



*From a guided museum tour at “The Dali” to roof-top drinks overlooking Tampa Bay, to a gluten-free snack bar at a major league game. You can do it all during a 36-hour “stay-cation” just across the Skyway Bridge.*

## THE HEART OF THE ‘BURG

I don’t ever want to move from Sarasota, but if I had to choose someplace else to live — tops on the list would be St. Petersburg. Beach Drive, Central Avenue — it’s a big city version of Sarasota’s Main Street. Waterfront, yet skyscrapers. Tourism, yet a corporate economy.

We began our two-day getaway at the funky Salvador Dali Museum. The building’s design is as eclectic as the artist himself. The generic cement exterior is interrupted by a “glass enigma”: over a thousand glass panels, and no two are exactly alike. Inside the museum, the circular staircase pays tribute to what some call Dali’s obsession with spirals.

Once we paid our \$21 and got upstairs to begin the tour, my girlfriend Erin and I initially bypassed the free headphones and the docents and tried to go it alone. (We didn’t want to be roped into a long slow afternoon staring at paintings.) But something happened: I saw a woman who was listening to the guided tour go in close to look at—what I thought was—an inconsequential speck on a painting. I saw her smirk, and suddenly I wanted to know what I wasn’t seeing. The best decision we made all weekend was submitting to the guided tour and the docents!

Outside the museum is the cleverly-named “Avant Garden,” that includes a maze of hedges. Nearby was a “melting bench” that paid tribute to Dali’s iconic 1931 melting clock painting called “The Persistence of Memory.” The museum is family-oriented and fun for all ages, also offering puzzles, and arts & craft activities to help educate the younger generations. All eyes will be on St. Pete this Fall when the Dali Museum offers a salute to Picasso in a blockbuster exhibit starting November 8th.

We ventured north along the beautiful bayfront on Beach Drive, stopping for dinner at—what many are calling—the hot new restaurant on Beach Drive. “The Birchwood” is a beautiful restaurant in a great location with first-class service. We sat in a U-shaped booth; Erin had the Pan Roast Chicken Breast (\$18) and I had Peppercorn Crusted New York Strip Steak (\$31). We each had a Grilled Iceberg Wedge Salad (\$8). We capped the meal with an ice cream bowl for dessert (\$6). She and I both have food allergies (onions for her, wheat for me) and the waitress, Monica, could not have been more sympathetic, having conversations with the Chef about our limitations.

After dinner we went up to the rooftop for a great view of the boats along the bayfront and Tampa Bay itself. The Birchwood’s “Canopy” has become the place to see — and be seen — on Beach Drive. We had a nightcap and watched the beautiful people stroll in. I was amazed at the wide range of ages. Though it skewed younger than Sarasota, several generations were having fun on the upper deck.


During the walk back to our hotel, we were drawn in to an active indoor-outdoor bar along the bayfront called “Tryst Gastro Lounge.” We were able to sit in high-chairs at an outdoor bar, and feel the air conditioning from inside the place. We settled in for a couple hours of people-watching and loving St. Petersburg.

We began the next day with the best Sunday brunch on the Gulf Coast of Florida. The Renaissance Vinoy—also on the bayfront—has a restaurant called “Marchand’s Bar & Grill” that is nearly 5-star. The room, the food, the service—all top-shelf. You can order off the menu or take advantage of the ample buffet. We both ordered omelets laced with lobster. Wow! It’s no surprise almost every Major League Baseball team also stays at The Vinoy while playing the Tampa Bay Rays. They understand customer service. (We knew we were among celebrities — in this case pro athletes — when we saw signs around the lobby that said, “To protect the safety and privacy of all our resort guests, please no autographs or photography.”)

With the Boston Red Sox in town, we decided to go see a matinee game at “The Trop.” (I can recall when the stadium was built in the mid-80’s and called the Suncoast Dome. Then the Thunder Dome. Now it’s Tropicana Field.) We arrived early enough to take a lap around the entire interior of the arena. Even if there wasn’t a baseball game about to begin, there’s still enough to keep you entertained for hours around the facility. Activities for little kids, games of skill for bigger kids and interesting history, exhibits and even a museum for history buffs like us.


This was to be Erin’s first baseball game EVER — and hearing her comments and fielding her questions was the highlight of the weekend. “Do they have to tag the runner with the ball, or can they just try to nail him with it?” “How many foul balls do you get, and do they go retrieve the balls in the stands like in tennis?” The list goes on.

We snuck out after the 7th inning stretch and were back across the bridge and home in about half an hour. It was one of those sensory illusions where we felt like we were gone a lot longer and were a lot farther away. Not the case. It’s just across the bridge. A short drive, but in some ways, a world away! RAY COLLINS



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