

Escape from Orlando's epicentre

It's possible to elude the giant theme park for a little R & R

JODY ROBBINS
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

There are many ways you can ignore your surroundings and pretend you're somewhere else. Prison inmates must do this all the time, I reason, as I'm about to enter my own form of incarceration.

I'm in Orlando — Downtown Disney, to be exact. Our family is attempting to manage a week at the epicentre of the theme park universe, without actually colliding into one. I'm about to have a near-miss: lunch at T-Rex, an over-the-top, dinosaur-themed restaurant. I pray it provides sufficient entertainment for the kids while I catch up with an old friend. It does.

Not that I'm opposed to theme parks. It's just that this trip is about sneaking in a dose of vitamin D for my daughter, Eve, and I, on the back of hubby's business trip, and not about kids, crowds or a certain mouse. So far, we've avoided costumed characters of any kind by staying at the Waldorf Astoria Orlando. This swank resort nestled on 480 acres within the Bonnet Creek nature preserve demonstrates that a family stay needn't be synonymous with lumpy mattresses and kids tearing down the hallways.

It's definitely not Disney, but it is a playground of sorts — for adults and families. This opulent oasis offers top-notch amenities such as a spa offering customized treatments from the famed Parisian skin care company Guerlain; private cabanas flanking a formal swimming pool, and a Rees Jones-designed golf course named Golf Digest's 2009 best new public golf course.

Starting at \$269 a night, cheap, it's not. But bypassing gate admission, parking and the obligatory souvenirs that accompany such endeavours, allow us to wallow in these swish surroundings.

Attached to the Waldorf Astoria, is the more affordable Hilton Orlando Bonnet Creek Hotel (\$209/



Clearwater has a wide sugar-sand beach, fringed with palm trees, from which to watch dolphins.



Visitors have no trouble getting their daily dose of vitamin D.

night). While not as luxurious, it's more suited for families, with free fare for kids at breakfast and dinner and a warm, zero-entry pool.

We crazy Canucks floated along the lazy river into the lagoon-style pool to the amusement of hotel staffers, who thought 20 C, was too cold to take an early morning dip. Eve and I relaxed poolside in canopied loungers, rising only to participate in the daily activities of the WA Kids children program,



There are plenty of activities to keep the kids busy.

accessible to guests at both hotels.

To escape amusement parks totally, it's best to leave Orlando. You don't have to go far to find a different sort of attraction. While there are numerous beach towns to choose from, we were looking for warm water, white sand and a not-too-touristy destination without straying far from the convenience of the Orlando airport. Clearwater, a short drive from downtown Tampa, on the Gulf of

Mexico, fit the bill perfectly.

Ever since the early 1900s, Clearwater's population has doubled in the winter and we could see why. Here, it's not about the theme parks (there are none) or the shopping. Wide sugar-sand beach fringed with palm trees provided the perfect backdrop to watch dolphins gracefully dive for dinner at sunset.

While seeing such majestic mammals in the wild is a sight

If you go

- WestJet flies direct to Orlando from Calgary until April 28. Air Canada offers connecting flights from Calgary to both Orlando and Tampa.
- Waldorf Astoria: www.waldorfastoriaorlando.com
- Hilton Bonnet Creek: www.hiltonbonnetcreek.com
- Sandpearl: www.sandpearl.com
- Hilton Clearwater: www.hilton.com/clearwaterbeach
- Clearwater Marine Aquarium: www.seewinter.com
- Cooters: www.cooters.com
- www.crabbybills.com

to behold, Eve was not easily impressed. She was on a mission to meet a movie star. It was at the Clearwater Marine Aquarium where we met Winter, the dolphin without a tail and star of Dolphin Tale. If you're looking for the bells and whistles of SeaWorld, you're in the wrong place. More animal hospital than kid attraction, this not-for-profit facility rehabilitates injured animals with a goal of releasing them in the wild.

Only two hotels boast beach-front access, the Hilton Clearwater and Sandpearl. To thoroughly decimate our HHonors account, we went with the Hilton, adjacent to Pier 60, a park that celebrates the end of day with festival activities such as street performers, outdoor movies and live music. Here, Eve successfully evaded her parents, hiding out at the hotel's Kid's Zone.

Being in the Gulf, one thing you don't want to miss is sampling local specialties such as gumbo, grits and grouper, served inventively in tamales, buffalo-style and parmesan. Sitting on the patio of Crabby Bills, where main courses with two sides are \$8, we regretted being so greedy after forgetting just how large portion sizes are in the south. That was soon forgotten, when we joined the regulars on Monday night at Cooters, a local dive, for all you can eat crab legs.

You might be successful in dodging the theme parks, but it's difficult to escape \$1.50 light beer. We toasted our successful family vacation — relieved it didn't take an amusement park to amuse this family.

Lufthansa's cushy lounge helps rejuvenate tired travellers

AARON SAUNDERS
POSTMEDIA NEWS

We've all experienced it: the stupor-like condition that befalls us after a long transoceanic flight. You're tired, hungry and not looking, or for that matter, smelling your best. You just want a good meal, a bit of rest and a shower. This is especially true of the road warriors who fly back and forth on business all the time. But there's good news, and it comes in the form of German airline Lufthansa, which recently opened its brand-new Senator Lounge at Frankfurt International Airport.

As you might expect, passengers holding First Class tickets with Lufthansa and Swiss are allowed access to this soothing lounge, but those guests travelling First Class on any Star Alliance carrier, like Air Canada, may also enter, as well as those passengers who are Star Alliance Gold members.

In the Senator Lounge, guests can relax, refresh and rejuvenate while waiting for their connecting flight. A full selection of complimentary food and beverages, including wine and spirits, are available, along with comfortable seating and some truly magnifi-

cent views of the comings and goings of the aircraft of Germany's national airline. There are also showers and even a "quiet room" here for you to catch up on your sleep.

Guests of the lounge can even relax at the on-site Senator Spa. While these carry an additional charge, guests can use their Star Alliance frequent flyer points to pay for treatments. Operated by renowned firm Babor, men and women can indulge in a variety of relaxing treatments like the 60-minute Energizing Hot Stone Massage for \$99 (or 32,670 award miles). There's even a dedicated spa program for men, with refreshing facials starting at \$35.

While I walked around in awe of this oasis of calm amid the bustle of Frankfurt Airport, it was the City Lights Bar that made the greatest impression on me. With a name spelled out in letters that

stretch the height of the room, the comfortable seating, soothing mood lighting and relaxing beverages are likely to be a hit with many travellers, not to mention the commanding views of your plane.

If you have to prepare for that upcoming business meeting, free Wi-Fi access and several computer workstations are on-site. Don't want to lug around your luggage? No problem; it can be stored for you. During my visit I got the impression that no request is impossible; the friendly staff are always willing to help.

As I left the Senator Lounge and returned to the noise of the main



Courtesy, Senator Lounge

Travellers relax in the Senator Lounge at Frankfurt airport.

passenger terminal, one thought ran through my mind: I could really use that hot stone massage.

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