

# TRAVEL

*If you're looking for stuffiness, there are other places to go. If you're looking to be "chill," check out the Hard Rock Hotel at Universal Orlando where you are the star!*



# Rock-n-Roll Resort

We pulled off I-4 and up a driveway next to a beautiful lawn. But we knew this place was different when we passed a sculpture/fountain of 42 bronze guitars. And our suspicions were confirmed when the Valet opened my car door and said, "Hey, boss. Need help with your stuff?" Yes, this is the tone of the Hard Rock Hotel at Universal Orlando where you can expect to be called "boss" more than once during your stay.

This is the quintessential place for music fans to stay—there is memorabilia throughout the resort and even a full-length mirror in each room with lines on it that designate how tall certain music icons were—or are.

After Erin and I settled in our beautiful room, we freshened up and went downstairs for dinner at one of the nicest steakhouses you'll find. The Palm Restaurant was established in 1926 and now has a "family of restaurants" at a couple dozen locations around the country. When you get around fine dining, you can tell: The wait-staff just "gets it." Smooth. Palm is known for their steaks, lobsters and Italian dishes.

Afterward we got a nightcap at the adjacent Velvet Bar. It has a lively atmosphere and included outdoor seating as well overlooking the pool. I loved the 80s music that filled the room.

The next morning, we got up early and made the short walk to Universal Studios Florida. You can also hire a pedicab or take a free shuttle-boat, or shuttle-bus. (7am-2am.)



Without any kids with us, we were determined to see if two adults could have fun in a theme park. The first “ride” was called “Disaster” which included a hologram—or a walking-talking image—of actor Christopher Walken. It seemed like he was right there on the stage, interacting with our guide! Amazing technology! After choosing several people from the audience, a short video was produced that we later enjoyed while being rocked around in a subway car, while fire and water raged all around us from a safe distance. Well done.

We also enjoyed an exhibit called the Horror Make-up Show. The performers again used people in the audience to make it more interactive. It was both fun and educational. When we came out, we were recruited into a magic show in a small parlor-like room directly across the street. A young magician did the usual card tricks, but also was able to levitate coins. The streets were alive with people, performers and music. You never know when a Blues Brothers show would break out in front of you. Fun atmosphere.



On our way to switching to another park within Universal Orlando Resort, we stopped for lunch at the Hard Rock Cafe. Erin and I both are gluten-free (me, by DNA, her by support), but we enjoyed a couple of cheeseburgers and french fries in this classic rock-n-roll restaurant. Not a place for a quiet and peaceful lunch, but you know that going in.

The other park, “Islands of Adventure,” includes “The Wizarding World of Harry Potter – Hogsmeade,” a very impressive and much-talked about castle up on a hill. We saw a lot of people dressed in Harry Potter memorabilia. (Fun fact: The original artist who decided what Harry Potter should look like lives in Sarasota. She modeled his features after her own!)

Hard Rock Hotel also has a “Universal Attraction Ticket Center” as well as a concierge desk to help with your plans. If you stay at the hotel, you also get free Universal Express ride access which allows you to skip the regular lines. This is a wonderful idea that saved us a lot of time.

We came back and freshened up for dinner at a brightly-lit restaurant called “The Kitchen.” They have a wide-range of “contemporary New American cuisine and upscale comfort food.” We were especially impressed by the service here. This is a family restaurant, complete with costumed mascots visiting certain tables.

The next morning, we went for a “power walk” back toward Universal’s City Walk, which is open to the public. We wanted to soak up every bit of that area before we headed back to Sarasota. Speaking of soaking up, there’s a large pool area with entertainment, cabana rentals and a giant slide. The weather didn’t cooperate while we were there, otherwise we would have spent a lot of time poolside.

From high-energy to low key, the Hard Rock Hotel has it all for any rock-n-roll taste. After all, you’re the boss. RAY COLLINS