

Sawgrass Sojourn

Recharge your New Year's resolutions and get back up to par in Ponte Vedra Beach. BY NANCY MORELAND

WHAT PROMISES DID you make for 2016? Relax more, stress less, lose weight, find your bliss? The Sawgrass solution will strengthen your resolve. A little over two hours northeast of Orlando in Ponte Vedra Beach, Sawgrass Marriott Golf Resort & Spa is a bliss-filled leap from chaos to calm.

The resort is rightfully considered a golfer's getaway, but don't dismiss the destination if you can't tell the difference between a six and a nine iron. Sure, it's next door to world-famous TPC Sawgrass, home of The Players Championship, The Players Stadium Course and Pete Dye Valley Course. And since the Sawgrass resort holds 85 percent of TPC tee times, it's easy to get on the greens. Sawgrass, however, isn't just about golf. With a well-rounded mix of activities and indulgences, it's a place to stay, play and parlay downtime into well-being. The property itself is reinvigorating, thanks to an estimated \$48 million renovation.

When The Players Championship ends on May 15, the crowds and TV crews disappear and Ponte Vedra reclaims the feel of a private enclave. More residential than touristy, it's still a destination in its own right, with miles of undeveloped beachfront, upscale shops and a creative culinary scene.

After check-in, you can ditch your car keys and walk, bike or shuttle between golf course and gym, beach and spa. Or, you might order room service and just relax in

your sumptuous surroundings. Better yet, order a handcrafted cocktail from the Bourbon Bar and sink into a sofa on the Cascades Deck overlooking twin waterfalls that spill into a placid lagoon.

When it's time to dine, raise a glass to Ponte Vedrans. Their discriminating palates drive the town's culinary reputation, and the resort's signature restaurants, Vernon's and 619 Ocean View, live up to it. Chefs at both restaurants create menus with local ingredients in mind—salad greens from a nearby hydroponic farm, herbs grown in the resort's garden and the catch of the day from Florida waters.

Executive Chef Joe Natoli and First Cook Matt Sanchez epitomize this passion for culinary craftsmanship. Sanchez even distills sea salt from the waters off Ponte Vedra using a Japanese charcoal purification process. In one concoction, he blends salt with sawgrass powder derived from the ubiquitous plant for which the resort is named. "Using sawgrass powder in salt and smoking meats with sawgrass imparts a subtle, sweet flavor," Sanchez says. He also infuses vinaigrettes with wine from nearby St. Augustine's San Sebastian Winery and beer crafted at Jacksonville's Intuition Ale Works.

Natoli speaks excitedly about working with regional small-scale farmers and his kitchen's "made from scratch" philosophy. "We're giving Old World traditions a local flair," he says.

With eight restaurants onsite, Sawgrass will challenge your weight loss resolutions. Balance the resort's gastronomic pleasures by booking a fitness class. If your path to nirvana is paved with yoga mats, try sunrise or sunset beach yoga. Or, you can get your game on with personalized golf fitness, Pilates or spin classes.

To reduce stress, just add water. Take a dip in one of four pools or shuttle over to the private Cabana Beach Club, where you can rent a kayak, canoe, standup paddleboard or Hobie Cat. Seeking something less strenuous? Bask on a beach chaise while a waiter delivers your lunch from the Sea Porch Bar & Grill. Later, slip into the pool and sip a cocktail at the sunken bar, making a mental note to return for dinner at 619 Ocean View. At this intimate beachfront eatery, Chef Nick Ocheltree flavors fresh seafood and grilled meats with a Mediterranean flair. After dinner, indulge your inner child at the s'mores station overlooking the ocean.

Take your sea-soothed soul to Sawgrass Spa to smooth any remaining edges. This 25,000-square-foot haven of chill pamper and polishes guests from scalp to sole.

Your weekend of well-being may end with a round of golf or just gazing into one of the many fire pits tucked into the 65-acre property. Either way, you'll discover that both your active and relaxed selves can meet halfway at Sawgrass. 

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

A comforting blend of activities and amenities, Sawgrass is the place to press life's reset button.

- An effortless getaway is a phone call away. The "At Your Service" team makes dinner reservations, books tee times or fitness classes and recommends local sights. 904-285-7777. sawgrass-marriott.com
- Don't wait until the kids are grown to visit. Sawgrass keeps kids (and parents) content with daytime and evening recreation programs, kiddie pools, miniature golf, children's menus and Junior Golf Camps.
- Five minutes away, the intimate Ponte Vedra Concert Hall features performers of national renown, with an emphasis on singer/songwriters. pontevedra-concerthall.com
- A small shopping center within walking distance of the resort, Sawgrass Village has boutiques, restaurants and a grocery store. sawgrassvillage-pvb.com
- GTM Research Reserve, less than 20 minutes by car, has 10 miles of nature trails, undeveloped beaches, fishing, boating and picnicking. myfwc.com/viewing/recreation/wmas/lead/guana-river/things-to-do
- St. Augustine, the nation's oldest city, is a 30-minute drive south of Ponte Vedra. Visitors can enjoy strolling the historic streets, sampling multicultural cuisine and browsing unique shops. floridashis-toriccoast.com



(Clockwise from top left) An afternoon of kayaking at the GTM Research Reserve; 619 Ocean View restaurant at the resort offers elegant beachfront dining; Sawgrass is adjacent to the famous TPC Stadium Course; the serene view from the Cascades Deck; the new Bourbon Bar just off the lobby overlooks the deck and lagoon; the spa relaxation room is an ideal place to get pampered and unwind; eight onsite restaurants serve everything from casual to upscale cuisine.

KAYAKERS: GTM RESEARCH RESERVE; RESTAURANT, LOBBY, SPA: SAWGRASS MARRIOTT RESORT & SPA; GOLF COURSE: GLENN HASTINGS/ST. AUGUSTINE; PONTE VEDRA & THE BEACHES VCB; WATERFALLS: NEIL RASHBA; CUISINE: ST. AUGUSTINE, PONTE VEDRA & THE BEACHES VCB