

DEPARTURES

— Hotels —

Miami Redux: Inside the New Four Seasons



Courtesy Four Seasons Resort

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It's a new golden age for the city's historic Surf Club hotel, which was recently reopened by the Toronto-based hotel brand.

By David Kamp on June 15, 2017

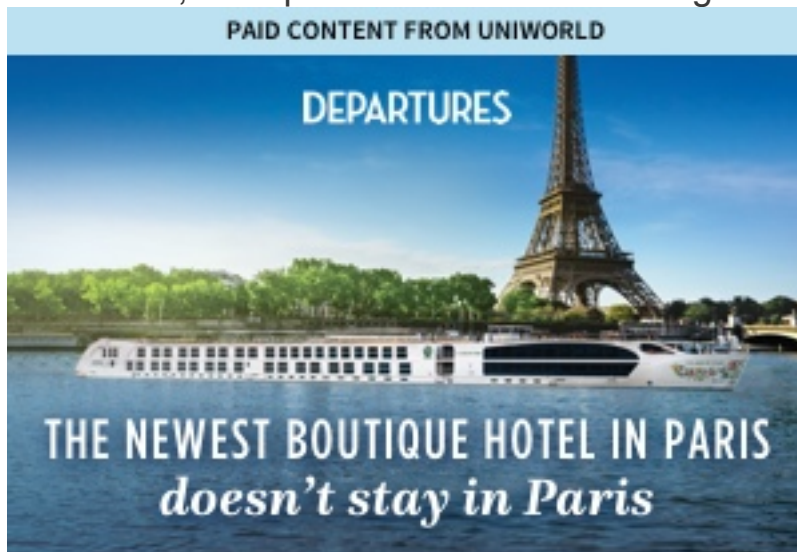
You're not more than a few paces into the lobby of the new Four Seasons Hotel at the Surf Club before you see him: Winston Churchill, in a framed black-and-white photo on the wall, swaddled in a voluminous white smock, painting a seascape in a cabana on the property. This, clearly, is not the Miami Beach of popular conception—neither the sweltering midcentury refuge where Bubbe and Zayde grew old playing mah-jongg nor the *thumpitta-thumpitta* stretch of latter-day South Beach that pulsates nightly with EDM and tanned, barely clothed men and women.

No, the Surf Club presents an altogether different picture of coastal southeastern Florida: elegant, austere, contemplative...Churchillian. Technically, the hotel is not even in Miami Beach, but in Surfside, a small village immediately north of the city. For several years, the Surf Club's renovation and rejuvenation had been highly anticipated: a gorgeous old private beach club (Spanish-style red-tile roof; a high-ball, high-society history) that had fallen victim to neglect but was slated to be revived as condos and guest rooms by the American architect Richard Meier and the French designer Joseph Dirand, under the aegis of the Toronto-based Four Seasons chain.

The complex finally opened to the public in March, and it is, I can report with relief, a happy marriage of the classic and the modern. That's no small feat along Collins Avenue, where, at certain resorts farther south, brawny old Deco buildings have had their ocean views obliterated by dodgy-looking, expediently erected glass towers. Meier's three towers are cooler than those, in two ways: visually, in their resemblance to stacked Lucite ice-cube trays, and sensually, in how their deep balconies provide ideal staging grounds for late afternoons spent reading a book or taking a nap while catching the ocean breeze. Most crucially, the new buildings rise above, not in front of, the Surf Club's original 1930 structure. Upon entering off Collins, one still encounters the same gobsmacking vision that greeted Noël Coward: the vaulted, palm-lined central hallway known as Peacock Alley, which leads to a wide, majestic staircase that descends to the pool area and beach.

The hotel is a small part of the greater property, just 77 rooms and suites, and it operates as a sort of boutique imprint within the Four Seasons brand, with its own residential logo (an abstracted wave with a pair of gulls hovering above) and exquisite, site-specific uniforms. Perhaps it sounds

silly to enthuse about uniforms, but when they're curated this well—cream-colored polos for the pool staff (complemented by moss-green shorts for the men, and skorts for the women), and palm-frond-pattern dresses for the servers in the hotel's Champagne Bar—they bring about a transportive sense of joy, conjuring some old-timey Floridian-posh narrative. *Oh, do order the Duke and Duchess of Windsor cocktail*, these palmy dresses suggested to my wife and me. And so we did, clinking coupe glasses filled with a frothy pink mixture of prosecco, peach nectar, and elderflower foam, unburdened in our case by Edward and Wallis's scandals of divorce, abdication, and questionable national allegiances.



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The uniforms are also an indication that this is a place where every aesthetic decision has been made with great care by people with good taste. In the case of the Champagne Bar and the restaurant that adjoins it, Le Sirenuse Miami, the credit goes to both Dirand and Antonio Sersale. The latter is the scion of an Italian noble family whose stylish resort in Positano, Le Sirenuse, has for 60-odd years welcomed guests to the Amalfi Coast.

The Four Seasons venture is the Sersales' first outside of Positano and has therefore not been undertaken lightly. The fingerprints of Antonio, a man known for his acutely on-point design instincts (and for being an inveterate global schmoozer; he probably knows someone you know), are all over it. The actual bar in the Champagne Bar is a mighty, U-shaped thing whose

ecru-colored top is made of polished stone and sides are inlaid with bottle-green—glazed tiles. Water is served in irregularly shaped, blue-striped Bora tumblers by the Venetian glassmaker Carlo Moretti. (The bora is a wind that rises off of the Adriatic.)



Courtesy Christian Horan Photography

Le Sirenuse Miami occupies the Surf Club's old ballroom, which was painstakingly stripped of decades of iffy decor decisions, revealing ornate woodwork on the high ceiling and an original Prohibition-era mural on its northern wall. With its widely spaced tables, potted palms, and hexagonal hanging lamps, the dining room is, during evening dinner service, one of the most beautiful in North America. And the Amalfi-luxe food by young chef Antonio Mermolia—e.g., lamb chops with semolina gnocco, risotto cooked in mozzarella water, and a transcendent pistachio gelato—more than measures up to the surroundings. (The Four Seasons is in talks with the chef Thomas Keller to open a second restaurant on the property, though, as of this writing, no deal has been finalized.) That a luxury hotel is unremittingly attractive and gracious should not be news. But sometimes, there's a mental trade-off where beach destinations

are concerned—that we’ll tolerate an ugly building and some Jimmy Buffett cheesiness in exchange for the warmth of the tropical sun and proximity to the sea. The Four Seasons Hotel at the Surf Club obviates the need for such compromise. It is, to be sure, expensive and not for everyone—no tennis courts, no golf, no meat-market singles scene—but it offers three swimming pools, a first-rate spa, 40 cabanas available for day rental, and five fully appointed residential cabanas, as well as the chain’s always well-staffed and complimentary Kids for All Seasons program. And, of course, the surf itself.

This is the (sort-of) Miami Beach you’ll want to go to if you’re keen to dress up and chill out, opting for the linen over the cargo shorts, and for open-ended days of savoring one’s surroundings over tee times and nightclubbing. In his charming collection of essays about his hobby, *Painting as a Pastime*, Churchill offered testimony to the joys of such unscripted stretches of time. “Armed with a paint-box,” he wrote, “one cannot be bored, one cannot be left at loose end, one cannot ‘have several days on one’s hands.’ Good gracious! What there is to admire!”

Even if, unlike Sir Winston, you arrive at the hotel unarmed with paint and brushes, you will never be at loose end and will still find much to admire. Rooms from \$600; fourseasons.com.