

The Swan and Dolphin Luxury Hotels in the Heart of Walt Disney World

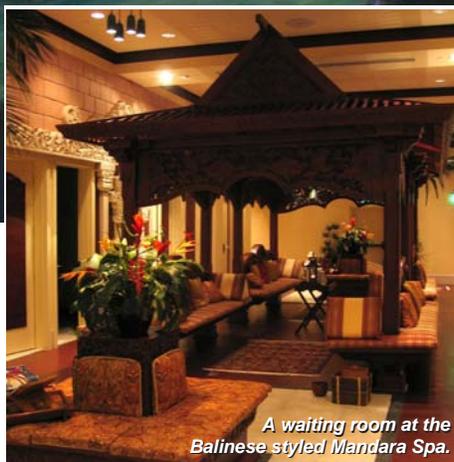
By Melissa Wolcott and Al Martino

I would imagine that most of our Tampa Bay Area readers have visited Walt Disney World at some point by now, perhaps even getting lost driving in the massive complex. If they have, they certainly would have noticed the two unusual buildings located between Epcot and MGM Studios — one topped with swans, the other with fish. They would be the Swan and Dolphin Resort, part of the Starwood Hotel chain. (The Swan is a Westin Hotel, and the Dolphin is a Sheraton.) The intriguing architecture is by post-modernist architect, Michael Graves, who had fun with the water themes. The interiors of the hotels are marvelously eclectic, with showpiece fountains in each. Built in 1987, both hotels have had, or are currently undergoing, a \$12-15 million surface renovation.

We stayed in a newly refurbished room at the Dolphin, which was warm and welcoming, with delightfully pleasing soft aqua and peach colors, and blonde woods. The Michael Graves touches are evident in the smallest of details in the rooms. The bed was heavenly, which is apropos, since it is a Westin “Heavenly Bed” (found in both hotels). A pillow-top mattress, white goose-down comforter, 250 thread-count sheets, and five overstuffed pillows envelop you.

Both hotel’s amenities are plentiful, and one never even has to leave to complex to have a complete vacation. The Dolphin even has a launderette for guests to use. Of interest to non-smokers, the Swan Hotel is entirely smoke free.

The magnificent new Mandara Spa is located in the Dolphin Hotel, and is one of the most relaxing spas we’ve been to. Staffed by quality professionals, and a wide menu of



A waiting room at the Balinese styled Mandara Spa.

services, the spa experience alone is worth the trip.

There are 5 swimming pools in the complex, including a grotto with a slide, waterfall, and a real sand beach. Whirlpools and hammocks are there for lazing, and fun Swan shaped paddle boats are also available for the use of guests.



One of the property's five swimming pools.

Camp Dolphin is a supervised play area with activities open from 5:00 PM to midnight, so parents can leave the kids in good hands while they spend some time alone, or enjoy a quiet dinner at one of the hotel’s fine restaurants.

And both hotel’s restaurants are fine indeed. We dined at the Swan’s Palios Italian Restaurant one night, and enjoyed a delicious Mahi Mahi con Pomodoro Carciofi served over a bed of roasted yellow and red tomatoes, marinated artichokes and toasted pastina. We met Executive Chef Ryan Messina, who was a surprise, as he turned out to be a she. (The non-gender specific name threw us.) Female executive chefs are very unusual. Why? We haven’t a clue — but it is so. She is the only female chef in the Swan or the Dolphin. The hotel’s executive pastry chef, Laurent

Branlard, is a member of the gold-medal winning USA World Pastry Championship Team. Needless to say, we greatly looked forward to our desserts, which were outstanding. The restaurant’s decor is elegant old world Italian, and the name Palio comes from a horse race in Tuscany. The race has been held yearly since the 11th century. We also enjoyed the talents of the strolling mandolin player, Del, who informed us that “back in the day” he worked and played sax and clarinet with Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Sammy Davis, and even the 3 Stooges.

The next evening we dined at Todd English’s bluezoo in the Dolphin. Chef English is known for his restaurants across the country, including Olives in Las Vegas, and the new Todd English Restaurant aboard the Queen Mary 2. The bluezoo is upscale, with a sleek, modern decor. The food was divine. We enjoyed their slow roasted double pork chops with honey glazed sweet potatoes, and brown butter apricot chutney.

We had breakfast every morning in Fresh, a Mediterranean-style restaurant, with a fabulous buffet (guests can order off the menu also). If you’re hankering to nosh at 3 AM, no problem, as the complex has a 24 hour “buffeteria”, a cleverly decorated self-service eating spot named Picabu. Altogether, there are 17 restaurants on property, and 24-hour room service, so you cannot possibly go hungry.

The next time you plan a get-away to Walt Disney World, treat yourself to this wonderful world within the World.

For more information, call 800-227-1500, or visit www.swandolphin.com.



Palio's Executive Chef Ryan Messina



bluezoo's Pork Chops with Honey Glazed Sweet Potatoes.