

LOCAL TRAVELS

JUST ACROSS THE BRIDGE BUT A WORLD AWAY

If you want to get out of town—feel like you're far away but you're really not—head over the bridge to St. Petersburg.

Everybody needs to clear their heads and get out of Dodge on a regular basis. You can fly to Hawaii, you can drive to Palm Beach—or you can practically ride your bike to St. Petersburg.

There are two distinct drawing cards to that city: On the gulf side, there is St. Pete Beach, the Don Cesar, and a lot of old Florida beachy fun. And then on the bay side, there's – ironically – Beach Drive, where there is no beach.

Beach Drive is a shopping district that includes world-class museums, galleries and restaurants. The streets are filled with people of all ages, not just snowbirds walking slowly with their sweaters wrapped around their necks.

We stayed in the middle of it all, at the Hyatt Place Hotel on 2nd Street North. Parking in the attached garage and walking into the lobby was a breeze. Our room had a nice view of downtown and everything in the hotel seemed new. The roof-top pool was full of young families.

We unpacked our small bags for our overnight stay and got back out to the streets to start exploring. Naturally we headed down toward the bayfront which is only a few blocks from the Hyatt Place.

The streets are wide and clean, and people are out having fun at every turn. We walked down Central Avenue to the water's edge, passed the St. Petersburg Yacht Club and then through a pretty park that separates Beach Drive from the water.

Once we got to the southern end of the district, at the historic pink Vinoy we turned up Beach Drive and started our slow window-shopping walk back toward the hotel. We actually did more than window shop. I probably buy clothes once every few years, but I saw a men's store that specializes in classic shirts and pants—not trendy—and it called my name. I wound up buying three shirts that were perfect for summer in Florida, with 'quick absorption' material.

After our walk around Beach Drive and Central Avenue, we showed and changed and once again walked to our dinner just a few blocks away. "Sea Salt" is located in the Sundial St. Pete complex at 183 2nd Avenue North. It's on the 2nd floor, and you can dine indoors or outdoors as this award-winning restaurant is also pet friendly.

It includes a 22-foot tall wine cellar (picture a Christmas tree). The friendly and knowledgeable sommelier Jackie Eash pointed out a few of her favorite selections. There is also an 80-foot long raw bar!

I liked the atmosphere; good restaurants can be crowded and loud--but the design at "Sea Salt" are such that you don't really feel like there are a lot of people around you. They call it "Sea Salt" because Chef Ken Tufo uses 130 different types and flavors of salts from around the world to season the dishes.

We started with Oysters Rockefeller (\$15) and Jumbo White Shrimp Cocktail (\$15). My wife then had the Saffron Cavatelli (\$27) which was Maine lobster, peas with a mascarpone-prosecco sauce. I had the Linguini Nero (\$26) with Key West pink shrimp, calabrian chilli, ramp pesto and Anna Maria Island (!) bottarga.

We finished with vanilla Gelato with warm salted caramel and I had coffee. They also brought out a quirky tradition--cotton candy in a bowl! Nice touch. The waiter was very personable but not overbearing which is the perfect balance. It was nice to look out the window at the busy streets below and the other parts of the Sundial complex.

We were able to walk off our wonderful dinner by exploring area around the former Jannus Landing--which is now called Jannus Live. It's one of the top concert venues in the Tampa Bay area, and if not for the noise you'd never know there was a courtyard concert area in the middle of the big brick building on 1st Avenue North.

Despite being across the street in the Hyatt Place, we couldn't hear the music or street noise outside the window. St. Petersburg stays up late, is a great mix of young and old--and the rest of us in between.

We went for an early morning walk along the bayfront, saw lots of joggers and walkers and people doing yoga in the park. We returned to the hotel for a complimentary hot breakfast in the lobby restaurant.

And then the best part--we left the parking garage and were back home in 45 minutes! A wonderful 24 hours out of town! There's no better stay-cation in our area.

