



✿ KING *of the* CASTLE ✿

I HAVE TO ADMIT MY EXPERIENCE in Orlando has been primarily limited to the interstate and an occasional theme park. When I was assigned a story on International Drive, I didn't expect much more than more cars, traffic lights and noise.

But I was pleased to find out there's quite an underworld in this 11-mile long community several miles southwest of downtown. Make no mistake, it's a busy area, but planners succeeded in making it a well-manicured and thriving strip. Cars? You bet. Chaos? Not really.

A wide-range of restaurants, attractions and yes, hotels. We stayed at The Kessler Collection's Castle Hotel. The location is perfect and the staff is very friendly. Over two hundred rooms with complimentary WiFi, big HDTV screens. "Queen Erin" and I were lucky to stay in the "Executive King" suite which included a living room area with a pull-out sofa bed, an

office area, a dressing station (sit-down lighted make-up mirror) and a wet bar.

After checking in, we went back out to explore our little section of International Drive. There's a childrens' science museum called "Wonderworks" which looks like a building that was lifted out of the ground and thrown on its roof. We also saw a series of helicopters flying in and out of a field--and went for a closer look: Helicopters International offers tours of Orlando--starting with a 3-minute \$20 dollar spin. I didn't see too much in that short a flight, but it was fun to get up in the air for a little bit. (Full disclosure: Erin stayed in the lobby clutching

the bench while I went up for a spin.)

After touring a nice outdoor mall called Point Orlando, we headed back to the hotel for his-and-her massages. Like several of The Kessler Collection properties, Castle Hotel is home to the brand's signature "Poseidon Spa." From the moment we walked in the lobby/waiting area, we knew it was something special. Jasem Al-Haswai is the Spa Director and from his opening two-handed handshake to his glass





of champagne at the end, it was all about customer service. In between, we both had great massages. (We had the option to be in the same room, but I tend to chat more than Erin, and after my tenth question to the therapist, I can hear her groaning. Maybe she's snoring.) Poseidon Spa offers a wide variety of treatments—skin care, facial enhancements, waxing and special event parties. It's a very tranquil atmosphere.

The pool was closed for a private event so we took advantage of the wet bar in our suite and had our own Happy Hour, before freshening up for a night on the town--er, the drive. We wound up going out for seafood and capping it off at the always fun "Howl at the Moon." I've been to other branches in Tampa and Las Vegas--but this one was the most fun. Yes, there were dueling piano players and a lot of bawdy fun. But they also incorporated a drummer and guitar players and the place--at times--morphed into a dance club. Several hours later, we enjoyed a short walk back to our hotel and turned in for the night.



Castle Hotel has a "Garden Bistro & Bar" that served up a great Sunday brunch. An \$18 buffet was available, but we chose to order our own omelets for \$12. Excellent food and service.

After brunch, we headed downtown to experience one of the best farmers' markets we've ever seen. Lake Eola is near Church Street and is the setting for a fantastic Sunday morning event.

We reluctantly bid farewell to our hotel, less than 24 hours after we checked in. Our wonderful experience--combined with first-class service--remains in our minds. -- Ray Collins

