

After a decade of driving past The Ritz Carlton in Sarasota but never checking in, I finally had the opportunity to cross this item off my bucket list.



Putting on The Ritz

“Welcome to The Ritz-Carlton, Sarasota, Mr. Collins.” That’s a sentence I can never hear enough—and it wasn’t just from employees I had just met. It came from workers in the hotel I had never seen before. The Ritz-Carlton has an elaborate intercom/ear-piece communication system that leaves you with the impression everyone knows your name.

Our visit was to learn more about the new tennis program being developed by the area’s only five-star resort. They’ve redone their three hard courts, as well as the nets and windscreens. They’ve brought in an outside vendor (Hurricane Tennis) to offer lessons to guests and the general public. (\$125 per hour.)

I had the opportunity to get a lesson from one of the top players from Ireland who also played for the Ohio State Buckeyes. The 20-something red-head has traveled the world off her tennis skills and she’s now settled in Sarasota. How good a teacher is Ciara Finucane? (Pronounced “Keera Fin-oo-can.”) She diagnosed the reason my groundstrokes were landing short in less than five minutes. It wasn’t a matter of hitting harder, or aiming higher as others have said. Nope, Ciara said, “You’re preparing a half second too late and not getting out in front early enough.”

I tried making contact a little farther out—and sure enough, depth!

- Ciara also showed me a good drill to loosen up my forehand to create more of a whip, and less of a death-grip on the racquet. She told me to hold the racquet with both my two smaller fingers OFF the handle. It’ll feel weird and wild at first, but should eventually remove the tension from my arm.
- Ciara also noticed I was stepping too far sideways to reach for my backhand. She suggested more baby steps that would allow me to step toward the net and keep my hips engaged. Otherwise lunging sideways too far “locks up” my hips and reduces power.
- Another good drill is to hit back and forth to twenty. You only get a point when the ball goes beyond the service line. There is no penalty for hitting long, but you subtract a point for hitting short. You’ll be amazed how long it takes to get to twenty! (For more on Ciara, read her profile on page 6.)

From tennis it was on to the peaceful spa. The area with the massage tables is called “The Treatment Sanctuary.” Norma Prado gave me the “Signature Massage,” which is a mix between hard and soft (\$150 for 50 minutes). From there it was over to Jackie Quintero for a “Whiskey Pedi-

FOR TENNIS PLAYERS TOO!

cure.” They call it that because the nail technician rubs a gritty substance with whiskey on your feet and ankles to soften rough skin (\$75).

We were assigned a room on the 8th floor, also known as “The Club Level.” I knew “Club Level” meant good seats at football games, but wasn’t sure what it was going to mean in a hotel. It wound up being one of the nicest perks I’ve ever experienced in a hotel: breakfast, lunch and Happy Hour is all included in the price of the room. No one can sneak in who isn’t staying on that special level: Access to that floor requires a special key in the elevator, or else the doors won’t open on the 8th floor! But be forewarned: Just because it’s exclusive doesn’t mean it’s only adults. There were plenty of young families in the room as well.

It was no surprise our room was impeccable—a beautiful spacious room with a sliding glass door leading out to the balcony. But it was the little things that left me shaking my head in appreciation: The desk blotter had four little clocks built into it telling the time in key time zones around the world. In the bathroom, a new toothbrush and toothpaste awaited. Nice touches.

Rates start at \$309 per night for a room through the fall. There are overnight packages available that have added value, like the “Comfort You” package that includes overnight accommodations, breakfast for two, and \$50 resort credit per night, starting at \$359.

The shuttle from the hotel to The Ritz-Carlton’s Lido Beach facility is free. It leaves on the top of the hour from the front entrance. It even drops off and

picks up guests in St. Armands Circle.

We chose a couple lounge chairs on the beach and paid \$15 for an umbrella to be implanted between our chairs. The cabana boys put up the umbrella, laid out towels and took drink/food orders. There is even a little flag system to get their attention without having to shout or wave. Since we were on vacation—er, ‘stay-cation.’ I got a Pina Colada (\$12).

On the way to the pool is a Tiki Bar, complete with live music and cold drinks. We were eventually escorted to the restaurant. I spoiled myself with twin lobster tails, potatoes and asparagus (\$48), a delicious meal as we watched the sun set over the Gulf of Mexico.

As we began to rush from the table to catch the last shuttle ride back to the downtown hotel, the maitre d’ was able to radio the bus driver to wait until we came out. Smooth system. Smooth resort.



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