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The Best of Universal Orlando

by Cara Goldsbury, Author of *The Luxury Guide to Walt Disney World: How to Get the Most Out of the Best Disney Has to Offer*

Best Deluxe Resort

For the height of luxury in a Mediterranean seaside setting head straight for this exclusive hotel designed to resemble Italy's idyllic seaside town of Portofino. The scenery is pure postcard with colorful fishing boats bobbing in the seductively curving bay, sun-bleached stucco buildings with shuttered windows and trompe l'oeil decorative facades, and a charming, waterside piazza loaded with appetizing restaurants. Guestrooms are large and luxurious with four-poster beds, luxe linens, down pillows, and a pile of other amenities that can't be beat.

Best Resort For the Utterly Cool

Hard Rock's motto is "love all, serve all" and serve they certainly do at the single coolest place in Florida to hang out in California hip style. It's a mix of pure luxury and star worship where an ultra slick marble lobby, a marvelous pool complex, and stylish guestrooms are interspersed with over one million dollars worth of rock and roll memorabilia and rock music blasting away in every public space; over 900 speakers are scattered throughout the property, all running seven days a week, 24 hours a day. But rest assured, from the moment you enter the hallways leading to your trendy guestroom, only beautiful silence is heard.

Best Resort Pool

Hard Rock's 12,000 foot zero-entry pool is almost too hip to handle. It comes with an underwater sound system and a 250-foot slide (the longest at any U.S. hotel), all surrounded by a sand beach and swaying palm trees. For the ultimate in luxury, rent a poolside cabana equipped with lounge chairs, TV, telephone, fax line, refrigerator, and ceiling fan. You can even order up your own private masseuse.

Best Resort Lounge

It depends. The hip crowd should head to Velvet, Hard Rock Hotel's so cool cocktail lounge offering a huge list of specialty martinis and premium cigars along with rock and roll, chic seating, and a great outdoor terrace with a view of the resort's pool. Those with a more sophisticated inclination will love Bar America at Portofino Bay Hotel where a pianist entertains a fashionable crowd feasting on Beluga caviar and fine wine in an elegant setting.

Best Attractions For Thrill Seekers

Universal Orlando is the perfect place for those who crave a rush of adrenaline. And the best park for thrills is Universal's newest, Islands of Adventure. Head first to the Incredible Hulk Coaster where you're launched from a near standstill to 40 mph in 2 seconds, then immediately into a zero-G dive roll looping through inversion after inversion and twice underground before coming to a halt. Then take a ride on Dueling Dragons, the world's first inverted, dueling (there's two of them), near-miss coasters. At certain points during the ride you'll swear your dangling feet almost touch those of the opposite dragon as it goes roaring by.

Best Way to Spend an Evening Without the Kids

First check the children into one of the Universal resort's excellent child care centers. Then head to either Emerils at Citywalk, a classy spot reminiscent of the New Orleans warehouse district with intoxicating Creole/Cajun food or Tchuop Chop at Universal's Royal Pacific Resort, one of the most beautiful restaurants in Orlando serving innovative Asian/Polynesian fare. Afterward dance the night away at Universal's Citywalk. Buy a Party Pass for unlimited admission to all the nightclubs and enjoy!

Best Resort Restaurant

It's a toss up. Tchoup Chop at the Royal Pacific Resort for its breathtakingly beautiful dining room and imaginative cuisine or Bice, Portofino Bay Hotel's stylish and sophisticated Italian restaurant perched above the piazza overlooking the bay.

Best Way to Spend an Afternoon Away From the Parks

Immerse yourself in luxury with one or two soothing spa treatments at Portofino Bay's Mandara Spa. Choose from a variety of massage, face, anti-aging, and body treatments including Indonesian four hands massage and Javanese Lulur. Follow this with an afternoon lazing beside one of the resort's three luxurious pools.

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Cara Goldsbury is the author of *The Luxury Guide to Walt Disney World: How to Get the Most Out of the Best Disney Has to Offer*. Visit her at www.wdwluxuryguide.com.