

LIVING THE LUSH LIFE

The Ritz-Carlton Amelia Island offers an unforgettable First Coast getaway.



Jay Greene/Provided by Leigh Cort

The Ritz-Carlton's Club floor offers more than just unique dining opportunities. The newly renovated club boasts picturesque views of the Atlantic Ocean.

Leigh Cort
Columnist

My heart has always been at the Ritz-Carlton on Amelia Island. A hotel that rivals the finest iconic resorts in refinement and stunning coastline, it has boasted world-class chefs, dining, service and comfort — not with a shout but a demure whisper!

The island, as you motor along the tree-canopied drive, almost leaves you breathless with the beauty and lush trees that are found in primary Atlan-



Leigh Cort
Unbound Travels

tic dunes. Once you arrive at the hotel's entrance, you realize you're somewhere very special, especially when the gentleman valet speaks your name with a genuine warm welcome. You're escorted to the front desk and a glass of Champagne is

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Provided by Leigh Cort

Visitors will find the Lobby Lounge to be a quiet and inviting meeting spot throughout the year — and perhaps especially on cold days when the fire is well-stoked.

already on a silver tray awaiting your first “wow.”

I could have waited longer than four minutes to be greeted by the professional staff, drinking in the cool marble entry with blazingly beautiful floral arrangements in the center of the lobby. The Champagne was perfectly chilled and offered to me by Front Desk Manager Anna O’Neil.

Everyone seemed to know my name and inquired about my trip and whether I wanted the Wall Street Journal delivered to the door each morning or another newspaper. I didn’t want to request the London Times but somehow if I had, I truly believe they would have figured out how to secure it!

Globally recognized for boundless modern reinvention in travel, nothing compares with the privileged world of the Club Floor. If you’ve never stayed on a Ritz-Carlton Club Floor, this is the season that you should consider something very rare, well-heeled and unexpected. Sharing a rendezvous in the Ritz-Carlton’s private club offers more than five lavish culinary presentations served from 7 a.m.-10 p.m. daily. To some, the food and open bar are what guests focus on without having to leave the eighth floor. Plan to indulge in Continental Breakfast, 7-11 a.m.; Lunch, noon-2 p.m.; Light Snacks, 2-4 p.m.; Hors d’oeuvres, 5-7:30 p.m.; and Sweets & Cordials, 8-10 p.m.

A sample menu from the “afternoon tasting” might include:

The Ritz-Carlton, Amelia Island

4750 Amelia Island Parkway
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- Finger Sandwiches — Open faced Tuna Salad on a Toasted Baguette; Chicken Salad on Wonton with Pineapple, Onion and Chili Oil; Barbecue Beef Wrap with Pepper Jack and Bell Peppers in a Spinach Tortilla
- Side Salads — Potato & Andouille, Greek Salad
- Dips & Spreads — Spinach & Artichoke, French Onion, Guacamole
- Selection of Artisanal Cheeses — Manchego, Boursin, Tomme, Goat Cheese
- Soup du Jour — Broccoli

The Ritz knows how to guide their guests through the leisurely pursuit of enlivening the senses. When you’re a Club Floor guest, treat yourself to a sofa by the fireplace, private balcony or secluded settee. The hotel offers you many amenities that add up to pure bliss worthy of a great escape:

- Complimentary use of spa facilities. This includes the eucalyptus steam room, dry sauna, Jacuzzi, outdoor adult space pool, relaxation lounges, locker rooms and showers.
- Complimentary pressing of two garments per room daily.
- Express check-out service, a guest

computer with Internet access, Wi-Fi and 24-hour beverages including espresso machine.

- Children, ages 5-12, the Ritz-Kids Night Out whereby Ritz Kids staff will pick up children at 5:30 p.m. The children enjoy a private kids’ dinner and activities until 9 p.m.

It’s impossible to stay indoors with so many easy beachy courtyards, pools, dune hideaways and seashore activities to select — and two VERY cool al fresco dining spots. Indulge in daytime light fare at the Ocean Bar and Grill (where you get a picture postcard view of the oceanside pool, sand dunes and ocean) and 4750 (casual dining all day on the patio where it’s always bustling). Guests are a heady mix of personalities, many with children in tow.

Settling in, I trace the ensuing two days’ of relaxed activities — with a fervent and rock-solid influence of dining. My double entendre embraces the hotel’s signature salt theme, which includes one of the most acclaimed restaurants in Florida — their oceanfront gem — SALT, starring Executive Chef Thomas Tolxdorf.

At 4 p.m. daily, the hotel invites guests to join the fun in their tiny retail establishment The Salt Shop, where one can learn about the relevance and health benefits of salt along with the overwhelming collection of edible salts that are gathered from around the

globe and crafted by the in-house culinary team. From wellness salt lamps to the ultimate reward of sampling buttered bread sprinkled with a plethora of multi-hued and textured salts, the presentation sets you up for spotting salt throughout the property.

Alas it was 5 p.m. I scurried upstairs to the honored Club Lounge, not wanting to miss whatever the chefs had created that day for dainty cocktail-hour fare. Whether your taste begins with a chilled martini, glass of Champagne, fine wine or personal favorite beverage, it’s “on the house.” That’s part of the Club Floor mystique; and for some, cocktailing begins with Mimosas, Bloody Marys, Spritzers or Manhattans at breakfast!

There aren’t many restaurants in northeast Florida where it’s comfortable to dress up for dinner. SALT is a seductive and sensual dining room — lush, actually — to inspire one to pack a favorite dress or sport jacket. There isn’t a formal dress code, but their international guests do show up in couturier ensembles and resort attire that any fashionista would enjoy showing off.

The evening fare — Chef’s Adventure Menu — is something that everyone should indulge in at least once. A five-course extravaganza that changes nightly, it promises to be a lasting memory of exquisite presentations,

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masterful combinations and skilled wizardry. I chose my repast paired with wines served at each course — not a tasting-size pour but a full glass of boldly chosen stunning selections.

I was mesmerized by the first course: Hawaiian Big Eye Tuna with Watermelon Ceviche, Candied Serrano, Crispy Corn, Yuzu and Mache served in a Coconut — perched atop pale baby blue SALT! “Chilled Adelsheim Pinot Gris, Willamette Valley Oregon 2011” didn’t play second fiddle to the dish but was a harmonious duet with the tuna!

As the four hour dinner continued, I was once again entertained and awed with Chef’s presentation of Key West Pink Prawns, Grits, Green Tomato and Goat Cheese. It was brought to the table under a clear dome of infused “smoke fragrance.” As the dome was lifted, the dish seemed to float out of its smoky world and into my mouth! It was a wildly intoxicating culinary moment, paired with my favorite wine “ZD Winery, Chardonnay, Napa, California 2010.”

I could write endless poetry about this dinner; suffice to say that it’s worth its weight in “salt” for \$85 per person without wine pairing and \$130 per person with wines. Ah, I don’t want to mislead — the five-course dinner is really six courses beginning with the Amuse Bouche Lobster Bisque with parmesan crumble AND Champagne!

As the moon rose over the ocean, I retired to my room to another surprise. The Ritz-Carlton nightly turndown is absolutely dreamy. Opening the door, I was welcomed by subdued lighting, linens meticulously folded down, drapes drawn and the TV tuned to soothing ocean waves and intoxicating sounds of trance-like soft music. This hotel knows how to anticipate guest’s dreams and expectations!

Morning sunrise came too soon but



Provided by Leigh Cort

Visitors can stroll the flowering grounds of the Ritz-Carlton at Amelia Island before lighting a private chiminea and gazing at the sea.

I quickly remembered that I was on the Club Floor and breakfast was being served to a select number of guests in the club lounge. How could I neglect the magical espresso and latte machine that I could handle myself to grind the beans and brew the most perfectly luscious cups of heaven? A sun-warmed balcony invited me to prepare a small plate of house-cured salmon, fresh fruit and a warm croissant to settle in with my newspaper and greet the day.

Rejuvenation was my mantra. I walked along the wide secluded 13-mile beach along Amelia Island’s bluff of dunes. It was exactly as I remem-

bered — unspoiled and only dotted with beachcombers. The spa became my hideaway for the afternoon — a cool and utterly faultless oasis of tranquility. It was easy to surrender to elemental pleasures where one can choose from an abundant “book” of professional services: floating weightlessly in a hammock or selecting a Honey Butter Wrap, Hadashi massage, aromatic scrub with custom fragrance or unwinding in a salt-lighted relaxation lounge. Visually the spa’s theme is the ebb and flow of tidal marshes where time heals, replenishes and refreshes. Although I didn’t feel that

time stood still — I did recognize that it slowed down and wrapped me in a seaside frame of mind.

A farewell toast of Champagne, poured by my club concierge, restored and energized me before departing. The Ritz-Carlton Amelia Island kept its promise of nourishing my senses. One last glance at the ocean meeting the sky and I was in my convertible turning the corner onto Amelia Island Parkway heading home.

A piece of my heart stayed on the Club Floor balcony where perhaps we might meet one day and toast life with a salty-rimmed margarita!

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