

A Sense of Place in Sarasota

An Interview with Damien O’Riordan,
General Manager, The Ritz-Carlton, Sarasota



The pool (left) and exterior of The Ritz-Carlton, Sarasota (above)

EDITORS’ NOTE Damien O’Riordan accepted his current post in 2013. He had been the General Manager at the chain’s Powerscourt, Ireland, property. A graduate of the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, O’Riordan spent eight years working for the Ritz-Carlton chain in Virginia, California, Washington, D.C., and Jamaica before joining the Adare Manor Hotel and Golf Resort in Ireland as Assistant General Manager. In August 2008, O’Riordan was named General Manager of the G Hotel in Galway.



Damien O’Riordan

PROPERTY BRIEF The Ritz-Carlton, Sarasota (ritzcarlton.com) is a luxury hotel in Florida that redefines personal service with a personal passion in a city that hums year-round with a bold and contemporary spirit. Located in the heart of Sarasota, it has easy access to the Gulf Coast and downtown where the guests of the hotel can enjoy bay or city skyline views from guest rooms and suites; contemporary waterfront dining at Jack Dusty that highlights fresh coastal cuisine and handcrafted cocktails; a spa that paves the way to well-being; and exclusive use of The Ritz-Carlton Golf Club in Bradenton and The Beach Club at Lido Key, the perfect way to experience one of the best beaches in America.

Where does the property stand today and what can guests expect?

We started this journey over 20 months ago with the selection of Jude Mulhern, a designer based out of Palm Beach, Florida with Bilkey Llinas Design. We wanted to capture Sarasota by creating a sense of place that ties in with our guest experiences ensuring that even if the guests never left the resort, they would still leave with a strong understanding of Sarasota. We accomplished this through our scenography of water, rings, and art.

Some people would say we did a renovation but we actually reimagined the entire resort by making sure it had a wonderful sense of place in Sarasota. Be it in the guest rooms that speak to the flora and fauna of nearby Selby Botanical Gardens, or the blues and purples reflected in the Sarasota sunset, we wanted the look and feel to capture the history of Sarasota. This was the Ringling family’s winter getaway and the home of American circus owner John Ringling, whose

Mediterranean revival residence and former home, Ca d’Zan, are represented in our meeting space.

The artwork and photography displayed in our guest rooms are a selection of images from local artists and students of the prestigious Ringling School of the Arts. The carpet features a non-repeating, abstract motif of a Nautilus shell, the first of its kind in hotel design, thanks to new technology.

When reimagining the club lounge we wanted to provide a sense of the Gulf shore and continuing with the

seashore theme and evoking the feeling of a shore-side picnic under a banyan tree reflecting the beautiful Selby Botanical Gardens in Sarasota.

A sense of place continued with the carpet design in the ballroom mirroring the same mosaic found at Ca d’Zan Mansion. The design includes the constellations of the ocean where we think of the old sailors who didn’t have maps and used the stars to guide them. The new ballroom chandeliers are interpretations of circus rings.

Is Sarasota well promoted and understood as a tourist destination?

We partner with Visit Sarasota and they do a great job. Once someone has been here and experienced it, they have an a-ha moment.

It’s not just a beach destination. We have the arts, culture, some of the best shopping and dining, the most magnificent farmer’s market, and our own performing arts center, The Aquarium, Ringling Museum, as well as Sarasota Opera and Ballet, and the Symphony.

There is so much art and culture here and although it is not solely a beach destination, we do have some of the top rated beaches in the U.S.

When our guests come to the property and see what Sarasota has to offer, they are pleasantly surprised. We have to continue to educate people and get them here to discover all Sarasota has to offer.

How critical are the service standards expected of a Ritz-Carlton?

I’ve had the distinct pleasure of working with three fantastic visionaries in our brand, Mr. Horst Schulze, founding President of The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company followed by former President Simon Cooper and our current President Herve Humler. Our company has

grown significantly and continues to evolve. There are currently 90 Ritz-Carltons worldwide with many more scheduled to open in the coming years, so it’s a very exciting time for the brand. Nonetheless, luxury service is still luxury service and while the times have changed, the expectations remain the same.

The selection of our ladies and gentlemen and the importance of how they engage with our guests has not changed. Even with Trip Advisor and all the social outlets that are at everyone’s fingertips, delivery of service excellence and luxury remains the same in terms of hospitality.

The hotel business today is often talked about from a financial view, but you’re foremost a hospitality person. Is the role still focused on hospitality or is it more about finance?

It’s still about hospitality and delivering our luxury service, but we’re a business too. We are fortunate to enjoy great support from our ownership who wants us to remain an iconic brand, delivering the legendary service we’re famous for while maximizing a return on their investment.

You have a resort with a great heritage and it has been relaunched within the market.

Yes, that excites me about the potential of this property. The layout is unique. We have 266 guest rooms, our spa, and wellness center and banquet space, but we also have a total of 216 residences. Three miles away, we have a beautiful Beach Club on the Gulf of Mexico with a wonderful restaurant, lounge, and Tiki Bar along with banquet space and a residential tower.

Our Golf Club is located 13 miles from the resort and was designed by Tom Fazio with a beautiful clubhouse, pro shop, and 18 championship holes.

Having the privilege to oversee the evolution of our reimagined resort and how it has transformed makes me so proud of our ladies and gentlemen, and the product we have to offer our guests.

Jack Dusty was the beginning of our transformation when we wanted to create a community restaurant and we re-concepted our fine-dining outlet into a waterfront seafood restaurant, lounge, and marketplace. Sixty percent of Jack Dusty patrons are locals providing our hotel guests with the same experience they would have dining out in the local community. ●