

Disney's Grand Californian: A Hotel Review

by Kathy Davis, PassPorter Guest Contributor

In celebration of our fifth anniversary, my husband and I recently booked two nights at the Disneyland Resort's deluxe hotel, the Grand Californian. It was the perfect place to escape, even though we live only thirty minutes from Disneyland. We checked in on Monday of Labor Day weekend to avoid holiday crowds.

You enter the Grand Californian through two sliding stained-glass doors, which depict a typical Pacific Northwest mountain scene. Just beyond registration, the lobby opens out into a 6-story Great Hall, columned in dark wood arching over the hall to represent trees. Wood and glass chandeliers suggest the branches and foliage of trees. A generous fireplace sits in a nook on one side, filled with rockers in the Arts and Craft style. The lobby is intentionally kept cool enough that even in 90° California weather, the fireplace is inviting. The music in the great hall is either light classical on tape or a tuxedoed pianist who plays easy standards and Disney tunes. Each evening, a storyteller performs in the fireplace nook.

The Grand Californian was designed by architect Peter Dominick, who also designed the Wilderness Lodge and the Animal Kingdom Lodge at the Walt Disney World Resort. The design is from the Arts and Craft Movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and draws from such influences as Frank Lloyd Wright and Charles and Henry Greene. The interior design was done by Richard Brayton, who used the talents of many artisans to reproduce the look and feel of the Arts and Craft Movement. It is the priciest of the three hotels at the Disneyland Resort but we thought it was well worth the extra money.

Our room overlooked the wedding garden and Paradise Pier in Disney's California Adventure park, and was off the Great Hall, rather than one of the wings. I enjoyed the spacious hallways surrounding the Great Hall, as well as the music from the lobby, which was still not loud enough to be disturbing. Even in the morning, this location was fairly quiet. The Grand Californian is definitely a deluxe hotel, with evening turn-down service and a luxurious bathroom. The decor is inspired by the Arts and Craft Movement, so wood of various hues abounds. There is repeated use of both the California poppy and the rose as motives, and many "extra" touches, such as wallpaper and borders.

We elected to take a tour of the hotel to learn more about the decor of

the Arts and Craft Movement, which was advertised on a daily calendar, left by the turn-down service. This tour is appropriate for teens and adults. Maria, from Guest Relations, escorted us through the lobby, the Hearthstone Lounge, the pool area, the Storytellers Cafe and the Napa Rose Restaurant. Many of the details included in this review were obtained on the tour. We were also fortunate that one of the four suites was unoccupied, and was included in the tour. Each suite is different; "ours" was decorated in Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie Style (my favorite in the Arts and Craft Movement), and overlooked a vast portion of California Adventure, including Condor Flats, Grizzly River Rapids and even Hollywood Backlots in the distance. Oh, to be rich or famous!

The Grand Californian has two table-service restaurants: the casual Storyteller Cafe, which features character dining, and the Zagat-rated #1 Napa Rose. The Storyteller Cafe is buffet-style for breakfast and à la carte for lunch and dinner. We ate breakfast there, and were joined by Koda and Kenai from Brother Bear. The food was adequate, with a large offering in the buffet. Murals decorate the walls, depicting six classic California tales, such as the legends of Zorro, The Island of the Blue Dolphins and "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." Theming is especially intricate here, as images from the murals are repeated in the design of the chairs, the carpeting and the wall borders. Our other breakfast was room service on our balcony, just as the sun came up over the roof of the hotel; it was romantic, and the food was excellent.

The Napa Rose Restaurant is the only part of the property with a different interior designer: Marty Dorf, who designed lounges on the Disney Cruise ships as well as the California Grill at the Contemporary Resort. The Napa Rose is aptly named on two counts, the interior design is inspired by Charles Rennie Mackintosh's "Mackintosh Rose," from a Scottish branch of the Arts and Craft Movement and the food is inspired by California's Napa Valley wine country. There is an extensive wine list, and all wait staff are trained sommeliers (wine experts for restaurants), so you can depend on their expertise to choose an appropriate wine for you. There is no restaurant in California with more sommeliers on staff. For a unique dining experience, reserve one of the Vintner's Tables, where a five-course meal will be designed personally by the chef for your party.

Naturally, the landscaping and the pool reflect careful theming. Three gates, each different and designed by California artisans, lead to the pool area. Trees are abundant in the pool area, and the slide in the Redwood Pool is a Disney Redwood tree. There are three pools, including a small wading pool for the youngest guests, though the pool area was smaller than I had expected from a deluxe resort. There is also

a quick-service cafe, where we ordered lunch after swimming. We ate in our lounge chairs, in the shade by the pools, and enjoyed one of the most relaxing experiences of the trip.

Trees are in fact abundant all over the hotel property, as suits a hotel whose design strives to bring the beauty of the Redwood forest to southern California. Many of the trees are varieties of redwood which were chosen for their ability to survive the local climate. Both indoors and out, there is an abundance of green and brown, making an amazingly natural setting in the middle of Orange County.

Guests at the Grand Californian have a private entrance into California Adventure, right across from Grizzly River Rapids. This was one of the most satisfying parts of the vacation for us. We rode Grizzly River Rapids twice in succession, got completely soaked, and zipped back to our room for dry clothes and shoes! Having the special entrance made you feel like a VIP sneaking in through a secret door.

We had two minor complaints during our stay at the Grand Californian. The Monorail was closed for refurbishment, but the in-room Guest Book still encouraged guests to use their resort ID to enter Disneyland Park via the Monorail. It would have been simple to have housekeeping leave a note in each room which updated the Guest Book, and would have saved us a long walk when we were tired! We also received inaccurate information from one Guest Relations person, regarding meal times at the Storyteller Cafe. That error worked in our favor, but we still expect Disney's service to be beyond reproach.

For anyone more interested in the architects and designers of the Arts and Craft Movement, Wikipedia has a surprisingly good discussion of the Movement, as well as articles on the architects and designers mentioned.

About The Author: Kathy Davis is the executive director for a non-profit youth orchestra in southern California. She and her husband have been to Disneyland hundreds of times, and they are currently planning their very first trip to Walt Disney World.

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