennis clinic in favor of golf lessons. Joe McWhorter was able to offer both of us great tips—even though Erin's never touched a club (or as she called it, a "stick") in her life, and I've been playing since I was ten. Saddlebrook has two 18-hole Arnold Palmer-designed courses and a golf academy.

After golf, we rented bikes from a concession area near the pool (everything is near the pool!) and rode several miles around the resort. It was interesting to see all the houses and vistas within the complex.

We ended the weekend with cold drinks—Margarita for her, cold beer for me—and headed back to Sarasota. We did so much in such a short period of time, it was —what I call—a sensory illusion: It felt like we were hours away from home and that we had been gone for a week. That's the definition of a good weekend getaway! RAY COLLINS
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