



scenes from an
amelia island
mancation

it's a guy thing

Dining on the 10-course "tasting menu" by Chef Richard Gras at the Seat in the Kitchen at Salt, the AAA Five-Diamond restaurant at The Ritz-Carlton, Amelia Island.

BY BOB COHN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE WILLIAMS



Shown the varieties of salt.



The Ritz-Carlton, Amelia Island sits on a bluff of dunes facing the Atlantic, and all of the rooms have balconies.

Ours looked directly over the expansive pool area, with the ocean to the right. The view was splendid.

The idea of a “guys’ weekend” suggests rugged, macho activities involving jagged rocks and angry waters, guns and fishing poles, or certain amusements you’d rather not share with the girlfriend or wife. Or at the very least, lots of beer and golf. But for our recent guys-only getaway, we decided on a fancy resort and spa, The Ritz-Carlton, Amelia Island.

Got a problem with that?

Right or wrong, stereotypes abound. Spas seem to be associated with women. You know, avocado mud packs and, um, other treatments. Women like to be “pampered.” Men like to “do stuff.” Or so goes the notion. As the three of us — us guys, that is — headed back to the airport after our weekend at the Ritz, our limo driver, Chuck, snickered and asked, “You didn’t get anything waxed, did you?”

It should be noted that Chuck is, without question, a rugged, macho guy. He’s got the chiseled jaw, the close-cropped blond hair, the steely blue eyes hidden behind cool, wrap-around shades. He’s the local *fire chief*. We considered the question. No, we reassured him, not as far as we know.

Even though nothing on our bodies was waxed, shaved or otherwise removed, we still had a terrific time. We ate and drank, kayaked and surfed, and took a dip in the ocean. We checked out the funky little town nearby. There was golf, of course. And the Spa. We loved the

Spa, especially when they brought out the chicken wings, chips and salsa, and beer. Guy food, Chuck! Wrap your shades around *that*.

Joining me were Rob and Charlie. Rob is my brother-in-law, and we get along great, a fortunate situation that should not be taken for granted. My sister wasn’t exactly thrilled about springing him for a weekend of fun and revelry while she stayed home with the kids, but big brother prevailed. He also promised to wash the dishes on Thanksgiving. Or at least dry. Charlie is a longtime pal and fellow scribe. He is doggedly — no, fiercely — single, with no permission required.

YO HO HO AND A BOTTLE OF RUM

We met at the Jacksonville airport and the drive took just 35 minutes. Amelia Island is a narrow, sandy, 13-mile-long strip of varied wildlife, salt marshes and forests of thick pine, live oak and Spanish moss, situated between the Amelia River and the Atlantic Ocean. It is duly noted by many who live there that at various times Amelia Island has been under the domain of eight different flags. But don’t ask me to name them.

Pirates are a big part of the history here. There are pirate books and pirate merchandise and the Pirates Club of Fernandina Beach, the aforementioned funky little town. It’s got all the vital components: a historical district, shops, restaurants and, most important, bars. Lots of bars.

The Ritz-Carlton, Amelia Island sits on a bluff of dunes facing the Atlantic, and all of the rooms have balconies. Ours looked directly over the expansive pool area, with the ocean to the right. The view was splendid. And here’s a nice touch: We had access to the eighth-floor Club, which has a full beach view offers a wide assortment of breakfast, lunch and appetizer items, jars of cookies, an open bar (mix it yourself), plus beer, wine and other beverages available for the asking. We made several visits.

After a quick tour of the facilities and a stroll along the beach, we were getting hungry and thirsty. This worked out well; the hotel could more than handle that. We had reserved a table at The Ritz-Carlton’s AAA Five-Diamond restaurant, Salt. Did you know that there are many, many varieties of salt, each with its own distinct texture and flavor? We didn’t either. They’re all on hand, a nod to the nearby salt marshes and to cooking itself. “[Salt is] the basic ingredient in food and the ingredient we need to live,” explained Richard Gras, the chef de cuisine.

We did not reserve just any table. No way. We reserved “the Seat in the Kitchen.” It’s right *inside* the kitchen, separated from the chefs’ activity only by a window, making it the equivalent to a front-row seat at the opera (or what I imagine that to be) or a seat behind the dugout at Yankee Stadium. But better. Here, no one whisks you off to the pokey before you can say “Derek Jeter” if you venture on the field ... I mean, go into the kitchen.

But here in Gras’ kitchen, diners not only are allowed inside to mingle with the staff, look over their shoulders and



Opposite, left: Sampling the many varieties of salt at Salt. (Opposite, right): Doing what guys do — playing pool in the sports bar and (this page, right) hitting the links.

ask questions, they want you to do it! They practically beg you, insisting you will not be in the way. You can even help. It's like a fantasy camp for would-be chefs.

So we went, and it was interesting. But I decided I prefer being a diner. We had the 10-course "tasting menu," assorted samples of Gras' handiwork (venison, shrimp, lasagna and other dishes presented in ways that went beyond creative, and, frankly, that we had never seen before). "It's for people who want to take dining to the next level," Gras said. For us, it was several levels higher. We took drinking to the next level, too, as each course came with a different bottle of wine. We tasted. We drank. We observed. Occasionally, Gras appeared and explained what was going on. We tasted some more. We drank some more. Dinner lasted four hours.

UP A CREEK

The next morning, Rob and I teed it up at the Golf Club of Amelia Island, while Charlie took surfing lessons and *actually stood up on the board* (see his accompanying story). After that it was back to the Club for lunch and then on to nearby Fernandina Beach for the educational part of the trip, a little history lesson.

We chose the "historic" Palace Saloon (built in the "Beaux Arts style") as our classroom. The saloon, Florida's oldest continuously operated drinking establishment, was the favorite watering hole for ship captains who docked here during Fernandina's shipping heyday between 1880 and 1910.

Later, we played some pool in the sports bar, then retired (relatively) early to rest up for the next morning, when we were signed up for break-of-dawn kayaking, a guy activity if ever there was one. We all had limited experience, but our instructor and guide, Tom Gagne, a compact, cheery man with an accent that gives away his New England roots, was patient and good-natured. The Ritz-Carlton provided us with box lunches. Gagne showed us the right technique ("Whenever I take people out, I view them as never having paddled before," he said) and led us out into Simpson Creek, toward the Atlantic, pointing out indigenous flora and fauna along the way. We saw a blue heron and a white egret, and we got to park our kayaks on a sandbar and go swimming. Even though it turned out there were more women on the water than men, it was still a great "guy" experience, at once both exerting and relaxing.

HAMMOCK HEAVEN

And then, at last, the Spa. There are suites in which to relax, "relaxation rooms" in which to relax even more, and people who know how to give one heck of a massage. The place is huge, more than 27,000 square feet. And best of all, there is "Heaven in a Hammock."

This isn't grandma's hammock strung between a pair of trees. This is a special kind of hammock from the Yucatán Peninsula. They've been using the same kind of cotton weave there for about a thousand years, so it holds up pretty well. Best of all, it creates what Stacy Myers, the massage treatment therapist at The Ritz-Carlton, calls a "nurturing, womblike feeling" when you're lying on it. You almost feel weightless.

Myers did a lot of research to figure out how to incorporate a massage with lying in a hammock, and it's a closely guarded secret as to exactly how you fit into the thing, other than to say there is no resistance anywhere under the body, not like lying on a table. You wear a blindfold contraption called an I-mask, which she describes as "sensory stimulating." You rock, you sway. Myers puts her magic fingers

to work. It's, well, heaven. And when it's over, you go to one of the suites, open a beer, eat. Again. And if you're really lucky, Chuck drives you back to the airport and you can tell him all about it. No waxing. ●



Left to right: A manly man getting the boot ... and, the "Heaven in a Hammock" massage.

Surf's up on Amelia Island

I've always thought of surfing as a young man's game. At 44, I figured the spring tides had probably passed me by, and if I were ever going to "shoot the curl" I would have done it by now. But when I saw surfing listed as one of the recreational activities offered at The Ritz-Carlton, Amelia Island, I couldn't resist the temptation to give it a try.

After a 10-course meal, accompanied by eight bottles of wine at the chef's table in the dining room of the resort's Salt restaurant the previous evening, our "guys' vacation" was beginning to resemble a Flomax commercial. I didn't necessarily feel any younger the next morning when I met the 24-year-old surf instructor with the washboard stomach who gave me a crash course on catching the waves.

Before we stepped foot in the water, Recreation Supervisor Jon Korman (in the dark blue shorts, below) defined some basic surfing terminology: The "nose" is the front of the surfboard, the "rails" are the

sides, and the "tail" is the rear end from which the "fins" protrude downward into the water.

He also explained the importance of waxing the surfboard for traction and showed me how it's done. While still on dry land, I stretched out along the board with my fingers gripping the rails and my toes just about reaching the end of the tail. From this position John told me I would have to hop, not crawl, to a standing position, shifting my feet sideways while keeping my weight centered from the middle to the back half of the board, which reminded me of a baseball catcher jumping from his crouch to throw out a base stealer.

It all seemed simple enough on the shore, but then we paddled out on the water. Going out past the first shallow breaking waves, Korman said the most desirable place for catching waves is on a sandbar. As I waited stretched out along the board on my belly, bracing myself for what would no doubt be an impending "sand facial," Korman held the board's nose board steady while keeping an eye out for a good wave to ride in. I saw a bunch of dorsal fins

breaking the ocean horizon, which Korman said was a school of dolphin. The first couple of times I tried to stand up on the board, I either slipped right off or had too much of my weight toward the front, pushing the nose down under the water while flopping forward.

About half a dozen attempts later, I got up. I mean, I GOT UP! And I rode the board all the way into the shore. It felt good. I was thinking how cool I must look to the others who were just riding boogie boards, swimming or lying on the beach doing nothing. I tucked the board under my arm and ran back out to go again. I slipped off a few more times but was successful in my last three runs. Figuring that was a good note to stop on, I did. And it definitely left me wanting more. ● BY CHARLIE VASCELLARO



surfing lexicon

BRAH: Surf brother, associate, peer, colleague, friend in liquid solidarity. In fact; anyone on this planet, including women. Derived from *bruddah*, Hawaiian pidgin for brother.

HOWLIE: Howlie comes from the movie *North Shore*. It's someone from the mainland who thinks he can surf, but he really can't.

RIP: To surf to the best of one's ability. Also means turbulent water, especially when citing it relative to the current.

RIPTIDE: A strong out-flowing ocean current.

SAND FACIAL: No fancy spa treatment, this means to wipe out and get dragged face-down along the bottom.

SCHOOLY: Someone surfing for the first time or taking surf lessons. Originated in Long Beach, New York. Example: "Let's chuck, brah, these schoolies are takin' up the whole beach!"

SPRING TIDE: The exceptionally high and low tides that occur at the time of the new moon or the full moon when the sun, moon and Earth are approximately aligned.

SHOOT THE CURL: Old school for when a surfer trims his board to set up for a ride in the pocket of a wave.

Source: *Riptionary Surf Lingo Lexicon*, riptionary.com