



The Ray has a sizzling rooftop pool scene and sensational dining. PHOTOS: THE RAY HOTEL DELRAY BEACH, CURIO COLLECTION BY HILTON

HOTEL INTEL

CHIC NEW RAY ADDS GLAMOUR TO FLORIDA'S DELRAY BEACH



ROCHELLE LASH

The new Ray Hotel has done the nearly impossible. It has made the irresistible, trendy town of Delray Beach, Fla., even more desirable, adding head-to-toe glamour, luxurious furnishings and sumptuous gastronomy, including one sublime Asian restaurant by Michelin-starred chef Akira Back.

The Ray is a chic urban resort that looks lighthearted and mellow but takes hospitality seriously. It opened about a year ago and was a smash hit right away.

I checked in on a sultry Florida day and hardly realized I was in downtown Delray.

The Ray's fresh, contemporary design mixes a breezy resort look with the tropical warmth and texture of rattan and linen. The lobby chairs could be from Bali and the large scale, avant-garde artwork reminded me of MOMA in Manhattan. The Ray is in downtown Delray, but the view from my guest room was of a grove of trees and the rooftop pool is surrounded by greenery.

Formally called the Ray Hotel Delray Beach, Curio Collection by Hilton, this stylish getaway is two blocks from the Atlantic Ocean, and two from the main drag, Atlantic Ave.

Delray Beach is eminently walkable, but the shopping along a three-kilometre stretch of the Avenue is an epic undertaking,



A collection of retro prints of sunbathers and swimming pools by Slim Aarons add whimsy and colour.

so I boutique-hopped using the hotel's chauffeured electric golf carts, as well as summoning the town's new Freebee taxi carts with a handy app.

Dining: The Ray is home to the best of Delray Beach food and drink at three seductive venues — the open-air Rosewater Rooftop, the sumptuous Ember Grill and Akira Back, a temple of modern Japanese cuisine. Schedule a happy-hour stop at Ember and Rosewater to sample wines, bites and fancy cocktails.

Akira Back's transcendent cuisine is a fusion of his Korean heritage, U.S. upbringing and Japanese techniques. Here, food is art, meticulously crafted and beautifully presented, but with a big flavour impact. Scallops float atop chifony foam. Caviar glistens.

I recognized dishes of tatak, crudo, tiradito, sashimi and



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tempura, but I also ventured into Wagyu beef tobanayaki, the Hot Mess (crab with spicy sauce), the Cow-Wow roll (short rib) and indulgences like sea urchin, tomahawk steaks and miso black cod.

Chef Vic Casanova of California, Las Vegas and New York fame, has taken over the other restaurants. The streetside Ember Grill is big-deal dining with a rich design by Studio Munge of Toronto and New York. It features seafood and meat delicacies like tuna crudo, beef carpaccio, rib-eye steaks, porterhouse for two and filet mignon.

The exciting, sociable Rosewood Rooftop combines a poolside bistro, a bar, a party venue and a supper lounge. Also designed by Studio Munge, the Rosewood is draped in leafy trellises and shaded with pergolas and canopies. Menu must-haves include ceviche, sushi with local yellowtail or Americana at its best with towering club sandwiches and burgers.

Accommodations: The rooms and suites are upbeat, with an easygoing tropical air and earthy

textures like natural wood floors, linen curtains and sisal rugs with splashes of sea blue.

Art is important here. A collection of retro prints of sunbathers and swimming pools by Slim Aarons, the mid-20th-century photo master, add whimsy and colour.

My room had so many deluxe features that I felt spoiled — good closet space, bathrobes, a mini-bar, a Nespresso machine, a 65-inch TV, organic linens by Eucalypto and a glass balcony.

The bathrooms are equipped with the finest fixtures by Waterworks, Kohler and Toto, and the shower has a glass wall with a view (plus a shade for privacy). And most importantly, the housekeeping was impeccable.

Around town: The Ray's neighbourhood is the Pineapple Grove Arts District, which pops with street sculpture, galleries, furniture and artisan shops, as well as Artists' Alley, a warehouse exhibition space for local creatives. The hotel is a short walk from Delray Beach Market — one of the town's newest attractions — which is home to an array of eateries and, soon to open, a branch of N.Y.'s Bounce Sporting Club. Or you can head for the coastal Sandoway Discovery Centre, where shark and alligator feedings are dramatic highlights.

Sightseeing in Stockholm

Old world meets modern in Swedish city that's a joy to explore, *Rick Steves* writes.

When sightseeing my way through Stockholm — which has a longer list of must-see attractions than any city in Scandinavia — I take full advantage of the local tradition of the fika, Sweden's ritual coffee break.

Swedes probably drink more coffee per capita than people in just about any other country. The fika is to Sweden what the siesta is to Spain. While typically a morning or afternoon break in the workday, it can happen any time, any day.

Fika-fare includes coffee, along with a snack or pastry, usually a cinnamon bun. You can get your fika-fix at practically any café or konditori (bakery) in Stockholm. While your coffee (usually with a refill) and a cinnamon bun will never cost you much, you'll see convenience stores advertising coffee and bun "to go" specials at a price no coffee lover on a budget can pass up.

With my cheap coffee and bun in hand, I like to grab a park bench to relax and enjoy some of Europe's best people-watching.

Even in the middle of the day, Stockholm's sidewalks are often remarkably full of moms and dads pushing luxurious baby

carriages, or with little ones in tow. Sweden's family-friendly social policies include generous parental leave.

Sweden is known for being very progressive and claims to be one of the most emancipated nations in the developed world — 47 per cent of its parliament members are women. And while it's still the capital of blond, Sweden is now also home to a large immigrant population.

Stockholm's charms go beyond the fika custom and other evidence of a generally healthy work/life balance. If I had to call one European city home, it could be Stockholm. Filled with parks, built partly on a number of small islands just inland from the sea, and with both historic ambience and a bustling urbanity, Sweden's capital is a joy to explore.

While progressive and sleek, Stockholm also respects its heritage. In summer, military bands parade daily through the heart of town to the Royal Palace, announcing the changing of the guard. They turn even the most dignified tourist into a scampering kid.

With each visit, I'm sure to be at the palace at noon for



Stockholm is a sightseer's dream, and it also offers a lovely café culture. DOMINIC ARIZONA BONUCCELLI

the changing of the guard. The performance is fresh and spirited because the soldiers are visiting Stockholm just like I am — and it's a chance for young soldiers from all over Sweden in every branch of the service to show their stuff in the big city. Generally, after the barking and goose-stepping formalities, the band shows off for an impressive 40-minute concert.

Although the royal family lives out of town at their summer palace (Drottningholm), the palace guards are for real. I thought they were just touristy soldiers until I tried wandering discreetly behind them for a photo and they snapped sternly into action.

While at the palace, you can "kill two flies with one swat" (as they say here) by dropping into the stunning Royal Armoury.

Royal armour and sword collections are a dime a dozen in Europe, but Stockholm's is the

most interesting and best-displayed collection I've seen anywhere. The original 17th-century gear includes royal baby wear, outfits kings wore when they were killed in battle or assassinated, gowns representing royal fashion through the ages, and five centuries of royal Swedish armour — all wonderfully described in English.

An added bonus is a basement lined with royal coaches (including coronation coaches), all well preserved, richly decorated and thoughtfully explained by an audio guide.

The palace and its associated museums fill a corner of an island called Gamla Stan — Stockholm's old town. The rest of the island is filled with antique shops, street lanterns, painted ceilings and surprises.

Until the 1600s, all of Stockholm fit on Gamla Stan. Today, it's been given over to the

tourists. Seemingly unaware that most of Stockholm's major attractions are elsewhere, the tourists seem to wander, mesmerized by the Old World quaintness of Gamla Stan's main drag, Västerlånggatan.

Stockholm has a long list of blockbuster attractions (including Europe's best-preserved old warship, its first and best open-air folk museum, and the ultimate scenic island archipelago cruises). Any visitor who reads the guidebooks and brochures will be directed to these.

But most of these will fail to remind you: When sightseeing Stockholm, it'll all go better if you do as the locals do — enjoy an occasional fika.

Rick Steves (www.ricksteves.com) writes European guidebooks, hosts travel shows on public TV and radio, and organizes European tours. You can email him at rick@ricksteves.com and follow his blog on Facebook.

IF YOU GO

Palm Beach County: thepalmbeaches.com. Delray Beach: downtowndelray-beach.com.

The Ray Hotel Delray Beach, Curio Collection by Hilton: 561-739-1700, therayhotel.com; 233 N.E. 2nd Ave., Delray Beach, Fla. Hilton Honors valid at 18 brands including Curio, Canopy, LXR, Hilton Garden Inn, Hilton Homewood Suites and Waldorf Astoria. **Price:** rooms from US\$300; suites from US\$800. Weekends and holidays are higher. Resort fee of US\$30 (per room) includes Wi-Fi, beach transport/access/chairs/umbrellas, rooftop pool, bicycles, local shuttle. Valet parking, US\$38.

Dining (reservations recommended): Akira Back Delray: 561-739-1708, akirabackdelray.com, daily from 5 p.m. Ember Grill: 561-739-1705, embergrilldelray.com, daily from 5 p.m., happy hour Mon.-Fri., 5-6 p.m. Rosewater Rooftop: 561-739-1706, rosewaterdelray.com; breakfast, Sat.-Sun., lunch/dinner daily; happy hour daily, 3-6 p.m.