

FLORIDA EXCITEMENT

ADVENTURE



THE PLANTATION AT CRYSTAL RIVER

SWIM WITH THE MANATEES AND GET PAMPERED



I'd heard about 'The Plantation on Crystal River' for years—but never visited. When I realized there was an opportunity to stay there and swim with manatees, I thought it was time to go—and check off that little item from my bucket list.

Crystal River is in Citrus County, which is just north of the Tampa Bay area, or about two hours north of Sarasota. Up I-75 and then head west to the water.

'The Plantation' is a 195-room hotel smack dab on Crystal River's King's Bay that's been around since 1962. There's an active bar and restaurant in the main building called "West 82 Bar & Grill" and a pool and tiki bar on the water out back.

We had a nice lunch in the restaurant. Erin had "Gulf Coat Peel 'N Eat Shrimp" (\$10) and I had a Grilled Chicken Caesar Salad (\$12). We split an appetizer of Chips & Queso (\$7.50). Nice service and good lunch.

Before we made our big splash the next morning, we rented bikes and toured nearby Inverness.

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David's World Cycle was founded 32 years ago by an ambitious teenager in Central Florida named David Sanborn and he has since spread to 21 cities around the state. Ashley Clark was extremely helpful to find us hybrid bikes that fit our respective heights—which, for the record is a foot difference.

They have a variety of cycles and services including a repair department, rentals and a helpful team ready to answer any questions about the bikes for your needs—or best places to ride.

Not coincidentally, the store was opened on North Pine Avenue, literally a few feet from the popular Withlacoochee Trail. That convenience made it easy for us to get started—and not get lost, for a change.

Pretty path—through wilderness and beautiful neighborhoods. Having lived in Florida for 30 years, it is still fun to explore different areas of my adopted home state.

We came back to 'That Plantation' and showered and dressed for dinner. Before heading out, we stopped for a drink at the backyard tiki bar which is tantalizingly close to a canal where boaters and fishermen troll just feet away.

We enjoyed sitting among other hotel guests and natives who come by this comfortable spot for a refreshment at day's end. Next, we drove a mile to a nearby restaurant called "Waterfront Social" to meet a friend who had recently moved from Sarasota to Crystal River.

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Laurie picked out a nice table by the water and we watched the sunset, had dinner and caught up. Beautiful spot. Felt like we were hours from home, or near Key West, in this charming 'Old Florida' destination.

'Southern Coastal Dining' is how they describe themselves. We split an appetizer of Grouper Bites (\$12.50) before moving on to the main course. Erin had the Crab Cakes with herb smashed potatoes, seasonal vegetables and remoulade (\$27) while I had Salmon with coconut jasmine rice, vegetables and pineapple relish (\$19). Yum! They also have a wide selection of beer and wine. We sat there watching the sun go down catching up with Laurie about her new life in Crystal Springs. Great night.

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Finally the next morning it was time to do something I've always wanted to do—and I don't mean shoehorn my way into an unflattering wet-suit. After I wedged myself in that little number, we rode out to the middle of Crystal Springs with half a dozen strangers—who soon became friends—and looked for manatees to befriend.

We sat, scattered around in the boat, in nervous anticipation as the sun came up on Crystal River. After some searching, our captain finally stopped the boat and told us how to slide into the water and glide alongside the gentle sea cows.

There they were—a mother and juvenile manatee—minding their own business looking for breakfast under water. Erin let the docile creatures get up close to her—and one even came right up to her mask, made eye contact and playfully did a 360. Meantime, I hung back, not wanting to be the first person ever attacked by a manatee. Opposites attract. The company took pictures of us on the boat—and in the water—and had them available for purchase a short time later.

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We peeled off the wetsuits, dried off and headed back to check out of our room on a high note. Great way to end our visit to Crystal River.

Brunch in the Plantation's restaurant tasted great as we sat and relived our wonderful 24 hours in Citrus County. It was our first trip, but it won't be our last.

Ray Collins has written over a hundred articles for Family Beautiful—including 61 different resort reviews—over the past 12 years. You can read other articles at www.raycollinsmedia.com/articles.

