

Sandals Royal Plantation

Disclaimer: As travel agents Janet and I are required to disclose if we are being comped when we stay at a resort or take a cruise, lest we allow the generosity of the supplier bias our review of the experience, even though we would never do that. The days of travel agents getting comps are pretty much over and though it does still happen on occasion, this trip was not one of those occasions.

Sandals resorts offer a range of unique experiences and amenities as I noted in the supplier review article. Each time we decide to stay at a Sandals we try to make it one we haven't been



to previously, and with so many resorts throughout the Caribbean that hasn't been too hard to accomplish. For our most recent trip we stayed at Sandals' most intimate resort, Sandals Royal Plantation in Ocho Rios, Jamaica. Sandals Royal Plantation has just 74 rooms and under 150 guests. Another Sandals resort located right next door to Royal Plantation, Sandals Ochi, is huge by comparison with 519 rooms housing over 1000 guests.

I mention Sandals Ochi because the Sandals policy of "stay at one, play at many" allows guests staying at Sandals Royal Plantation to experience the best of both worlds. You get the intimacy of a small resort, but when you are ready to party you just hop on the shuttle bus and head next door to Sandals Ochi where there is almost always a party going on. Because Royal Plantation is so small, the reciprocity is one way...Royal Plantation guests can crash the party at Ochi, but guests staying at Ochi *stay* at Ochi. Royal Plantation is just too small to take in additional guests.

Overall Observations

Sandals strives to make a stay at their Royal Plantation resort reminiscent of the "golden" era of elite living in the Caribbean, and that's what many guests find desirable about this particular resort. Normally full of Brits and Canadians, the COVID travel restrictions imposed by their respective governments have left Sandals Royal Plantation hosting mostly U.S. travelers. That has resulted in a clientele that, at least during our visit, was somewhat dissonant from the genteel vacationer the Royal Plantation ambiance is designed for. Sandals Royal Plantation is located on a former sugar cane plantation and the main public areas are situated in a replica plantation Great House. Those facilities include a main bar themed around drunken peacocks (it's a Sandals thing and I don't even want to know how it got started), Sandal's only champagne and caviar bar (for an additional fee), the resort's two main restaurants, a tea-room offering daily tea service, the future booking office, lobby and check-in, and the Terrace pool deck with pool, hot tub, and multi-level sundeck. The Terrace



deck is also where the evening entertainment is held with a fairly large concrete pad area open for dancing.

The décor is equally tuned to the British Caribbean colonial theme with well-appointed public areas featuring overstuffed upholstered furniture and dark wood furnishings and trim, though



with the nature of the clientele during our stay you had to be careful where you sat. More than once I ended up with wet shorts after sitting on an upholstered chair previously (unbeknownst to me) occupied by a guest in a wet bathing suit. Pretty disappointing when there are ample wood and metal chairs meant for pool guests with wet bathing suits just a few feet away. I expect something like that from kids, but not from adults at an adults-only resort. That was the nature of the guests during our stay.

The small but surprisingly well stocked gift shop carries the usual assortment of snacks, sundries, souvenirs, and over the counter medications. In addition to the usual t-shirts and local crafts, the gift shop sells premium Jamaican rums, Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee, and Cuban cigars, all of which are grossly overpriced but surprisingly authentic. Purchasing the Cuban cigars at the gift shop might be an exercise in futility as the resort lacks a proper cigar bar or cigar lounge. About the only place to enjoy a cigar would be the outdoor smoking “lounge” which is nothing more than a bench in an open-sided shelter with a roof.

All of the accommodations at Sandals Royal Plantation come with butler service. You’ll meet your butler as part of the guest check-in...it is a nice progression after being greeted with a cool, lemon scented towel and a refreshing glass of champagne. Your butler will escort you on a tour of the property, advise you of the name of the other butler (Sandals’ butlers work in teams of two), explain how the team concept works, and describe the full range of services you can expect from them. He or she will offer to unpack your luggage for you while you go enjoy the resort, and they’ll even press an outfit for you so you can enjoy your first night’s dinner without worrying about looking like you just unpacked. Even though you did. Beyond that initial service, all laundry, dry cleaning, and pressing services cost extra but the butler will handle it if you ask. Your butler will handle any arrangements you care to make regarding dining, excursions, and spa appointments. The butler will also arrange for a few surprises during your stay which I won’t give away here.



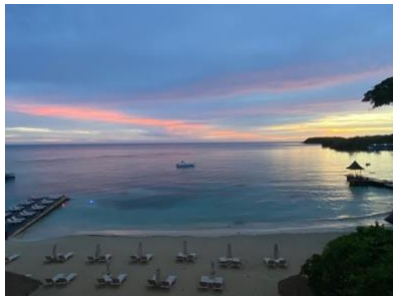
The butler will leave you with a cell phone that is your dedicated lifeline to them, along with instructions to call them with anything you want during your stay, in our case between the hours of 8AM-8PM, which is a few hours less than it had been pre-COVID. Jamaica still had a

curfew in effect when we visited, and the butlers couldn't work past the beginning of the curfew time.

At this point it is important to note that your butlers are only as helpful as you let them be, which means you have to use them. Don't worry about inconveniencing them by asking for a fresh drink on the beach...it's what they are there for. To be clear, your butlers aren't just hanging around waiting for you to call them. Each butler team is assigned up to eight rooms so if you don't call them, I assure you someone else will.

All Sandals properties have a strict no tipping policy...when they say all inclusive, they really mean it. If a staff member is caught accepting a gratuity it is grounds for their immediate dismissal. The one exception are the butlers...you are expected to tip your butler team, and they are expected to earn it. A gratuity of \$20 per butler per day of your stay is appropriate, more if you really used your butler. And be sure to tip both of your butlers...you'll see one butler when you check out and you can leave a tip for the other with the front desk. Some people will tip their butlers smaller amounts throughout their stay. Many American tourists have this sense that you don't get good service without the immediate gratification of a tip. The Sandals butlers are more professional than that. I think that practice is more to make the tipper feel magnanimous than anything else. To be sure, your butler will take the gratuity whenever you offer it, but it is appropriate and expected that you tip at the end of your visit, not during. At Sandals the butler's gratuity is considered recognition for good service delivered, not an incentive.

Some of Sandals' resorts have amazing beaches. Others, like Sandals Ochi, have beaches that



are barely adequate or even undersized for the number of guests at the resort. Sandals Royal Plantation has a Goldilocks beach...not too big and not too small. It is just right for the number guests and the nature of the resort. It is well maintained with little surf to contend with, making it easy to hop in for a refreshing dip periodically whenever the sun gets too hot. And as the sun goes down it is also a nice spot to enjoy a colorful sunset on your way to dinner.

Now the Real Scoop

I don't put lipstick on a pig in my travel reviews, and I won't start now. Just getting to Sandals Royal Plantation can be a chore. Ocho Rios is about a 90-minute drive from Jamaica's international airport in Montego Bay on a good day, and our arrival wasn't one of those good days. We got out of the airport quickly enough, but the drive ended up taking over two hours due to multiple detours and traffic delays. There are advantages to getting away from the hustle and bustle of the Montego Bay area, but there are also trade-offs and for a stay at Sandals Royal Plantation the drive is one to consider, particularly if your stay is less than a week.

The physical presence of Sandals Royal Plantation is almost as dated as the plantation concept it seeks to emulate. The décor throughout the resort is desperately in need of a makeover. Rooms are outdated, bath and shower facilities are basic and not on par with what I expect in a luxury resort, accessory hardware such as chrome-plated door knockers are missing throughout much of the resort, which you can tell because of the mounting hardware left behind, and the occasional door knocker that remains randomly distributed throughout the property.

Aside from the overall appearance of the place, I had three main issues with our stay at Sandals Royal Plantation: the staff, the butlers, and the dining. The entertainment was nothing to write home about either, but I'll begin with the staff.

Staff and Service

The guest experience at Sandals starts and ends with their staff, and usually the staff makes you feel special without coming off as patronizing. From the moment we arrived at Sandals Royal Plantation things seemed to be a bit off somehow, and it didn't improve for the duration of our stay. It's not like we were ignored or treated poorly. I chalk it up to a combination of understaffing overall and too many new employees in key areas such as the restaurants and food service. Even though tourists have been welcome to "come back to Jamaica" for over a year, it seemed like the staff at Sandals Royal Plantation had just pulled off the dust covers and reopened the place.

One thing the staff lacked during our stay was attention to detail, and that goes from the butlers all through to the newest server in the grill. Without exaggeration, the dinner service at home at a Red Lobster is more attentive than what we got either at Royal Plantation or the one night we dined at Sandals Ochi. The exception being when we dined at Le Papillon.

Butler Service

All rooms at Sandals Royal Plantation come with their "elite butler" service. The main thing I want to say about the butler service is to make sure you have your expectations in check. They do some nice things, like the surprise bubble bath they'll draw for you unprompted after a hard day of lounging in the sun. But there are many more things I expected them to do that they did not. Sandals notes that all their butlers are trained by the Guild of Professional English Butlers, which sounds much more impressive than it really is. I thought Sandals was referring to a guild officially registered in the UK with the mission of ensuring that the strict standards of English butler service were maintained. No. Turns out the "Guild of Professional English Butlers" is the name of a company that serves as a training factory for hotels and resorts around the world.



They train service staffs to provide a more personalized level of service for guests beyond what is customary from a concierge desk. And that's the best way to think of the service you'll get from a Sandals butler...as an extension of the concierge desk rather than as a proper English butler. That is not a criticism...just an important clarification particularly with how heavily the Sandals marketing sells their "elite butler service." If you book Sandals butler level accommodations and are expecting the type of service the Lord and Lady Crawley enjoy in Downton Abbey...you'll be disappointed.

You only get one opportunity to make a first impression and Sandals tries to set their butlers up for success by providing guests with a preference sheet to fill out in advance of your stay. One of my guilty pleasures during COVID has been watching the Bravo TV reality series, "Below Deck" which chronicles the outrageous antics of a private luxury charter yacht crew and their guests. Before each sailing, the crew meets to go over the incoming guests' preference sheets; they make sure the galley has the food and beverages the guests request, and that the staff is prepared for the activities and entertainment the guests hope to enjoy. No request is too outrageous to fulfill, even if it means arranging to ship a single tin of a specific brand of ultra-luxury caviar halfway across the world, or arranging for a private fireworks display for five people. Staying at a Sandals resort butler room isn't that. It is a far cry from that.

The preference sheet allows you to specify what drinks you want in the minibar when you arrive, your preference for afternoon canapes, and a couple of other things designed to wow you from the outset, as long as you don't stray too far from what the average guest might ask for. You can ask for premium brand products for your minibar, in fact you can ask for anything you want, but what you get will be whatever Sandals has in their food and beverage supply chain.

All of that is well and good, but it doesn't matter if your butlers don't get your preference sheet, and ours didn't. That wasn't the first time it happened either. This is an unforced error, and when it happens more than once at different resorts as it has recently, it suggests a systemic problem at the corporate level.

Dining

Sandals Royal Plantation advertises five dining venues on property...the Royal Grill, the Terrace Grill, Le Papillon, the Wobbly Peacock, and the Terrace Tea Room. In reality only the first three are actual restaurants, and only two of those were open for dinner. The variety of cuisine at Sandals resorts is one of the things I find appealing about them, and with their "stay at one place at many" policy I wasn't too concerned about only having two venues for dinner. Sandals Ochi next door boasts 16 restaurants and I had already planned out which restaurant we would be eating at for each night of our stay. I shared my preferences with our butler when we first met so he could make the necessary reservations. That's when we learned that because of COVID, we would only get one visit to a Sandals Ochi restaurant during our stay. Now THAT was a wow moment...of the wrong kind.

Dining at Sandals Royal Plantation was limited to the Royal Grill for breakfast and lunch service, the Terrace Grill for breakfast, lunch, and dinner service, and Le Papillon (ala carte French cuisine) for dinner service only. And of course, there is room service. Pre-COVID you could get just about anything from any of the resort's restaurant menus delivered to your room through room service. COVID took that away from us as well, and room service was limited to a fairly short list of options mainly from the Terrace Grill menu.

What's in a name? Don't let the name of the Royal Grill fool you...it is not an overly stuffy and proper establishment where you are expected to lift your pinky finger as you daintily sip your



tea. It is a beachside grill offering a comfortably casual atmosphere where you can come off the beach just a few steps away to get out of the sun and enjoy a drink, a snack, or order from a full breakfast or lunch menu. The Terrace Grill is a step up, both physically and in terms of quality. It overlooks the ocean two floors up from the Royal Grill, on the same level as the resort's main lobby. Breakfast on the Terrace Grill can be ala carte, or they offer a staff-served breakfast buffet which is the only buffet you'll find at Royal Plantation.

For lunch and dinner service, the Terrace Grill offers an ala carte menu with lunch being a fixed set of offerings that you will find at any grill in the U.S., with one or two featured specials themed in the same line as that night's dinner service.

Did I mention the pizza place or the jerk shack? Well...turns out even though most Sandals resorts have one or the other and some even have both, Royal Plantation doesn't have either. It isn't big enough. You can get pizza from the Terrace Grill, but only as a special on Italian day. Jerk chicken is offered daily on the lunch menu from both the Royal Grill and the Terrace Grill, but it wasn't true jerk chicken. It was a concoction that tasted like someone squirted the Jamaican equivalent of Sweet Baby Ray's BBQ sauce on a piece of chicken and then baked it in an oven. I ordered it twice and both times it was a disappointment, especially when I could smell the pimento wood (allspice) from jerk shacks on the street cooking up their daily offerings just outside the resort's gates. Why they didn't bring some of that onto the property and serve it is beyond me.

The Terrace Grill's dinner menu was at least marginally more interesting, featuring entrees that rotated nightly among different types of cuisine like Mediterranean, Italian, Asian, and Caribbean. Both the Royal Grill and the Terrace Grill were informal affairs where beach and pool attire were acceptable, though cover ups for the ladies and t-shirts for the gentlemen were required. For dinner the dress code at the Terrace Grill was only slightly less casual, with bathing suits frowned on but shorts, t-shirts, and flip-flops still welcome.

The only venue at Royal Plantation that I considered to be a real restaurant was the French themed Le Papillon, and it was only open for dinner service. Unlike the rest of the resort, Le

Papillon had an actual dress code that was enforced: collared shirts and casual dress pants for the gentlemen, dresses or pant suits for the ladies (sun dresses were fine). No jeans and definitely no shorts. The nightly menu was a fixed offering of classic French preparations in an intimate, casually elegant setting. The food was quite good if somewhat predictable, but that's what I expect from classic French cuisine, and it was comforting to have found it. The fact that the executive chef for Sandals Royal Plantation is a classically trained Austrian probably had something to do with that, but I wasn't complaining. Having lost the option of dining at different restaurants next door at Sandals Ochi, we ended up dining at Le Papillon three times and enjoyed each meal.



The other two so-called restaurants at Royal Plantation were the Wobbly Peacock and the Terrace Tea Room. The Wobbly Peacock is the resort's main bar themed around drunken



peacock characters depicted in artwork scattered around the bar with real (hopefully sober) peacocks roaming about on the patio just a few steps outside the bar. Maybe someday I'll ask about the backstory, though I'm not sure I want to know. Although the Sandals website describes the Wobbly Peacock as a dining venue offering "gastro pub essence," unless you are a Wobbly Peacock, you'll find that description to be over the top marketing hype. You can get basic bar food like a burger, fish and chips, or a bowl of chili. I'm not sure what makes that gastro pub essence, but...whatever.

The Terrace Tea Room offered a proper English tea service daily between the hours of 3:00 and 4:00 PM. I suppose since they serve scones and tea sandwiches it could be considered a dining venue. I suppose. The Tea Terrace had no dedicated space of its own...the staff repurposes several tables and couches that are part of the terrace patio area for the tea service. The terrace patio was my go-to place in the afternoons after I had my fill of the beach, and I saw all of maybe two couples going for the full tea service in my entire week on property. Which considering the situation with the wet cushions is probably a good thing.

Let me be clear about one thing...Sandals offers good food. It may take a little planning to get the necessary reservations, but that's one of the benefits of spending more on a butler level room. That said, nothing about the dining experience at Sandals is elevated to a level a gastronome would rave about. I know that from past stays, I didn't expect it for this stay, and my expectations were met. If I am being honest, I was pleasantly surprised at the quality of food we were served in Le Papillon...it was quite well executed if not particularly imaginative. What I was disappointed by was not being able to enjoy the varied cuisine offered by Sandals Ochi's 16 restaurants. Our butler told us it was because of COVID protocols, but there was nothing about Jamaica's COVID-19 restrictions that would explain that. It was a resource decision plain and simple. They didn't have, or couldn't get, the necessary staff. I don't like it, but I understand it. I just hope it doesn't represent the beginning of the erosion of Sandal's reciprocity policy.

Entertainment

I don't come to these resorts for their nightly entertainment offerings. There was a different singer most nights that performed out on the Terrace patio for about an hour, belting out a predictable list of tunes from the 80s songbook. I know this not because I sat through it, but because the resort is so small I could hear them from my room. To say it was no better than karaoke quality would be kind. I think there was a Caribbean fire dancing act or some such thing one night, and each night after the main entertainment a DJ ran through a generic play list for about an hour. The resort pretty much went quiet after about 10PM, but if you wanted late night entertainment or partying all you had to do was hop on the bus Sandals Ochi. Even though guests of Sandals Royal Plantation were limited in their ability to dine at the restaurants at Sandals Ochi, we were free to party there as much as we liked.

Summary

Having experienced the Sandals brand at multiple locations throughout the Caribbean, I have to say Sandals Royal Plantation was not my favorite, and it wasn't because of the limitations imposed by COVID. I simple never warmed up to the plantation theme of the place. That's not to say we didn't have a great anniversary getaway...we did. A solid week of relaxing on an idyllic beach without having to pull out the wallet for anything...what's not to like about that? But there were disappointments, made all the more so because they were unnecessary. The unforced errors piled up throughout our stay and that is something I'm not used to from a Sandals resort.

I like the Sandals brand for an all-inclusive beach vacation, and it is a brand I will go back to. How many more times I'll go back to them depends on how well they address what I believe to be systemic shortfalls. There are things about their business model that have developed over the past few years that are getting in the way of their ability to deliver the high quality of service I have become accustomed to from them. Sandals is a growing company, but in my view they are at risk of allowing growing pains to detract from an otherwise superior product. I'll let you know how well they are doing after our next Sandals stay, in January at the Sandals Royal Barbados.