

Luxurious Miami Stopover

Headed to Ft. Lauderdale to connect with a cruise ship? Changing planes at Miami International for a flight to the Caribbean, South America, or Europe? I think you may find that nonstop flights from San Diego are non-existent, and an overnight stay in Florida is required. At least that's what my husband and I discovered when we flew to the West Indies a few months ago.

At first I groaned, and then I got busy researching our options. It wasn't long before I'd made a reservation at Acqualina Resort & Spa, a AAA Five Diamond property located right on the beach in Sunny Isles — between Miami and Ft. Lauderdale. The hotel's ESPA spa sounded more than capable of turning a harried traveler (me) into a relaxed human being who could arrive at our final destination ready to have fun.

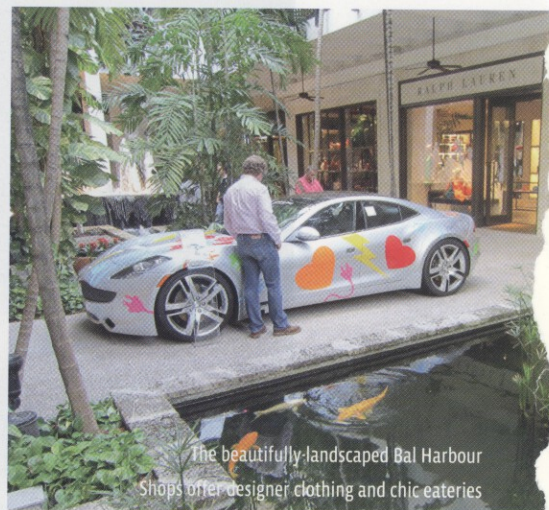
I knew we'd made the right decision before we'd even left home: the concierge called to confirm that a car would be waiting for us at the Miami airport. My impression of guest services was reinforced when, upon arrival, I noticed a box of Twinings Earl Grey tea (my favorite) in the kitchen of our one-bedroom oceanfront suite.

Built in 2006 by the Trump Group, the hotel consists of 97 rooms and suites in a 44-story tower, flanked on both sides by towers containing 188 private residences. Three swimming pools, several spa pools, and two restaurants overlook the beach.

While it was the spa that first attracted me, I soon realized that we had stumbled into a diner's heaven. While I savored my porcini ravioli, I realized that Il Mulino Restaurant upholds the

high standards of the original Il Molino New York, famous for its authentic Italian cuisine.

In addition to the more formal restaurant, the hotel also offers



The beautifully-landscaped Bal Harbour Shops offer designer clothing and chic eateries

Piazzetta Marketplace, serving brick oven pizzas, panini, salads, artisan cheeses, gelato, 21 specialty coffees, and caviar. The caviar might seem out of place on a Tuscan-inspired menu, but many of Acqualina's residences are owned by Russians, and I'm sure it makes them feel right at home. Piazzetta also offers Kosher wine tastings and vodka tastings. (www.acqualina.com)

The next day we availed ourselves of the free car service to the renowned Bal Harbor Shops, where Neiman Marcus and Saks Fifth Avenue are flanked by Carolina Herrera, Chanel, Diane Von Furstenberg, Emilio Pucci, MaxMara, Miu Miu, and all the other likely suspects.

Even though I wasn't shopping, I loved watching the 30-something European-model-like moms >>



Acqualina's Tranquility Pool is reserved for adults

<< pushing pricey prams around the artfully-landscaped shopping center. There were more beautiful-people-watching opportunities at Carpaccio, where we scored a great table. My pasta fagioli soup was excellent and Richard enjoyed his smoked salmon focaccia. (www.balharbourshops.com)

And the Acqualina Spa by ESPA — what can I say, except that it was wonderful. I've never seen such elaborate pre-treatment facilities, including the Ice Fountain, Experience Shower, and Roman Waterfall. My favorite part was the Crystal Steam Room where subtly changing colored lights opened up my chakras while the heat made my muscles melt. I recognized some of my favorite Indian therapies on the treatment menu and opted for

The colored lights in the steam room at Acqualina's ESPA spa change gradually and open the chakras



the Stress Releasing Abyhanga, which I first experienced at Ananda Spa in the Himalayas. The oil poured over my third eye (forehead) made my hair shiny and my skin retained a moist glow for at least a week.

As if the Indian spa treatments, Italian food, and Russians playing chess in the lounge weren't enough of an international experience, on our last night I was determined to try Cuban food. The driver who took us to the Bal Harbour shops had recommended a restaurant within walking distance, but when the concierge got wind of our intention, she lobbied for a place she said was much better.

"I want you to have a great experience. If you'll go to Little Havana Restaurant, I'll pay for your taxi."

We went and had a great time. Our affable waiter gave us a lesson in Cuban-American culture in between delivering platters of tender shredded pork, oxtail in wine sauce, white rice, red beans, and plantains. And yes, our concierge paid for the taxi. Never, except for the legendary Pierre Hotel in New York, have I enjoyed such a remarkable staff.

Just as I had hoped, I arrived in the Caribbean rested, relaxed, with a smile on my face — and glad that we hadn't been able to fly straight through from San Diego.

On the way home, we made the utilitarian decision to overnight at the Airport Hotel within the Miami terminal. It wasn't Acqualina, but I was so relaxed from our time in the Caribbean that I didn't miss the pampering.

ELIZABETH HANSEN

Acqualina Resort & Spa is located right on the beach in Sunny Isles, Florida

