

Ultimate Food Guide

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PICK OF THE
SOUTHWEST

LaPlaya Beach & Golf Resort

NAPLES

BEST FOR » The ultimate in barefoot elegance

Naples' manicured gardenlike knolls on Tamiami Trail North are the perfect predecessors to what awaits when you arrive at **LaPlaya Beach & Golf Resort**. This boutique gem merges sand, sea, flowering hibiscus and mile-high palms. *Lush* is the best descriptor, an ode to the natural beauty of the area. Once inside, the open, sunny lobby's glistening chandelier, wallpaper with leafy greens, prints of pretty-in-pink roseate spoonbills and floor tiles in muted shades of earthy magenta, turquoise and yellow demand attention, as do the British Colonial-style furnishings with gold and crimson textiles. The ambience provides a telling first impression: You have arrived. Naturally, relaxation follows.

PLENTY TO DO » A getaway here means you can drop your car off at the courteous valet stand (you'll hear bellows of "Welcome to LaPlaya") and, quite frankly, forget about it. While Naples has sights galore, if you're looking to disconnect rather than go gallivanting about town, this is the place.

The pristine beach with sensuous palm trees and soothing breezes is perfect for lounging and getting lost in the latest thriller. Youngsters find the sand ideal for building sandcastles while

adults eager for exercise can choose rentals among canoes, kayaks, stand-up paddle boards and personal watercraft.

A couple staying for a week with their daughter, on vacation from school in Charlotte, spent the afternoon chilling out in an over-size cabana alongside one of four pools amid cascading waterfalls. Their teen, Abbey, went kayaking in the Gulf. "I couldn't believe how calm the water was!" she exclaims. Dining at a high-top table, the trio shared crunchy grouper tacos from the bar menu.

At lunchtime, guests duck for shade under the **Tiki Bar's** huge thatched roof to munch on grilled fish sandwiches on ciabatta bread with spicy rémoulade. Spry for his age, a well-tanned New York gent with silver hair, sporting swim trunks and a bright polo, is sipping a tropical libation at the bar. He gets a good chuckle from a few single ladies sitting nearby when he declares he's "looking for a new wife."

The resort's golf is yet another attraction. Bill and Ann Rowan, a 50-something preppy couple from Palm Beach, stay at LaPlaya at least six times a year. "We jump in our car after breakfast to make our tee time. It's just a few minutes' drive from the resort," Ann says of LaPlaya's Robert Cupp-designed, par-72 course. A 10-minute tee-off time allows for a more leisurely game, and Ann proclaims, "It's our favorite club and course." The fairways, rich with mangroves and bougainvillea, are exclusive to guests and members.

THE ROOM » Toes-in-the-sand quarters in the Beach House Lanai are truly ideal for families, but it's the Gulf Tower building's beachfront premium accommodations and stellar views of the glistening blue Gulf that cause a happy sigh. Step off the elevator and a vista of tropical-style villas and estate homes with private docks and boat slips on Vanderbilt Bay greet you. Floors nine through 15 offer suites; the balcony of our choice room (1310) is a prime spot to watch the sun bid farewell for the night. Inside, the statement-maker is the bedroom's wrought-iron canopied bed with white privacy sheers hanging to the floor. Crisp white linens and pillows covered in tropical foliage fabric are almost too



Clockwise from top left:
Deep-sea fishing trips leave
from Hawks Cay; WaterColor
Inn; sunset at LaPlaya's fire
pit; Stormalong Bay pool area
at Disney's Yacht Club.

pretty to be disturbed. The bathroom scores for its open, tub-side window looking out on the Gulf of Mexico.

DINNER HOUR >> The evening begins at **Baleen Naples**' bar with cocktails and a chat with barkeeper Alex; dinner moves to the terrace. Insider tip: Reserve a table early, as these ideal sunset-viewing seats go fast. Here, rattan woven chairs in pale mocha share space with cream-colored tables; the outdoor setting is lit with a post-sunset glow by a row of wrought-iron chandeliers that dot the ceiling.

You're in for a treat when the monkey bread arrives. A longtime specialty of the house, the golden mound of soft, raised dough is delivered to the table with a waft of fresh-out-of-the-oven aroma. The birds here know the drill, so don't be surprised if a little sparrow hops over, poised to pounce on your crumbs. Fish is the way to go, beginning with a small tart-size mold of ahi tuna, topped with a French bean salad and served with confit potato and olive purée along with a hard-boiled egg. While it's practically a meal in itself, entrées can be ordered in half-portion plates — a wise option. Try the sea scallops, dusted with fennel and served with fennel citrus risotto and Belgian endive.

ROMANCE MAGNET >> Dining on the sand in an intimate setting for two is a common occurrence here. Tonight, everyone dining on the terrace has become a voyeur, catching a glimpse of the pair celebrating their anniversary with a Moët & Chandon Imperial toast. A vase of deep red roses sits on the table; two tilted beige-colored beach umbrellas behind the couple provide an intimate enclave for love as the sunset gives off the day's last light, illuminating a pale pink and ocher sky. *laplayaresort.com*