

Sunny Isles Beach has the best waterfront hotel in the country. Just how magical is it?

BY CONNIE OGLE

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We hate to tell you this, but this story is probably as close as you're going to get to Acqualina Resort & Spa.

It's as close as we'll ever get for the rest of eternity, too.

This news is hard to take, especially after the Sunny Isles Beach resort was named the best waterfront hotel in the country by USA Today. Yes! The resort, which sits on 4.5 beachfront acres, was also awarded the Forbes Five Star Award seven years in a row, plus the AAA Five Diamond for the 11th year in a row. This is kind of like winning the Super Bowl, the NBA championship and the World Series year after year after year, only less boring because it doesn't involve baseball. TripAdvisor also named the resort the no. 1 beachfront resort in the continental U.S. while US News and World Report called it the no. 1 resort in the continental U.S.

Acqualina - even the name evokes a magical palace of wonder. Say it loud and there's music playing. Say it soft and it's almost like praying. And all of us, we live RIGHT HERE, and we have never been. Because let's face it, most of us are Travelodge people all the way.

So what's it like to visit a luxury resort about which the whole world raves? Don't you want to know? Why exactly is everybody losing their minds over Acqualina? Does it live up to the hype?

We went to find out and also because strolling around a gorgeous, Mediterranean-style luxury resort like a baller beats staring forlornly into a computer screen.

And listen: we found out why everybody's gushing about the place.



When you check in, the nice people at reception offer you champagne. This will calm your nerves after seeing all the Rolls Royces parked outside when you rolled up in a five-year-old Hyundai with a sticky clutch. The super helpful guys who set up your chairs on the beach - because you cannot possibly set up your own towel on a chair - bring you an icy pitcher of water. When you leave, the kind valet will offer you a bottle of water so that you will be less parched when you return to your pitiful, non-luxury life.



THE POOLS

There are four pools at Acqualina. One is for spa visitors only; another is for adults only. At the other two you can bring kids, which is good because the resort caters to families with a variety of activities and programs, including one that introduces kids to the wonderful world of marine life in a newly designed Children's Center. Plus there's a mini soccer field and basketball hoops. Bring the kids and you barely even have to see them.

THE OCEAN VIEW



You can't stop staring. Especially if you're used to Holiday Inn Express

THE ROOM WITH THE OCEAN VIEW

There are 98 guest rooms at Acqualina and 188 residences, and the rooms with the views of the ocean are heartstopping in the best possible way. Pack your heart meds. You're going to need them when you see the bill. For a random weeknight in September, the classic suite starts at \$955 a night, with a one-bedroom suite starting at \$1,155.



Troy Campbell Photography www.tr

THE ROOMS WITHOUT AN OCEAN VIEW



You might feel that if you stay on the west side of the resort, your life is bleak and worthless. You're wrong. The view still involves water and lights and all the elements you need to feel pampered. For a random weeknight in September, the Intracoastal rooms start at \$455 a night.

FISH TACOS AT COSTA GRILL

Visitors can eat at any of Acqualina's restaurants, and your best bet for lunch is the outdoor Costa Grill, which has a view of the water and fish tacos so stuffed with snapper they can change the way you think about fish tacos. The Costa Grill is open from 11 a.m.-6 p.m. daily.



Troy Campbell Photography www.tr

THE ROVING HUNK OF CHEESE AND THE PORCINI RAVIOLI AT IL MULINO



Dan Forer

Almost immediately upon sitting down in the atmospheric Il Mulino New York, which resembles a dark, clean, “Game of Thrones” style castle without all the murder, a man wielding a giant chunk of cheese materializes at your table. He carves off a piece and places it gently on a plate, then glides away. You will spend a few minutes considering flagging him down again. Then you will think: I can’t afford to come back here again any time soon, so I am eating some more damned cheese. So you flag him down again. Don’t worry. He’ll oblige. The service here is so attentive the waiters come equipped with extra flashlights to lend you so your ancient self can read the menu. Also, the porcini ravioli, a house specialty, is so delicious it can melt your brain. Il Mulino does have a Miami Spice lunch and dinner menu, though sadly neither includes the ravioli. The resort’s third restaurant, AQ Chop House by Il Mulino, also features a Miami Spice dinner menu.

THE SPA



You don't have to be a guest at the hotel to visit ESPA, which is so tranquil you won't even remember what you called that guy in the BMW who cut you off on Collins. The spa - which is the first ESPA branded spa in the U.S. - has its own pool and Roman waterfall spa, plus a steam room, sauna and rainfall shower. When you sign in, you will choose a type of tea, which will be brewed for you to sip before your treatment (see: people are always giving you beverages).

There's an extensive menu of treatments, but the newest is the Sound Care Massage, an 80-minute Swedish massage combined with tranquil music (you get to choose, and no, there is no Cardi B on the menu). You wear headphones while a skillful masseuse makes you forget you live in Miami, where everything off these grounds is completely insane. The treatment is \$250, and all treatments include use of the spa amenities. Make sure to leave time for the steam room because there are colored lights on the ceiling and you get a free light show.

DID WE MENTION THE OCEAN?



Enough said.

ACQUALINA RESORT & SPA

Where: 17875 Collins Ave, Sunny Isles Beach

Rates, reservations and information: acqualinaresort.com