

WALDORF ASTORIA ORLANDO



OPENING PICTURE: Fireworks at Waldorf Astoria Orlando.

An old named brand with echoes of its past haunting our correspondent as he visits a southern gem.

BY DAVID J WHYTE

Red Astaire tap-dancing down 5th Avenue, Gene Kelly looking longingly across a crowded room at Rita Hayworth. These are the kinds of images that spring to mind when you hear the name, 'Waldorf Astoria'. New York's iconic Park Avenue hotel as well as being the first skyscraper hotel and indeed the first hotel in the world to offer the concept of room service, The Waldorf set the scene for dozens of classy movies such as 'The Great Gatsby', 'Godfather III' and 'Scent of a Woman'. When it came to class the Dorf, as it was fondly called, had it in champagne bucketfuls.

You could even argue that this plush property marked a turning point in the cultural milieu of a young, thrusting, industrially opulent America. Lacking the manners and grace of its Old World counterparts, The Waldorf offered America's self-made tycoons, movie stars, gangsters, politicians and socialites the sophistication of London, Paris or Berlin, and an island of glamour and charm.

Could there be another Waldorf Astoria? Since it was taken over by Hilton Hotels in the 1970s there are in fact dozens scattered like gilded lilies around the world including one in Edinburgh, Arizona, Jeddah, Jerusalem and many more. But the one that intrigued me most was the Waldorf Astoria in Orlando, Florida. The Waldorf and Orlando? Isn't that like sitting the Queen of England next to Jay Z at a state banquet or washing down Beluga caviar with a triple-thick McDonald's Chocolate Milkshake? In spite of such contrasting characters, could this curious pairing mark a turning point in Orlando's fortunes?

I pulled into Bonnet Creek just about a mile off Interstate 4 and in the very midst of theme park America. You are literally surrounded by all things Disney here - Epcot, The Magic Kingdom and the Disney

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town of Celebration just down the road. But curiously enough, it all magically disappears as you drive up the lane towards The Waldorf. There are actually two hotels on this property, Waldorf Astoria Orlando and Hilton Orlando Bonnet Creek. Set within a 482-acre nature preserve, the only whiff you get of Disneyworld is from the fireworks display each evening.

I arrive in time for lunch in the Waldorf Astoria Orlando's Peacock Alley restaurant overlooking the magnificent handcrafted clock, an echo of a similar timepiece in Manhattan. After lunch I wandered over to the clubhouse and caddie master and quite soon after, I was off on my own to the first hole. I notice how awfully quiet it was here, which I found pretty strange.

A round of golf here costs around US\$150 during the high season, which is very acceptable especially for such a great facility and priced in line with most good courses in the Orlando area. The course was designed by Rees Jones, 18 holes adding up to an impressive 7,108 yards from the back tees with a rating of 74.6 and slope of 139.

From the get-go, it is a tough track, unusually so I thought for a resort layout. Then you launch into a thrill of holes as exciting as any of the rides at Disneyworld. Play your top game and you'll still be thoroughly tested. This is grown-up golf and a real treat of length and precision.

The 4th is a long par 5 laced with cross bunkers. This is the first of many par-defeating holes. Meanwhile the 8th kicks in with lots of penal bunkering in front of raised greens. This is RJ's signature, mainly penal and mega-intimidating stretches, which of course is why he is well known as a designer of Major championship courses. Even from the white tee boxes.

The 11th would be a song if you can power fade a hybrid onto a coffee table. This is a long-short hole playing onto what I can only describe as a pimple of a green - that's what the putting arena looks like from the tee - a bird table perched atop yet another well-raised and heavily fortified parapet. This is followed by a monster par 5 at the 12th, long and lined with bunkers.

Many of the greens have a sort of drawbridge approach, a steep-sided rampart that forces you to fly all the way to the hole. The closing holes are among the best I've ever played. This is a great piece of carved

topography, better than most Florida courses with little sign of the flat lands that must have once existed here. I'd say it was worth checking into the Waldorf for this golf course alone.

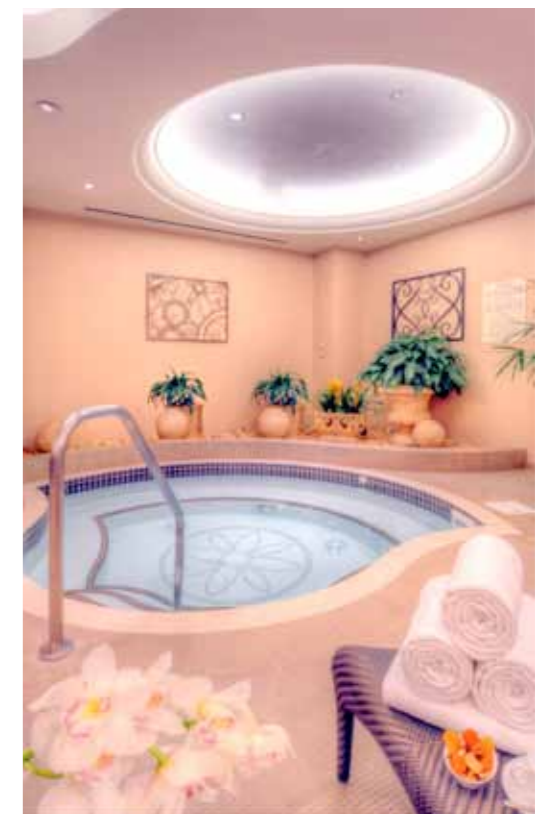
While the course left me mellow with my efforts, the hotel was more of a conundrum. I suspect my head was full of expectation of the style and glamour of New York and that somehow just didn't transcend the miles from Manhattan to Central Florida. As I watched portly vacationers waddle through the atrium in their shorts and flip-flops, I wondered what Gene Kelly would have thought. The rooms are generous, beds and linens plush with an understated decor that is rather calming.

All rooms feature marble bathrooms, 42" high-definition LCD televisions, Blu-Ray player, dual-line telephones, in-room safe big enough for a laptop, complimentary in-room premium cable, video check-out and Internet access. The 498-rooms of the Waldorf Astoria Orlando are complimented by the 1,001-room Hilton Orlando Bonnet Creek with a convention centre joining the two.

After a while, it really is a matter of getting used to. Perhaps more for an old school like me. It is after all, Orlando, and the type of resort guests or MICE visitors by the hoard do fit in more so than a tap-dancing deceased Hollywood actor. Once I got past the illusions, I found myself slinking further into the depths of lush comfort that is more in place here.

And there is no place more comfortable in its entirety than The Waldorf Astoria Spa. An opulent swimming pool set in the midst of private cabanas frame this indulgent retreat with 22 indoor treatment rooms with a buffet spread of luxuriant therapies to soothe the soul.

As a footnote to our tale, the original, iconic Waldorf Astoria in New York is about to close its doors. New Chinese owners have decided to deconstruct most of its 1,400 rooms and create a myriad of upmarket condos retaining only around 300 hotel rooms. The lavish



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Waldorf Astoria Orlando Golf Club; Waldorf Astoria Spa; Waldorf Astoria Orlando Golf Club, Hole 2.



FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: Waldorf Astoria Orlando Hotel exterior; The magnificent handcrafted clock at Waldorf Astoria Orlando Hotel's lobby, an echo of a similar timepiece in Manhattan; The swimming pool at Waldorf Astoria Orlando Hotel.



interior so appreciated by the likes of John F. Kennedy, Grace Kelly and Marilyn Monroe will disappear.

I suppose everything must move on and we can't cling to the past but it is with a sigh and heavy heart I see it go. Waldorf Astoria Orlando is definitely a hotel of choice in the Orlando area, perhaps the best in town and possibly marking a turning of the 'City Beautiful' to a more sophisticated milieu.

As another aside, I like what's going on in Orlando, a city that is definitely on the move away from its theme park backdrop. Nevertheless, for now, we have the Waldorf Astoria Orlando as the ideal setting to bring the family to visit Disneyworld; it can also be a great convention venue for Fortune 500 companies, as well as a superb base for pure, unadulterated golfing joy.

Just don't go looking for Cyd Charisse or Gene Kelly sipping Manhattans at the bar. Sorry, I just had to. ☹️

For more information on the Waldorf Astoria Orlando, please call (407) 597-5500 or visit www.WaldorfAstoriaOrlando.com.