



EXTERIOR POOL COMPLEX.

The JW Marriott Phoenix Desert Ridge Resort & Spa

Offers luxury, stellar restaurants, sparkling pools and a truly grand experience.

STORY BY
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CABANAS.



TIA CARMEN EXTERIOR.

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iving up to the JW Marriott Phoenix Desert Ridge Resort & Spa is a truly grand experience that's fitting for the largest hotel in all of Arizona. An expansive water feature and tall palm trees are situated in front of the hotel's entrance.

Leave your car with the valet and then head inside to the lobby featuring expansive windows that frame the green, lush grounds, the hotel's pool and golf course and mountains in the distance. Head down to the staircase in front of you to find two of the resort's restaurants on the ground floor. Pause here to take in the site. Tall columns frame the entrance to Roy's—a Hawaiian fusion restaurant—and Tia Carmen, the property's newest restaurant that is of some note. Helmed by "Top Chef" star Angelo Sosa, the name refers to his Aunt Carmen that inspired him to become a professional cook. Tia Carmen is a contemporary Southwestern restaurant.

"The menu at Tia Carmen is the inspiration through my travels," says Sosa. "As the menu changes and evolves, it's really going to be this unveiling of my discovery of the Southwest."

For example, when Sosa was traveling to Benson, Arizona—where the restaurant sources its chicken—he pulled over and saw mesquite trees during the high heat of the summer. At that moment, he knew he was going to incorporate mesquite into his cuisine. He came up with Wagyu kebabs made with sesame leaf, pickled onions, serrano chile and thai basil that he says are a conduit for smoke and Southwest spices. The drink menu was made to pair with the food. A cocktail made with sherry is intended to pair with a whole trout brushed with regional spices. The sweet sherry is complemented by the herbaceous notes.

"It's almost like a euphoric experience," says Sosa.

My personal favorite dish was the Tuna Crudo. Served in an oversized bowl handcrafted by local company Blue Door Ceramics, a yellow corn coconut brought was poured over the bright pink tuna accented by smoked chile oil and dill. The tasty broth is intended to be drunk straight from the bowl. The crudo is



TIA CARMEN INTERIOR.

paying homage to the bowl's creator, Christiane Barbato.

"When you eat the tuna, you want to eat it with a spoon, and then you want to pick up the bowl, really feel the texture and the beauty behind the plate," he says. "We want it to be an experience. We want you to feel just like an overwhelming sense of just love and kindness and authenticity of who we are."

Lastly, the design of the restaurant is elegant. Think high ceilings, neutral and soft cream colors on the walls and floors and hanging round chandeliers. Sosa described it as where "art meets earth."

Tia Carmen is part of the hotel's \$60 million renovation that also coincides with the property's 20th anniversary. The hotel's 869 guest rooms and 81 suites were given a modern update. All rooms incorporate floor-to-ceiling windows featuring views of the scenic surroundings. Designed by Looney & Associates, all rooms feature either balconies or firepits for rooms on the ground floor. Rooms feature modern monochromatic design elements including gray curtains, modern art and headboards flanked by floating bedside tables. Spacious bathrooms include deep soaking tubs, marble vanities and a separate shower. Bathrooms are stocked with products from Aromatherapy Associates. On my most recent stay, the scent was soothing lavender ylang ylang. Eco-friendly features abound. Lights automatically shut off after 30 minutes of no movement detected. The air conditioning will also turn off if

the door to the exterior is left open for too long. For a truly opulent experience, consider the outstanding Presidential Suite. This includes a luxe bedroom, a separate living room and a conference room—both outfitted with a fireplace. The open-air balcony offers views of the mountains and the hotel's so-called Isle of Capri. The circular space that's surrounded by water and can be accessed via a picturesque bridge—giving the space its island name—is a popular spot for weddings.

When you're ready to leave your room, the property's five heated pools are a great place to spend a few hours. Appreciate the tropical plants that line the entrance to the hotel's main pools that are only accessible via a guest room card. Soak up the sun as you float along at a leisurely pace inside yellow inner tubes at the 1,600-foot-long Lazy River. If you're searching for a quieter experience, consider the Griffin Bay. The by reservation only pool features plush chaise lounges and Cabana Cottages where you can relax when you're not taking a dip in the pool. I enjoyed reading and shrimp tacos along with a heaping plate of chips in the covered 120-square-foot space that came complete with a beautiful sectional sofa. The cabana with an overhead misting fan and an oversized flat panel television was a comfortable cocoon where I could retreat from the blazing Arizona sun and when I wasn't cooling off in the pool. Behind Griffin Bay are two other pools if you'd prefer a livelier environment. On some days, a live DJ performs to the delight of the crowd.

Guests looking for an even quieter experience can



TIA CARMEN DISH.



LAZY RIVER POOL SUITES.



WILDFIRE GOLF CLUB FLADO HOLE 8.

venture to the Revive Spa's Sanctuary pool. Flanked by palm trees, the outdoor lap pool features a Jacuzzi and seven private cabanas. I enjoyed a light and texture-rich quinoa and shrimp salad for lunch. The pool feels serene and soothing—in keeping with the spa's overall vibe. When you head inside the 28,000 square-foot spa, walk down a long hallway to find the lobby. The lobby comes complete with an overhead skylight and a water feature that constantly trickles. An attendant lead me to the locker room, where I changed into a plush provided robe. About 10 minutes prior to your treatment, head upstairs to the dimly lit lounge to relax. I headed to one of 41 treatment rooms where an attendant used a refreshing yet soothing lavender oil—the lavender is cultivated on the property's on-site herb garden that's right next to the spa's adjacent fitness center—to work out muscle tension during a 50-minute Swedish massage. The window of the room was open and let in light and the sounds of birds chirping outside—making me feel immersed in the nature around me. The spa menu is rounded out by salon services, facials, a peel, body treatments like the Prickly Pear Sugar Scrub and a variety of massages including cupping, bamboo, hot stone and an aromatherapy option.

After the massage, I headed back downstairs to enjoy the spa amenities. I first headed to the hot tub, then steam room and sauna before cooling off with a refreshing shower and then repeating the experience all over again. The spa is also connected with the 3,500-square-foot fitness

center. The expansive space features free weights, treadmills, a TRX and a variety of cardio equipment including a handful of stationary bike Pelotons.

If you're looking to work up a sweat outdoors, the resort features five hard tennis courts, a pro shop and 12 pickleball courts—making it the resort with the most number of pickleball courts in the country. Work on your serve at the Racquet Center that also offers private lessons, ball machine rentals and daily in-season clinics.

Located a stone's throw from the courts are the resort's enormous ballrooms. This includes the 120,000-square-foot Grand Canyon Ballroom, the largest banquet hall in Arizona. Given the overall grand nature of the resort, it's no surprise that the hotel's ballrooms host some of the Valley's top charitable events. I've attended a handful of events here, and the hallway in front of the ballrooms is typically used for the cocktail hour prior to the main event. Perhaps the most prominent is Celebrity Fight Night. The very first Celebrity Fight Night featured Phoenix Suns Charles Barkley, Dan Majerle and boxing champion Michael Carbajal all playfully boxing as guests watched and raised money for charities. During the third year, legendary boxer Muhammed Ali was the featured guest. He attended the event for two decades as the guest of honor. Performers like Jennifer Lopez, Reba McEntire and Garth Brooks have all taken the stage at Celebrity Fight Night. In April, the Wildfire Golf Club hosts the Children's Mir-

acle Network golf tournament. The hotel also features a total of 240,000 square feet of meeting space and frequently hosts meetings and gatherings.

When I drove away from the resort, I came away feeling refreshed and glad to have fully experienced one of Phoenix's top resorts.

Golf Courses

The hotel's on-site Wildfire Golf Club includes two championship courses designed by golf legends Arnold Palmer and Nick Faldo. Each course seeks to showcase Arizona's incredible natural beauty. The Nick Faldo-designed 6,846-yard 71 par Faldo Championship Course offers generous fairways, large greens, 108 sand bunkers and multiple tee boxes. The Arnold Palmer-designed 7,145-yard Palmer Signature Course has flashed bunkering and putting greens with plenty of undulation that offer golfers plenty of challenges. The club's practicing facility includes a driving range, putting and chipping greens and a green-side practice bunker. Each golf cart is equipped with a GPS.

Located by the Wildfire Golf Course, Meritage, an Urban Tavern, is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Meritage has an upscale sports bar vibe that includes dark wood tables, lights hanging from the ceiling and a variety of craft beers on tap. Golfers can look forward to heartier menu options including the Meatball Sub and the Tavern Burger. 🍷



WILDFIRE GOLF CLUB FLADO HOLE 4.



WILDFIRE GOLF CLUB FLADO HOLE 1.