

## HOTEL INTEL

## W FORT LAUDERDALE BRIGHTENS UP THE BEACHFRONT



ROCHELLE LASH

You can't buy happiness, but W Fort Lauderdale promises to deliver at no charge.

W Fort Lauderdale is an engaging and entertaining resort that embodies Fort Lauderdale's most winning qualities: high-spirited cocktail culture, spa life, great food and a sunny lifestyle at a broad, pristine beachfront and two swimming pools. The resort is stimulating and sociable, with lots of people-watching. It's also reasonably good value, with top-drawer facilities and some free activities, including daily oceanfront boot camp or yoga. **The news:** A recent US\$55-million renovation has ensured that this southern Florida landmark stays bold, beautiful and fresh.

The overhaul means guests enjoy a restyled W Fort Lauderdale: 517 redone accommodations, exciting dining, high-tech meeting spaces and the gorgeous Living Room, a show-stopping lounge and terrace overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. W Fort Lauderdale's multi-level lobby is a spacious and dramatic study in white and glass, with pale wood adding a natural touch and the sky soaring above. And the Away Spa, a new brand for W, recently made its debut.

"It always has been an extraordinary destination hotel," said general manager Anna MacDiarmid. "Now the restyling has taken W Fort Lauderdale and its guest experience to a whole new level."

**World of W:** This is a full-service hotel, no doubt about it. The front desk smoothly handles a huge volume of check-ins and checkouts.

Updating the traditional concept of concierges, W Insiders dish expert advice on world-class everything: jogging trails, snorkelling sites, boating, bike rentals, shopping on Las Olas Blvd. and at the Galleria. The team's Whatever/Whenever service claims to accommodate any request, "as long as it's legal."

W Fort Lauderdale presents nightly happenings in the Living Room (complimentary activities, with specials on drinks); hand massages on Mondays; henna tattoos on Tuesdays; artists



W Fort Lauderdale has received a top-to-bottom US\$55-million renovation. PHOTOS: W FORT LAUDERDALE

## IF YOU GO

**W Fort Lauderdale**  
**Contact:** 866-837-4203,  
954-414-8200,  
wfortlauderdalehotel.com

**Address:** 401 North Fort Lauderdale Beach Blvd., Fort Lauderdale, Fla. Marriott rewards apply; best rate available at marriott.com.

Prices fluctuate; starting at about US\$360 for two (watch for lower online specials), plus \$35 resort fee. Price includes pools/whirlpool, beach setups, group fitness, nightly activities, 24-hour fitness centre, Living Room Wi-Fi, bottled water, bicycles. Extra: valet parking, in-room dining, pets, guest room Wi-Fi. Fort Lauderdale tourism: 800-22-SUNNY (227-8669); sunny.org.

painting on Wednesdays; interactive DJs on Thursdays; Latin Heat Wave on Fridays; '80s tunes on Saturdays; and jazz-infused Saxxy Sundays.

The Away Spa, a sanctuary adjacent to the lobby, opened



The guest rooms at W Fort Lauderdale all have water views.

recently with a range of services, including party-worthy beauty treatments like mani-pedis and makeup, body buffing and couples massages.

Everyone's favourites are W Fort Lauderdale's two magnificent rooftop pools. WET East, restyled with new lounges and day beds overlooking the Atlantic, is the "it" scene on weekends, with DJs adding to a pool-party atmosphere.

WET West is a secluded hideaway for sunbathers looking for tranquillity. Drinks and food are available at both.

**New rooms:** With categories like Wonderful and Fabulous, the 517 guest rooms, suites and residential suites have been totally redecorated in a nautical

theme — white and azure with unbleached wood and touches of rose gold for shine. The ombré curtains match the horizon, from cloud white at the top cascading down to deep blue, representing the sea. All have water views — the Atlantic Ocean or the Intra-coastal, or both.

The accommodations have new everything: thick carpets, fine bedding, attractive lighting, large flat-screens and sparkling bathrooms, plus tech-centric NudeAudio Bluetooth speakers and bedside USB ports.

At the tip-top end is the spectacular Extreme Wow Suite, an ultra-luxurious two-bedroom suite with contemporary designer decor, a state-of-the-art kitchen, three TVs and pan-

oramic views. It sleeps up to six, so it's great for a bachelorette or friends' getaway. And if you really are loving the world of W, you can buy one of the residential suites (with kitchens/kitchenettes).

**Cuisine:** So many options — salads and sandwiches poolside; cappuccino and croissants at the grab-and-go café; and the new sushi bar for lobster rolls.

El Vez, a new Mexican restaurant, does Latin lobster avocado toast, ceviche, steak quesadillas and grilled chicken. Happy hour — super fun on the patio — features half-price margaritas and bites.

Moving up — way up — the culinary scale: Stephen Starr, a celebrity chef and James Beard Award winner, hits gastronomic sweet spots at W Fort Lauderdale's Steak 954 (954-414-8333, steak954.com), a lavish restaurant serving the best of surf and turf, plus fine wines and premium spirits.

Dinner features seafood delicacies such as oysters, king crab, shrimp, scallops and black cod, plus a bevy of steaks, from the \$40 filet mignon to the \$75 wagyu New York strip. Drinks and desserts are over-the-top. The Seeing Stars cocktail blends three rums and fruit essences, and is so potent there is a limit of two per guest. To finish the feast, consider the caramelized chocolate custard with bourbon sabayon and pecans.

## Specialized tours bring sights to life

Engaging experts enrich everything from Europe's food to art and history

## RICK STEVES

When I arrive in a new city, I book a private guide straight-away — someone who can bring the city's architecture, history and culture to life.

Lately, in the spirit of experiential sightseeing, I've been taking specialized tours that highlight unique, local experiences or historical themes. Particularly in big cities, I've found all kinds of focused tours, from guided night walks to musical pub crawls.

One of the most popular sightseeing trends is food tours, which reward travellers with a full meal, a local's insights and edible memories. For about \$100, you can eat your way through a few neighbourhoods in a few hours, while an expert explains the history and tradition behind each dish. Depending on the cuisine, tours might be centred around a series of informal standup gourmet-snack stops, or several more formal dining experiences.

Unsurprisingly, my latest food tour in Paris was a delicious mix of culinary enlightenment and carbs. My guide taught me how to scrutinize and savour baguettes, croissants and cheese, and how to appreciate the French

as expert eaters. More adventurous foodies should seek out food tours in unlikelier places.

For example, Poland's bigger cities — particularly Warsaw — offer fascinating and flavourful food tours with a focus on vodka, fermenting techniques (for dishes like borscht) and hardy stews that originated in the country's peasant past.

These tours provide valuable perspective on how food affects culture, and vice versa.

To work off the food-tour calories, consider a bike tour. Some cities lend themselves well to cycling — and flat Copenhagen is the best of any. You'll get to know the lay of the land efficiently, accompanied by a fun and opinionated Dane, and you'll likely stumble upon charming corners of the Danish capital that many travellers miss. You also get a sense for local daily life, as many Danes regularly commute by bike, and stop at a few important sights (my tour finished at that must-see lady on the rock, the Little Mermaid statue).

If hard-hitting history is more to your liking, it's well worth spending an afternoon on a tour led by academics with a passion for a specific historical era, polit-



Rothenburg's Night Watchman tour is an enchanting evening of medieval exploration in the perfect cobblestone village. DOMINIC ARIZONA BONUCELLI

ical figure, or artistic movement. In Barcelona, I like historian and author Nick Lloyd's deep dive into the Spanish Civil War. Both he and his partner are enthusiastic teachers, taking small groups on highly regarded walks through the Old Town to explain the war's social context and significance in Barcelona.

Context in artwork is also much easier to absorb with a guide at your side. During my latest visit to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, I was inspired by the local art historian who led my tour. I was better able to appreciate Johannes Vermeer's 17th-century "intimate genre" paintings, which focus on domestic interiors — unique in a time when artists were normal-

ly supported by lofty patrons.

During the Dutch Golden Age of the 1600s, trading ships roamed the globe and made Amsterdam wealthy. No longer ruled by the Habsburg king or obedient to the pope, the Dutch were a Protestant republic — fiercely independent and proud.

Even without relying on the typical nobles, kings and Catholic Church as patrons, Dutch artists still did just fine.

For a fresh perspective on daytime sightseeing, try a night walk. One of my favourites is Rothenburg's Night Watchman tour — it's flat-out the most entertaining hour of medieval wonder anywhere in Germany.

The tour is as funny as it is informative, and "watchman"

Georg, who for years has led visitors on this walk every night with a Cal Ripken-like constancy, manages to keep his jokes as fresh as if he's just coming up with them for the first time.

And as much as I enjoy hearing the Night Watchman's stories yet again, it's even more delightful to watch the enthralled faces of his younger audience members, eyes wide like those of any traveller who's open to embracing new experiences.

Ghost walks are also popular in many cities with an old-timey core, and provide local lore and colour. While many have a well-earned reputation for being too silly to be worthwhile, I do enjoy the ones in York. On any given night, costumed characters bring out the dark side of the medieval centre's atmospherically narrow lanes. Some tours are more historically based; others are more like street theatre than a walking tour — but all tell engaging tales of history, violence, and mayhem.

And in Dublin, I like to spend an evening on a Musical Pub Crawl, getting a (literal) taste of local culture. A few Dubliner musicians meet each group in a pub and, over the course of the evening (and several pints of beer), lead you through three pubs. Along the way, they let you in on the backstories behind Ireland's musical traditions.

There's a tour for practically every curiosity and attention span.

Pick your expert, take advantage of local expertise and enjoy Europe's most intimate cultural experiences.

Rick Steves (ricksteves.com) writes *European travel guidebooks* and hosts travel shows on public television and public radio.