

ROMANTIC GETAWAYS

Orlando For Grown Ups – Part 1

January 6, 2011 by [Donna Heiderstadt](#)

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“Romantic Orlando” may seem a laugh-out-loud oxymoron – what could possibly be sexy about shrieking kids, endless lines, and faux-everything sprawl? So you’ll probably be surprised to learn that 52 percent of all visitors to America’s theme park capital are adults traveling *without* children. As I discovered on two recent visits, there is more to this world-

famous central Florida playground than that iconic squeaky-voiced mouse.

[Orlando](#) has several factors that make it a convenient destination for a quick grown-up getaway: Great airlift from most major East Coast and Midwest gateways (with flights of one-to-three hours and round-trips as low as \$169); a moderate climate (with the exception of June to September when temperatures and humidity soar); and several resort complexes that are located amid abundant nature, such as on Shingle Creek (shown above; courtesy of The Ritz-Carlton Orlando, Grande Lakes), and outside of the theme parks, but close enough to allow easy access if you so choose. Here are my suggestions for two exceptional places to stay to enjoy a romantic getaway in Orlando (and watch for Part 2, next week, for details on very grown-up places to play – hint: they involve Tiffany glass, designer bargains, wine-sipping, and more):

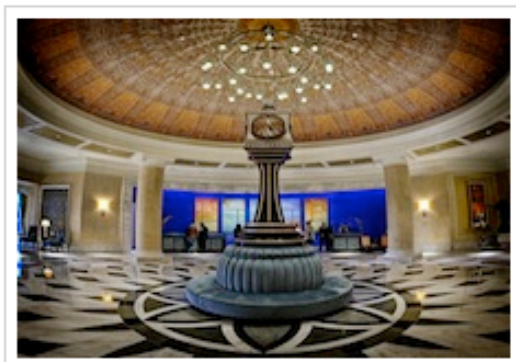
[The Ritz-Carlton Orlando, Grande Lakes](#) Taking its cues from Italian palazzo architecture, this marble-clad 582-room resort, located on 500 acres 10 miles from Orlando International Airport, is almost a decade old, but it has just been updated with contemporary room décor (renovations will be complete by late January). The spacious rooms and suites, all with private balconies, are now awash in serene blue and sand (with an exceptionally comfy bed), and feature large bathrooms with separate tub and shower and a double vanity. Upgrade to one of the 56 Club Level rooms to enjoy a dedicated concierge as well as the also newly renovated Club serving a series of food and beverage offerings throughout the day (a great value if you plan to dine mostly on property as breakfast, lunch, and pre-dinner cocktails for two can quickly add up).

The Ritz-Carlton Orlando, Grande Lakes is also home to the largest spa in Orlando, featuring 40 treatment rooms, a 4,000-square-foot heated outdoor pool and rentable cabanas (a great spot to escape kids after having enjoyed a two-hour-plus Just For Us couples massage and rose petal bath). Cuisine wise, the resort offers access to nine dining venues, six at



The Ritz-Carlton and three at the adjacent JW Marriott Resort & Spa (with 1,000 also recently updated rooms, you could opt to stay here for rates starting at \$339; jw-marriott.grandelakes.com). Tops for flavor and ambience are Norman's, an elegant space (shown at right; courtesy of The Ritz-Carlton Orlando, Grande Lakes) helmed by award-winning Florida chef Norman Van Aken, known for his Latin-Caribbean-Asian fusion cuisine (a great choice for seafood-lovers) and Primo, serving up Chef Melissa Kelly's contemporary and organic "home-grown" Italian cuisine.

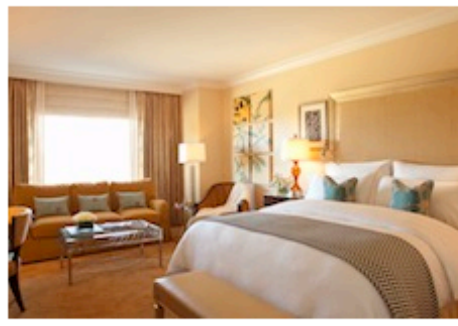
Surrounded by a Greg Norman-designed golf course and Shingle Creek, the headwaters of the Florida Everglades, the resort offers adult-only recreation such as a one-on-one golf challenge or a guided eco-tour in kayaks. And should you feel like indulging your inner child for a day, you'll be just two miles from Discovery Cove (where you can swim with dolphins) and seven miles from Universal Orlando Resort (where you can scream with delight on giant coasters or enjoy lively dining and nightlife – Emeril's Restaurant rates a visit). Rates from \$339/per night and \$439/night for Club Level.



[Waldorf Astoria Orlando](#) The new kid in Orlando, at just 15 months old, is the progeny of a century-old hotel with a storied past. And the pedigree shows as you walk in via striking Art Deco-inspired doors to a lobby dominated by a replica of the distinctive clock that chimes on the hour, just like the New York City original (shown at left; courtesy of

Waldorf Astoria Orlando). But rest assured, everything else at this 498-room resort, set on a 482-acre nature reserve about 20 minutes from Orlando International Airport and adjacent to Disney's Epcot, is evocative of its historic namesake while also managing to be strikingly contemporary – starting with the distinctive shattered-glass artwork by Seattle-based artist Cassandra Blackmore behind reception.

Let's continue with the rooms, where a muted palette in varying shades of gold is offset by a modern tufted headboard, jazzy black-and-white throw and artwork, and colorful accent pillows (shown at right; courtesy of Waldorf Astoria Orlando). The spacious marble bathroom features a separate tub and shower and a vanity with a single (not double) sink. The bed and bedding are both ridiculously luxurious.



Like The Ritz-Carlton, the Waldorf also has a golf course (designed by Rees Jones), and two-for-one amenities and nine dining venues, courtesy of the adjacent, 1,001-room Hilton Orlando Bonnet Creek (where the contemporary tropical décor and rates starting at \$199/night make it an appealing option for couples on a budget; www.hilton.com/BonnetCreek). The Hilton's lazy-river-style pool tends to be a hit with the kids, leaving the Waldorf's two pools (one lined with luxury cabanas rentable by the day) and Jacuzzi to the adults traveling sans children.

Borrowing from its Big Apple namesake, the Waldorf features a 24,000-square-foot Guerlain Spa with 22 treatment rooms, including two couple's suites; try side-by-side Guerlain Imperiale massages, complete with your choice of in-room Guerlain fragrance and organic post-treatment health elixir, to feel harmoniously revitalized and in sync. Other signature amenities transferred from NYC include Peacock Alley lounge, Oscar's brasserie serving breakfast and lunch, Sir Harry's Lounge, and Bull & Bear Steakhouse. The latter, under the direction of Chef David Sears, makes an ideal venue for a heartily romantic meal – such as a shared 36-ounce, 28-day-dry-aged Tomahawk steak (a certified Angus beef, bone-in prime rib) paired with modern interpretations of classic side dishes such as macaroni and cheese and creamed corn. Be sure to finish the meal with Sears' take on luscious cream-filled beignets.

On another night, head next door to the Hilton for Napa Valley chef Donna Scala's modern Italian menu at La Luce, or go fun and casual with easy access (and free transport) to Epcot for around-the-world dining or Downtown Disney for dining, nightlife, and Cirque du Soleil. Rates from \$322/night.

A Tip: Orlando is also a popular convention destination – and both The Ritz-Carlton and Waldorf Astoria have convention facilities – so as you're planning your trip you may want to call ahead before booking to ask if a major conference is scheduled. Not only can hordes of nametag-wearing convention-goers be loud and obtrusive, but they can also zap the romance right out of your visit by booking up your preferred restaurant, as was the case during one of my recent stays.