

Advertising Feature

PASSPORT to

DISCOVERY

Everything new again in Orlando renaissance

BY BART CARD

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It's been 11 years since I last visited Florida with my family. My children were a lot younger and our excitement was quite high as Florida was even then considered the destination of choice for a family vacation. Now, more than a decade later, I have returned to Orlando.

To be perfectly honest, my expectations were different this time around. As my family weren't coming along, and none too happy about it I might add, it was just Bart and the rest of the tourists. But it didn't take long to figure just how much has changed in Orlando throughout the past 11 years.

I've said before that so many of my destinations and excursions begin with a simple phone call. It's often to venture on a cruise or outback safari. But this time, Orlando, Florida beckoned. And without my kids in tow, an opportunity to explore Orlando is an opportunity to experience the attractions as a child with adult eyes.

Well, my phone rang and I was soon deep in conversation with Lori Babb, Public Relations Manager for the four-diamond Renaissance Orlando Resort at SeaWorld, a bubbly person to say the least, with stacks of personality. Lori then transferred me to a dear old friend, Ralph Schmitz, now General Manager of the Renaissance.

Ralph and I worked together many years ago. Ralph is a man of few words, and always takes the issue straight to the point. We didn't swap old stories; he just said, "Bart, I'd like you to come down to the hotel and have a look." With that, I knew I was in for an experience. Ralph, a fantastic operator, arranged for a chauffeur at the Orlando International Airport, and as we drove up to the front steps of the Renaissance, I was breathless.

With 778 guest rooms and 64 suites stemming from within a 10-foot atrium lobby, your first sight is of the nearly 200 exotic, brightly-coloured Japanese koi who swim in crystal-clear ponds formed by a cascading waterfall amid soaring palms. More than 100 species of plants and a multitude of lush flowers frame the lobby's centre attraction, an imposing \$600,000, 50-foot-high Venetian aviary which houses colourful tropical birds in a natural habitat.

The Renaissance Orlando Resort is located in the heart of the Central Florida attraction area, and a recent \$18-million renovation project has made everything new again. There are five restaurants to choose from, another two lounges, a 24-hour health centre and a myriad of outdoor recreation facilities at your fingertips.

Over the years, the hotel has earned a cherished reputation as a distinctive hotel for families and leisure travelers. According to Ralph, the resort was specially designed to let children fully enjoy themselves while secure in the knowledge that their parents will be taken care of. I know from past experiences that if parents feel relaxed on vacation, everyone will enjoy themselves even more.

There just isn't a fault to be found. Just absolutely spotless with first-rate service. The Renaissance is ideal for fam-



The shimmering outdoor pool at the Orlando Renaissance. The resort is also home to a five-star, award-winning restaurant and caters to families and leisure travelers.

ilies who wish to experience SeaWorld and Discovery Cove considering the hotel is directly across the street from these two great venues. Both locales are absolutely brilliant and the 21st Century technology has helped to radically alter two of Orlando's most popular destinations of choice. Nearby, you can visit Walt Disney World, Universal Studios Escape, the Kennedy Space Centre on the East Coast or the Gulf-Coast beaches around St. Petersburg.

Not to be forgotten is the Renaissance's Five-Star award-winning restaurant — the Atlantis. I was lucky enough to spend some time with Master Chef Hiroshi Noguchi, the Renaissance's Executive Chef who has guided all food operations at the resort for more than 12 years.

Hiroshi immigrated to the United States from Japan as a young man, with one suitcase and \$500 in his pocket. Along the way, the personable chef has garnered a suitcase of awards and is renowned for his ice and chocolate carvings that are often found on display at the Renaissance.

Don't be fooled, however. There is much more to Orlando than the Renaissance. As I walked through the gates of SeaWorld, I glanced over my shoulder, and realized with no children in tow, I could experience SeaWorld in my own time, with others not dictating the day's itinerary. I would not be responsible for someone screaming for ice cream, a stuffed toy or a soft drink and when I found out the cost of these items, I must admit I was somewhat

glad I was flying solo. Yet souvenirs are part of the overall Orlando experience. It was amazing viewing the attractions and watching the handlers with the animals.

One of the world's premier marine adventure parks, SeaWorld features more than 200 acres of world-class shows, thrilling rides and unforgettable animal encounters. More than 80 million visitors have already experienced SeaWorld and learned about many mysteries of the sea. If you get the opportunity, don't miss out on this excursion.

Mindboggling. That one word captures my thoughts and experiences of Discovery Cove. Whatever you do while in Orlando, Discovery Cove must be on your to-do list. I just can't stress that enough. The admission is worth every single penny considering only 1,000 customers are allowed to walk through the doors each day and you must make reservations — well in advance. I was fortunate enough to arrange my day through Sarah Rogers, and she didn't disappoint.

Walking from the lobby into Discovery Cove, I was knocked off my feet how this fantastic adventure was created. With its man-made beach, I thought for a moment that I was back on the shores of my native Bermuda, relaxing with our turquoise-blue water and delicious white sand. To my left, visitors were swimming with the dolphins, interacting with perhaps one the most intelligent creatures on earth. To my right, folks are wading with mysterious rays, snorkeling through colourful clouds of tropical fish before coming eye-to-eye with sharks and barracuda.

With one staff member for every five guests, service at Discovery Cove is never far away. Whether it's a cool drink on the beach, information on a particular animal or guidance in half a dozen languages, the Discovery Cove staff is dedicated to giving every guest a day in paradise.

Let's be honest. Vacations are not just about places and activities. They are about people and their experiences. Based on that philosophy, adventures such as SeaWorld and Discovery Cove are sure to leave you and your family with an immeasurable amount of memories.

After playing tourist for days, the end of my trip drew near. But there was still time to sit down with Ralph and share old memories and relive some of our good times together. If I recall, the last time we sat and talked was in the South of France — in Nice, to be exact. That was a decade ago.

European born and internationally trained, Ralph takes a personal interest in the quality of service and conducts fact-finding tours of the property each day. He may very well be the most visible member of his 700-plus team. Ralph has an open-door policy, yet he's rarely in his office to welcome visitors.

Ralph has certainly put his array of talents to good use, and the Renaissance is proof of that. He's one good reason why a trip to Orlando can be so enjoyable — for you and your entire family.

Contact Bart Card at bcard@passporttodiscovery.com. Check on the web at www.passporttodiscovery.com

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