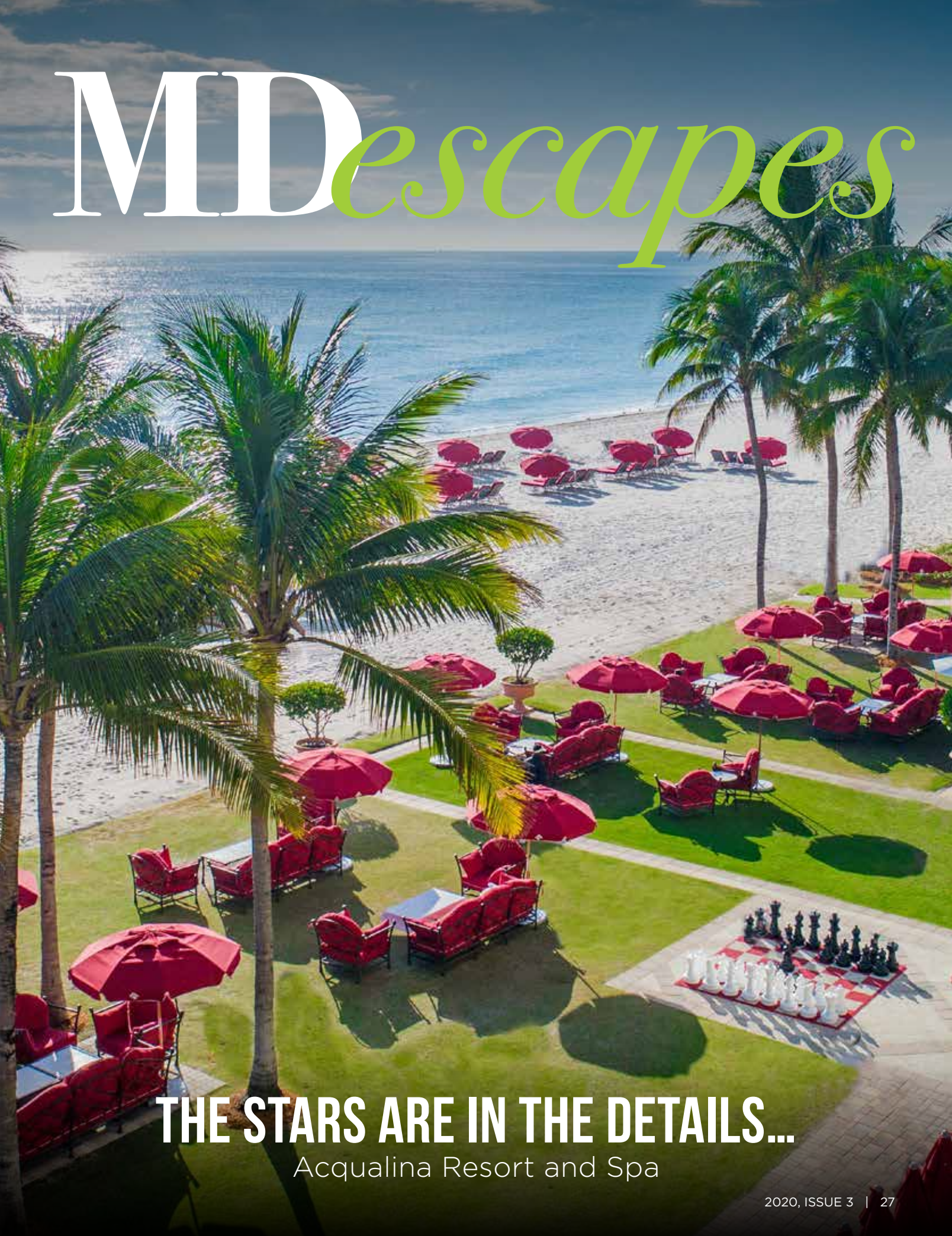
MDescapes



THE STARS ARE IN THE DETAILS...

Acqualina Resort and Spa



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BY BRANDI BROWER, TRAVEL EDITOR

Just north of Miami, there's a special place. White drapes with red trim tied back from the arched alcove, wisp in the light wind, waving a welcome as my car drives up the brick-paved incline to the several young valets dressed in a pressed white shirts trimmed in red. Just ahead is a Venetian statue in the middle of six water fountains in a pool of blue, flanked by some of the most beautiful luxury cars that I've ever seen. This resort is home to the highest collection of independently owned Rolls Royce vehicles out of any property in the world. For an instant, I regretted my choice of a rental car, as my Ford Fusion seems a bit out of place as the smiling valet graciously opened my door and offered to take my luggage.

"Welcome to Acqualina," the suited doormen say in unison as they in tandem open up the oversized doors into the entrance of the lavish hotel. The Mediterranean-inspired resort has the relaxed vibe of Collins Avenue with the sophistication of a Venetian palace. As you enter the stunning lobby with high arched ceiling, massive iron chandeliers, gold leaf, and marble columns, you feel as though you're no longer in Florida, or even the United States. During the prompt check-in process, I was offered a cooled scented towel and a choice of water, champagne, or Bellini. As Mardy, the Front Desk Agent gave me the guided tour of the main floor where works of art on display feature rare prints and portraits, including the likes of Andy Warhol and Roy



Lichtenstein. Because the resort entertains a partnership with Fine Arts Miami, the contemporary wall art are not prints or duplicates, but the originals, and value far exceeds the cost of my room during my stay.

I actually wouldn't classify it as just a room, as every guest accommodation feels like a suite. Even the standard Intracoastal rooms, with their spacious balconies and 640 feet of living space, would be classified as a junior suite anywhere else with the full-sized living area, oversized marble bathroom with spacious walk-in shower and separate Jacuzzi tub. The resort structure itself is massive, the 51-floor building hosts three towers, the two exteriors are exclusively private residential while the center portion of the building houses the resort's guest rooms. There are only 98 rooms and suites that make up the hotel. Each floor houses only four to five guest rooms, combine that and the spacious accommodations, evokes the unique feeling of privacy as it's more like residential living than staying in a hotel room. General Manager, Christof Pignet, shares a goal for the resort patrons, "We want our guests to feel as though they are staying with family or in the home of a good friend."

When I arrived at my room, I was a bit stunned by the opulence of modern design as the suite was sprawling and utterly magnificent. As much as I love the grandeur of the resort lobby, I enjoyed the surprising level of sophisticated comfort that the suite afforded. The design pallet of calming tones, cream, champagne, white, ash grey with textured satin, high gloss lacquer, metallic and faux fur accents are all brought together for a sleek aesthetic and yet very homey and comfortable. Almost too comfortable as I toured the entire set up and questioned why I would ever want to leave? An office, with built-in desk, bookshelves, desktop computer, and a daybed, was to the right of the entry hall. A comfortable living area with beautiful furnishings opens up to a very spacious veranda overlooking the Atlantic. Natural light floods the space, as does sweeping views of the beach below. An entire wall of floor to ceiling glass doors welcome in the lovely blue hues of the ocean, adding an accent of color to the calming tones of the suite. To my left, a full kitchen with a dining room table, Illy espresso machine, granite countertops, and Wolf appliances. (When your resort suite has a better kitchen than you have at our own home.) A full stocked fridge replaces the usual minibar, and the freezer has a surprise stash of mini Haagen-Dazs ice cream tubs, bless their little Dulce de Leche hearts. The king-size bed with Frette linens and goose down duvets almost guarantees a pleasant rest and with a large slider opening onto the patio, insuring a spectacular ocean view.

The bathroom, both expansive and indulgent with marble floors, double sinks, bench and vanity, Jacuzzi tub complete with yummy bath salts, large enclosed shower with both rain shower head and handheld nozzle, and even a bidet. (When in Rome ~ keeping with that European feel) But it's the little things that make life sweet; a half bath just off the living room, ESPA toiletries and the soft robes with the branded "A" clover monogrammed on the cuff. As well, slippers with the "A" clover also prominent, the "A" clover etched in the sliding doors, not one but two huge flat-screen T.V.s, a walk-in closet, and a vanity mirror, to name a few sweet extra touches. They even remembered the rubber ducky with a tongue in cheek message attached, "No one should bathe alone at Acqualina." For the guests who love to read but forgot their book at home, the resort offers their Bedside Reading Program which shares best sellers on the bedside tables for guests to enjoy during their stay. I ask myself again, why would I ever want to leave my six-room suite of respite?

The resort is only one of its kind to be built entirely open to the sea, free of any barriers between the resort tower and four hundred feet of gorgeous shoreline. I'm certain that this is the genesis for the name of the privately owned hotel, proudly built by the Trump brothers from South Africa, (no relation). As they roughly translate Acqualina as the "water's edge" and have created this beautiful resort at the edge of Atlantic blue aqua.

Just one look off of my terrace to the glistening white sand, verdant palms, azure waters, and red beach umbrellas dotted below and I'm inspired to explore the colors that are Acqualina. Keeping with the Mediterranean ambiance, Acqualina's signature outdoor living room settings with comfy crimson couches and chairs and matching umbrellas and low tables create intimate clusters to gather family and friends. It feels like you're on the Italian Riviera, soaking up the sun somewhere between the south of France and Tuscany. Isaiah approaches me and introduces himself and asks if this was my first time visiting. He also inquires how I would like to be addressed during my stay. I'm not sure if the young attendant will see me again but I let him know my first name is excellent.

He guides me over to a waiting beach cabana with a pitcher of ice water waiting and towel-lined lounge chairs. I'm curious how he likes working at the resort and ask what makes Acqualina so unique that people keep coming back? "The stars are in the details'" he proclaims proudly, "Having attention to detail is important because a small deal to me could be a big deal for someone else. Like refreshing water and ice, even if they didn't need it, or remembering a person's name." Isaiah smiled and ended his thought with, "Little things matter."



If official accolades and awards matter to you, Acqualina has chalked up many of the highest honors in the hospitality industry. Forbes Five Star for eight consecutive years, AAA's Five Diamond Award for twelve straight years, USA Today #1 Best Waterfront Hotel, #1 Family Resort in the World, Trip Advisor Travelers Choice Award for Top Luxury Beachfront Resort in the Continental U.S. and Andrew Harper Readers' Choice Awards named Acqualina the #1 beach resort, spa resort and family resort in the world. Stars and Diamonds aside, what matters most is your personal experience. As Isaiah put it, "The stars are in the details…little things matter."

Acqualina has three swimming pools to ensure all guests have a choice for their water / sunbathing activities. Attentive pool staff offers luxury service, which is commensurate with the Acqualina brand. This service includes the presentation of hourly amenities like chilled fruit, smoothies, iced coffees, as well as the signature Thai coconut water drinks served in a coconut shell embossed with the branded "A" clover (an Instagram worthy photo). The Beach Club Pool is the largest, with the popular zero entry, arched fountains, and is where all guests can enjoy activities and lounge. The Recreation Pool is where staff organizes fitness classes and games for children. The Tranquility Pool is an adults-only space with hot tub, optional private cabanas, an excellent place for optimal relaxation and to set yourself apart from the more active crowd. Lunch and Snacks are served at all pools and the beach.

There is no reason to leave the premises to dine elsewhere as there are three exquisite restaurants to serve up anything your heart desires. Costa Grill is the beach/pool haunt that serves lunch and libations. I raised my little red flag while at the beach and received prompt service with my Lio's Tacos prepared with the fresh catch of the day. I also enjoyed a lovely Mediterranean platter at the outdoor seating another afternoon. The food is casual, along with the setting and the view was amazing. Whether it's a beautiful breakfast buffet by day or a sumptuous filet mignon by night, A.Q. by Il Mulino with both indoor and outdoor dining, is a lovely place to fulfill your cuisine cravings. Beautiful oversized windows allowed the morning light to fill the spacious restaurant as I enjoyed my delicious French toast and planned my day. By night, the ambiance is enhanced with the famous artwork and a giant, 1930s art-deco style chandelier that hangs from the lofty ceiling. The cuisine is modern steak house meets Mediterranean flair. Famed Miami sushi chefs from Yakko-San offer a full Sushi and raw bar, creating delectable bites from the East, serving up specials that include crunchy spicy tuna rolls and salmon sashimi.

I saved the best gastronomic experience for last, Il Mulino New York. Take the famous #1 Italian restaurant on the NYC Zagat survey for an astounding 20 years and mix that with the Mediterranean vibe of the Acqualina and it is a match made in hospitality heaven. I loved this culinary occasion so much that I went back a second night. The Maître d', Carlos, graciously sat me at a quaint table for two, next to the glass-paned mahogany framed double doors that looks out over the pool and further on to the ocean. Stunning tapestries hang on the walls; large mahogany antique sideboards adorned with wine bottles flank the floor to ceiling windows; above are iron chandeliers that provide the mood lighting. It is as though I have stepped out of South Florida and into Southern Italy. Andrea Bocelli and Frank Sinatra serenade as the head waiter, Jose, dressed in a tuxedo, brings the old world charm. He first offers the complimentary amuse bouche, which was a spicy fried zucchini. The waiter then cut pieces of 24-month aged Parmesan cheese and served that with a selection of five different types of Bruschetta. My starter, a traditional spinach salad with bacon and mushrooms that tasted better than I've ever tasted. The next evening I had Caprese as a starter and, once again, the best that I've ever tasted. As the main course, I chose one of the restaurant's signature dishes of Ravioli ai Porcini with champagne truffle cream sauce. I am usually a very slow eater, but I acted as if someone was going to take my plate away from me. It was one of the most delicious things I've ever consumed. The Gueridon service brought a unique ambiance to the meal, watching the head waiter, cook, and finish the dish in front of me was mesmerizing. The next night, I was tempted to order the same main course but promised myself I'd be back for another visit and ordered the delicious Capellini Milano, a pink sauce, with pancetta, sweet peas, mushrooms, and black truffle. I passed on the blueberry Grappa that they served from a "magical" copper kettle, but said yes to a flourless chocolate cake with Sabayon cream and berries. It was an incredible meal for the memory book.

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