

Option of first resort: beachfront business trip in Miami

By **Alan Behr**

Tribune News Service

MARCH 5, 2018, 3:45 AM

Google Maps and the unforgiving female voice on my Garmin GPS device were having yet another disagreement: Google said I should go south via I-95, but my windshield-mounted scold (whose favorite word is recalculating) said Biscayne Boulevard was the preferred route this time. It was high season in Miami, and rush-hour traffic was compressed into an even greater mass of rolling metal than usual due in good measure to the migratory return of seasonal residents and vacationers. As a result, not only were my two guidance systems almost never in agreement, each was prone to changing its mind. Perhaps because she literally spoke to me, I followed the voice of Ms. Garmin and got to day two of my conference, in downtown Miami, with enough time to spare to reach the conference-venue cafeteria for my morning jolt of Cuban coffee.

Legal conferences being quite demanding, once mine started, I did not get outside during daylight. From great picture windows, I would watch the sun course across Miami Bay, reflecting from catamarans, bulbous cruise ships and diligent container vessels as they entered and exited upon turquoise tropical waters that might have been iced over for all the contact I had with them. Fortunately, I had done enough of these events to have predicted all that, and I had come prepared. Instead of staying at the usual, business-friendly, soul-ignoring conference hotel, I had booked at what some consider to be the best resort hotel in the region: the Acqualina, on the beach in Sunny Isles Beach, a resort town about 18 miles north of downtown Miami.

Anyone can walk barefoot on a crowded beach during the day, under a tropical sun. It takes a lawyer determined to enjoy small snatches of free time to walk barefoot on the beach at night, alone and in a business suit. Here is a tip: roll up those trousers! On that second night, the moon was but a white smile amid the clouds, and the waves caught the muted shimmer from their master above. An anchored ship loomed moody and silent just below the visible horizon. Acqualina, tall and quiet from this angle, rose overhead as does the Eiffel Tower over Paris with purposefulness and a languid command of the earth around it, even though Acqualina is a tower hotel and residential complex with two tall buildings in operation and with another on the way.

Skyscrapers that wall off the ocean from the coastline are not unique to South Florida, but they are a signature of the region. It can take some adjustment in expectations to accept the Florida waterfront aesthetic. This is not Southampton and it is not Portofino; think big, American and affluent and take the riff from there. Just to the north of Acqualina, a rival tower bears the brand of POTUS. (It is with some irony that the owners of Acqualina are also the Trump family, from South Africa no relation to the commander in chief.) What I have liked most about my hotel since entering is that, although it is built on a Florida scale, it circumvents the regional predilection toward ostentation. That is not an easy thing to do with an ocean tower, but the drive-up entrance leads to a tall gallery in the Italianate manner, which directs visitors into the lobby, where Mediterranean notes

and careful divisions of space help keep the architecture reasonably to scale. The residences now under construction can be forgiven a greater level of flash in their metallic silver lobby; it is by Karl Lagerfeld, who has an international license to do whatever it is he wants on the assumption that he will somehow manage always to do it right.

This distinctly Floridian way to get your toes wet comes at a price, of course, but what the hotel has given me, on this second evening, when I most want to be at rest, at peace and pampered like an itinerate aristocrat. Staffers seem to be everywhere, and to all appearances, authentically friendly. That is not as easy to do in Florida. Americans arm themselves to the teeth with protestations of equality, which is in part why an American waiter will introduce himself to you by his first name to be sure you understand that, although he may be serving you, he is not your servant. Perhaps because its staff is from many nations and regions, Acqualina sidesteps of that earnestness, with the result that you actually feel you are being served by people who like earning a living by providing things at your polite request or, to show they really get it before you even think to ask.

As I came in, again after dark, on my third night, a security guard complemented me on my necktie (this being South Florida, only he and I were wearing them). A bartender came up to me and asked about my preferences for my nightly wind-down cocktail; she escorted me through her offerings like the ice cream vendor leading the children through tub-borne temptations at the nearby Kosher-to-Go stand until I arrived at Woman in Red Dress (vodka, Champagne, elderflower liquor, Campari, fresh berries) because I liked the name. I took dinner just paces away, at the hotel's new lobby restaurant, AQ Chop House. Although I grew up on a cattle farm, thanks to my cardiologist, Dr. No Fun, I now abjure most red meat; but tonight, my treat to myself was bone-in ribeye steak, which I paired with a Meoimi pinot noir. There are few places more agreeable for enjoyable alone time than the lobby of a luxury hotel. I dined amid a decorous contingent: parents with their children, young couples alone, older couples alone or with friends of many years an affluent, polyglot cadre energized by self-confidence and comfort. The hotel absorbed it all, accommodated it, comforted and reassured it, and at times just let it all happen. Again still in my suit, I went for a workout in the fitness center. No one there seemed to notice or care.

On the fourth and final night of my conference, we got to leave a half-hour early. Ms. Garmin celebrated by leading me along the perimeter of a rectangular route of her own invention that, although covering a distance I could have easily walked, consumed my entire bonus time. When she insisted that I go yet again back from where I started, I pulled the device off the windshield and unplugged her wicked heart. And, so, almost two hours after setting out, I came back to Acqualina, where I was again welcomed, feeling like the prodigal son, my profligacy having been not in the waste of money but of time.

Dinner tonight was at the hotel's gourmet restaurant, a Florida branch of the Il Mulino restaurants of New York, which feature the cuisine of the Abruzzo region of Italy. I had the fettuccini special, followed by the veal chop special and that was quite magnificent, but then came the Grand Marnier fresh fruit flambee, and that coda quite made the evening for me.

The next day, I did something I had not done since the day I had arrived: I saw Acqualina and its four pools (including the one at the spa), and the soccer field and, for that matter, the Atlantic Ocean, up front and in broad daylight. To get to the beach facilities, you have to stop at a booth and secure a wristband. There was a line, and out of nowhere came the general manager himself, Christof Pignet, an Austrian; he stepped in and helped the people at the booth hand out wristbands, astonishing a number of us. When he assisted me with mine, I asked him in German, "You do everything personally?" to which he replied with a smile, "Self-evidently." (Wearing my hat as a German national, I have no problem confessing that we need the Austrians to remind us how to laugh.) Members of the Florida contingent of my family swept in, and we all had lunch at the beachside hotel restaurant, the Costa Grill, where my cocktail this time was the French Kiss because I liked the name.

My self-made program had been a complete success: I had enjoyed a beachfront resort despite the best-laid plans of the legal conference subculture to keep me downtown, pleading with the front desk of a serviceable hotel for access to the business center. Which is to say, I got my job done and I had fun. I have every intention of returning to Acqualina this time without a conference or the business suits. I have already picked out my welcome-back cocktail: the Feels Like Heaven and you know why.

For more information: www.acqualinaresort.com; reserve through Leading Hotels of the World: www.lhw.com, or, if like me, you think that someone else should do the typing when booking luxury, call 1-800-745-8883. The website of the always-helpful Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau: <http://www.miamiandbeaches.com/>.

Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Copyright © 2018, Chicago Tribune