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on elementary
school students
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*Edward Murphy Elementary School student Liam Farias Trindade enjoys interacting with NAO. Read the full story on page 14 of this edition.
(Photo, Wendy Singer)*

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TAMPA BAY

Adapted Travel

By Mike Cohen

BEAUTIFUL TAMPA BAY: Last year my family and I spent our winter vacation in St. Petersburg, Florida. However, when it came to shopping and dining, we found ourselves commuting to Tampa on a fairly regular basis. We liked what we saw and were sure to make it our base this time around.

The hip, urban heart of Florida's Gulf coast beats in Tampa Bay (www.visit-tampabay.com). Here cultural gems mingle with authentic history to create an atmosphere that inspires awe and adventure. Whether your quest is for art spanning antiquity to the modern era, sensational live entertainment or other untold delights, imaginative and inspiring thrills await around every corner.

WHERE TO STAY: It was very nice to stay in the downtown area and the gorgeous Tampa Marriott Waterside Hotel & Marina (www.tampamarriottwaterside.com), only eight minutes from the airport. Offering spectacular views, stellar service and a high-quality experience all around, this upscale hotel is particularly well-situated for guest convention-goers or if you want to an NHL game with the host Lightning across the street at the Amalie Arena. And as I found out, it is a pretty good choice for a family vacation as well, with its central location, superb facilities and top-notch customer service.

This striking, 27-storey high-end property has more than 700 non-smoking rooms and suites that feature private balconies overlooking Harbour Island, downtown and the hotel's 32-slip marina. All rooms include high-end signature bedding, flat-screen TVs that can connect with laptops and large, luxe bathrooms with the softest, fluffiest white towels and sleek granite countertops.

High-speed in-room internet is available for a daily service fee, and it is free in public spaces. General amenities include a palm-studded pool and groovy hot tub and a full-service spa/gym on the third floor, a business center and

multiple newly renovated options for wining/dining that include white tablecloth fancy, sports bar casual, poolside grill and a lobby-side Starbucks cafe. There's both valet and self-parking, each for a daily rate. At night you can enjoy live music, adding to a very uplifting atmosphere.

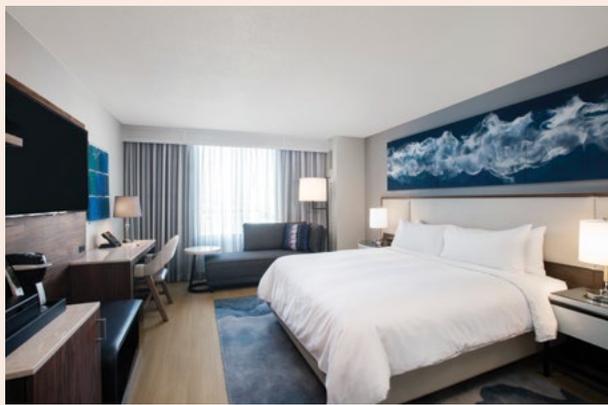
Following \$2.5 million in improvements in 2013, the hotel is currently in the midst of a \$40 million upgrade. Every single room has received a makeover, as will the lobby. The check-in desk will move to a pod format and a full service Starbucks is in the works, along with an expanded outdoor patio, an outdoor beer garden and an extremely popular Topgolf simulator, using real golf balls.

My family really fell in love with the pool setting. For starters this is a good sized pool with plenty of seating options. Besides standard lounge chairs, there are many chairs and couches with soft and ultra-comfort cushion covers and standalone large cushioned lounge chairs located next to gigantic umbrellas which will shield you from the sun. You can order drinks and food from the bar.

We stayed in one of the magnificently newly renovated luxury suites on the 22nd floor. I must say that when the bellman opened the door we were left speechless by the space and beauty of what would be our home for five nights.

While we did take advantage of the 24 hour room service, one night we chose to stay at the hotel and have dinner at the Waterside Grill. Let me strongly recommend this as a dining choice whether you are staying at the hotel or not. The restaurant offers a relaxed atmosphere and delicious American cuisine. You can feast on fresh seafood, prime steaks, expertly crafted cocktails and decadent desserts. They are open for breakfast, lunch and dinner and you can dine inside or on the terrace facing the Tampa waterfront. This was a meal that indeed

exceeded our expectations. You can read the menus on the hotel website or call 813-221-4900 for reservations.



A renovated room at the Marriott Waterside.

The hotel is ADA compliant. Following the latest renovations, 23 rooms are listed as ADA and hearing impaired. There is also an entire floor devoted to health and wellness, featuring aromatherapy, circadian mood lighting, a dawn simulator, an energizing light, a stay well mattress, a vitamin c shower infuser and nutritious menu options. The hotel has an accessible front entrance, six elevators and ramps leading to the Riverwalk.

CITY PASS: Like other cities when you want to play a bit of tourist, get the CityPass (<https://www.citypass.com/tampa#6QcVgMcR8yS4QVcg.99>). It is only \$143.29 for adults and \$129.77 for children. This includes admission to Busch Gardens, The Florida Aquarium, the Lowry Park Zoo, the Clearwater Marina Aquarium and either the Museum



The Florida Aquarium.

of Science & Industry (MOSI) or the Chi-huly Collection.

Busch Gardens Tampa Bay (www.buschgardentampa.com) is the ultimate family adventure, offering 300 acres of fascinating attractions based on exotic explorations around the world. A unique blend of thrilling rides, one of the country's premier zoos with more than 12,000 animals, live shows, restaurants, shops and games, this spot provides unrivaled excitement for guests of every age.

Guest Relations is situated inside the park entrance at Adventure Outpost, on the left hand side as you enter the park. Guests with disabilities are welcome to stop by for any assistance they require. Parking for guests with disabilities is available in Lot A near the main entrance on a first-come, first-served basis for guests with a legal parking permit. This parking area is designated by blue-striped parking lanes. All spaces are van-accessible. Vehicles parked in disabled parking without a permit are subject to applicable laws. Wheelchairs and Electric Convenience Vehicles (ECV's) may be rented at Stroller Rental near the front gate of the park in Morocco. Wheelchairs and ECV's are available for a nominal fee on a "first-come, first served" basis to guests with disabilities. Guests may also use their own wheelchairs or single passenger ECV's. Guests using wheelchairs may join any admissions line to enter the park. The use of Segways is not permitted.

Located right across the street from Busch Gardens is Adventure Island's (www.Adventureisland.com) 30 acres of water-drenched fun in the sun. It features the ultimate combination of high-speed thrills and tropical, tranquil surroundings for guests of all ages. You can access their full accessibility guide on their website.

The Florida Aquarium (www.flaquarium.org) is one of the top of its kind in the country, with over 20,000 sea creatures! The main entrance is accessible by wheelchair. The Aquarium is fully

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accessible to the disabled and a limited number of wheelchairs are available for rent on a first-come, first-serve basis with appropriate identification. Handicapped parking is available on a first-come, first-serve basis in the lot located north of the Aquarium on the east side of Channelside Drive.

At Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo (www.lowryzoo.org) you can see more than 1,200 animals, including manatees, koalas, elephants, tigers, penguins, giraffes, orangutans and much more. The Zoo's Visitor Service staff is pleased to assist guests requiring special assistance to ensure an enjoyable experience. Just contact a supervisor in advance of your visit by email or at (813) 935-8552 ext. 0 to learn more about access, rentals, autism, service animals and sign language.

Tampa's Museum of Science & Industry, better known as MOSI (www.mosi.org), is a scientific playground with more than 450 hands-on activities in the largest science center in the southeastern United States. MOSI is wheelchair accessible. Automatic doors are located at the main entrance from the MOSI Entry Plaza and parking lot. Handicapped parking spaces are available near the entrance to MOSI. The property surrounding the museum is paved. Wheelchairs are available at no additional cost on a first-come, first-served basis at the MOSI Ticket Office. Guests must leave a driver's license or credit card at the ticket office until the wheelchair is returned.

FOX RENT A CAR: For the best rates go with Fox Rent a Car (www.foxrentacar.com). The company just recently moved into the new rental facility at the airport in Tampa. We drove away with a brand new Chrysler 300. At Fox you'll find economy cars, family-size cars, SUVs, mini-vans and luxury or sport vehicles available for your discount rental. The Tampa operation is managed by Edgar Hernandez, who has been with Fox since the company first arrived in Florida six years ago. In addition to Tampa, their Sunshine State locations include Orlando, Fort Myers, Miami and Fort Lauderdale. The Tampa location is open 24 hours a day. For more information call (800) 225-4369 Ext. 1 or (310) 641-3838 Ext. 1 for customer

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The beautiful Andalusia dining room at the Columbia.

DINING OUT**THE COLUMBIA RESTAURANT:**

When in Tampa, you must experience Florida's oldest restaurant and in fact the largest Spanish dining establishment in the world. The Columbia Restaurant (www.columbiarestaurant.com) was founded in 1905 by Cuban immigrant Casimiro Hernandez Sr. It began in Tampa's Ybor City, (pronounced EE-bore) as a small 60-seat corner cafe known for its Cuban coffee and authentic Cuban sandwiches, frequented by the local cigar workers.

The original Ybor City location is nothing short of magnificent. Additional Columbia locations include St. Armands Circle in Sarasota, the Historic District in St. Augustine, Sand Key on Clearwater Beach, Central Florida's town of Celebration, Columbia Café on the Riverwalk in Tampa and Columbia Restaurant Café at Tampa International Airport. All Columbia locations are owned and operated by fourth and fifth generation members of the founding family except for the airport, which is operated in partnership with HMSHost.

Some of the menu favorites include Columbia's Original "1905" Salad,® Spanish Bean Soup, The Original Cuban Sandwich, a variety of Tapas, Paella, Red

Snapper "Alicante," Pompano en Papillot, Roast Pork "A la Cubana," Chicken and Yellow Rice "Valenciana," Filet Mignon "Chacho," Café con Leche and Flan. A gluten-free menu is available. The entrance to the restaurant and to the different rooms are wheelchair accessible.

RUTH'S CHRIS STEAK HOUSE:

Ruth's Chris Steak House locations can be found across the United States and elsewhere around the world. While in Tampa, we dined at the 350-seat 1700 North Westshore Blvd. location in what would mark my long awaited first review of this very famous restaurant chain.

More than 50 years ago, the "First Lady of Steak," Ruth Fertel, bought a local steak house in New Orleans, Louisiana. It was called Chris Steak House. What started as one restaurant has grown into the largest collection of upscale steak houses in the world.

Now guests routinely savor the sizzle of USDA prime steak and genuine hospitality across the globe. Their perfected broiling method and seasoning techniques ensure each cut of USDA Prime beef they serve arrives cooked to perfection and sizzling on a 500 degree plate. The menu includes seafood, appetizers, sides and desserts.

For dinner let us recommend the Porterhouse steak for two - 40 ounces of



The seafood tower at Ruth's Chris.

prime beef with the rich flavour of a strip and the tenderness of a filet. This was more than enough for our party of three, with some roasted cremini mushrooms and fingerling potatoes on the side. While we each had our eyes on one of the many excellent soups and salads as a pre-meal selection, instead we agreed to share a small (but it

is actually quite large) chilled seafood tower - Maine lobster, king crab legs and knuckles, colossal lump crab meat and jumbo cocktail shrimp served with both Sriracha-lime seafood and cocktail sauces. When it came to dessert, our waiter Wayne suggested we go with the crème brulee and we did so with a few spoons. Wayne was right on the mark. This restaurant was perfectly wheelchair accessible. To learn more about the legend of Ruth Fertel and Ruth's Chris Steak House, visit RuthsChris.com.

OYSTERCATCHERS: When on holiday we always try to find the best seafood restaurant in town. In Tampa, that would be Oystercatchers (www.oystercatchersrestaurant.com) at the Grand Hyatt at 2900 Bayport Drive. The visually stimulating water views and sunsets provide a unique environment to enjoy feature wines and appetizers. As for the menu, it highlights an array of the freshest, wild and line caught fish available, organic produce and seafood specialties with a unique and contemporary flair.

For our party of three we chose to share a number of dishes and that started with the appetizers: eight splendid oysters, an order of golden calamari fries, an arugula salad and yellowfin tuna (red in color, served medium rare from Florida's East coast). This was a great combination!

When it came to the main course, we opted to share a two-pound lobster. It came to the table completely cut up and easy to dip into the garlic butter. We also added an order of large juicy sea scallops from the Mexican Gulf, perfectly prepared and among the best I have tasted in many years.

For dessert we shared the house specialty, a slice of key lime pie and a piece of sumptuous chocolate cake. There is a ramp entrance to the restaurant (to the left of the stairs by the valet), as well as a handicapped elevator to allow guests into the lower level of the dining room.

Mike Cohen is the editor of Inspirations. You can read an extended story about Tampa Bay at www.sandboxworld.com/travel and follow him on Twitter @mikecohensl. ✨