

Palmetto Ponderings

Fock 2: Five Diamond Follies

The Westin Resort, the only Five-Diamond resort on the East Coast (as we were all told at orientation) seemed like it would be a magnet for snobs. Thankfully, though, it wasn't bad. Many of the guests were not so much the corporate bigwigs, but the next echelon down, and they thoroughly relished putting our amenities on someone else's plastic.



MCI, when they hosted the PGA's Heritage Classic Golf Tournament, booked the entire 412-room hotel for a full week. The parties they threw were tremendous! They were all Open Bar for everybody, and each bash had a different theme.



The mid-week shindig was the best, with small thatched huts set up as portable bars all around the expansive pool deck, the bartenders in Khakis and pith helmets, and a remote control alligator swimming around in one of the pools. They even went to the extreme of taking a small airplane fuselage and sinking it in the large pool, to give that stranded-in-the-jungle feeling. You can put out all the props and decorations you like, but stranded-in-the-jungle never meant FREE top shelf booze. Absolut, Bacardi, Tanqueray, Crown Royal, Maker's Mark ... all the thoroughbreds were there. With Miller Lite, Budwesier, and Heineken. Ha! What a contrast: here, have some excellent booze, or some crappy beer (yes, I include Heinies in that category).

Those were fun parties, and we barkeeps were rockin' – 500-plus people and an open bar. Sweet Lady of Lime Wedges, they just kept comin' on back for more and more and more. One fat, triple-chinned guy had six double-Absoluts. No mixers or nothin', just six big cups, with a double shot of that high-falootin' vodka on ice. He was the only one I had to shut off all week. Walking nose first -- at an aggressive clip, mind you -- into the plate glass sliding door of the balcony sealed his fate.

And it wasn't just on MCI week that Westin bulged with bucks. One other time, my colleague Fili and I were assigned to serve the whims of a very small party of five ultra-rich Saudi oil men. We're talking billionaires. They supposedly had some royalty in them. Bah. Whatever. They just tipped us \$150 each for two days and nights. Royalty my buttock, your spiffiness.

Bill Fasbender, the banquet manager who had given us this elite assignment, once referred to me as "our Fifth Diamond" for my dignified service. [Ha! It's true, though; I could play that role well.] But, to be honest, Fili kicked my ass at it.

Fili was a Mexican who used to be a real troublemaker back when he first slipped across the border into El Paso several years before. He was solidly built, and I could easily picture him knocking heads in a barroom brawl, or even coldly slipping a knife into a detested enemy. But something caused him to shake free of his companions in Texas – I suspect he was on the run – and he ended up here on the banquet beat.

Fili was just plain smooth. He was always one step ahead. One cigarette butt hit the ashtray, and a new clean ashtray was wooshed in to replace it. Smoothly, as if it was part of normal breathing. A cigarette was withdrawn from a pack and Fili had his silver lighter flicked open with a steady flame for lighting. Soggy napkins turned into fresh ones without anyone noticing. Empty drinks became full ones. Guests would sometimes do an I-thought-I-finished-that-drink double-take as they lifted up the fresh cocktail.

His English language skills needed work, and I cockily tried to assist him with those. But his questions were not ones that I was accustomed to fielding. He once asked, "When do you use 'The'?" It seemed like a pretty broad question, with a pretty simple answer, but he clarified it: "like, when do you say 'weather' and when do you say 'the weather'? When do you say 'water' and when do you say 'the water'? When do you say 'money' and when do you say 'the money'?" My simple explanation got longer and longer, and I doubt I cleared up a damn thing.

Fili's best line of all, though, was when he said to me, "My girlfriend tells me that I must behave, so I am being have."

We used to get drunk together a lot, along with all the other servers. At work, I mean. See, South Carolina was the only state left that still mandated that its liquor be sold exclusively in 1¼-ounce mini-bottles ("nips" we called 'em up north). Any hard liquor drink that you bought in any bar, hotel, clubhouse, restaurant, church outing, or bowling alley had to be served from those tiny bottles. You could pick a SC bartender out of a crowd just by looking at the callouses on the fat part of our index fingers. It was kindergarten for barkeeps, too, since state law mandated that the whole bottle had to be used once it was open. As a customer, you knew you were getting a full shot, and then some.

Most bars I've been associated with serve a 1¼-1½ ounce shot. Some even serve just 1 ounce. So 1¾-ounce was generous indeed. Considering that the Westin used 8-ounce highball glasses, filled with 5 ounces of ice, there wasn't a whole lot of room left for tonic in that Tanqueray and Tonic.

But the reason we all got drunk at these parties was that, unofficially, we were encouraged to. The liquor bill for a party just went on the overall bill for all the guests in all the rooms on all the nights. The bill was going to be huge (the cheapest room in season was \$185 a night, and the Port Royal Suite – the largest of the 29 suites – cost \$2000 for one night) anyway, so a bloated party bill was expected and would not be contested.

The method was this: at the start of the night, we estimated how much the guests would drink, and withdrew that amount from the liquor stockroom. We counted up the number of mini-bottles that we

had taken and logged them on the official clipboard. As the night went on, if we needed more, we took more, and logged them on the official clipboard. When the party was over, we counted the number of bottles that were being returned, and, yes, logged them on the official clipboard. Total Removed minus Total Returned equaled Total Consumed. Simple math.

The good side for us was that it really didn't matter who consumed them. The guests were certainly encouraged to do so. But if we, the half-dozen or so lowly help, happened to down five or six each, then that was an extra thirty or forty bottles that were simply added to the bill. And at an average of \$4 or more per mini-bottle, we were making the hotel another \$100 to \$150 dollars for the night.

This was all with a nod and a wink, of course, and Bill and Buzz (our Beverage Captain was named Buzz, can you believe that?) would officially deny ever condoning such antics. They kept a watchful eye on us, but I could tell it was mostly an if-I-can't-tell-then-the-guest-can't-tell-either type of thing. Tacit approval: as long as I don't catch you, bottoms up!

Myers's Rum and I became great friends during my employ at the Westin. It's dark color blended perfectly with the Coke Classic, so I could boldly sip my on-the-job "soda" without fear of reprisal.

Slavery was alive and well at the Westin, however, as it was at Indigo Run, and as I imagine it still is throughout the Deep South. Emancipation, my ass. The "front of the house" personnel – that's hotel parlance for the people who will meet, greet, and speak with the guests face-to-face – were almost exclusively white. The "back of the house" personnel – kitchen help (not chefs though, they were all white), housekeeping, maintenance, custodial – were almost all black. There was the occasional educated black man or woman who knew The Rules Of The Game and played them well enough to advance into front of the house positions, and there was the occasional dumb-as-a-stick redneck jackoff who didn't know when to shut his pie-hole and loudly claimed he was the best damn dishwasher ever seen 'round these parts.

The locker room was a very odd place. All the help were assigned and supplied Westin uniforms. Even the grungiest worker wore grungy Westin duds. My uniform was a white tuxedo jacket, white shirt, black bow tie, black pants, and black cummerbund. I provided the black shoes and socks, they provided the rest. Underwear was optional, but encouraged, especially by the folks in Laundry.

Everyone, regardless of job, used the same locker room. At any given time, the ethnic diversity in that room rivaled the United Nations. Classical music – the Beethoven-ish piano and violin kind, not the Wagnerian horns and kettle drums – was piped in around the clock, and it served as a vividly contrasting backdrop for some of the most guttural and Neanderthal conversations I have ever heard. I am no racist, as I have said before, but this cultural disparity did seem to hinge proudly on race.

The dialect of the Carolina slaves of the Civil War era was known as Gullah, and many of us swore that it was the same language being spoken in that locker room. Try as I might, I could not decipher even a tenth of what was being said around me. And we also believed that it was that way deliberately. Devoid of pride in any other aspect of this white man's minimum wage, servitude existence, they kept alive that esoteric slang and twang of their ancestors, and smugly laughed at our inability to understand them.

It was actually uplifting to see and hear. There was dignity of a different type in it. There was a THIS IS US thing that waved a dismissing hand at "the better way of the white man." There was nothing rebellious or belligerent in it, just a way of saying, Yeah but you can't take this from us, can you?

Then, on a radically different plane, there was Lisa. Ahhhhh, sweeeet Lisa Muellner. What a great woman.

She took me under her wing when I first came upon the scene and showed me around the place. She clearly took a shine to me because, unlike many of the other employees



there, I had some visible intelligence, considerable education, a respectable background, and really, really nice legs.

Lisa was a fellow barkeep, but also a kickass beach volleyball player, and Hilton Head had one kickass beach for playing. The eastern shore of the island is almost all beach. It's flat, wide, firm, and pretty much devoid of rocks or seaweed. The water does not sparkle like it might at some tropical islands; it is clouded just a bit by the loose sand and the low but churning surf. Body-surfing is a great way to pass a sun-drenched hour or two.

At dusk, or under bright moonlight, a run along this beach is delightful. The sand is solid enough to give good support, but just soft enough to cushion your silent steps. The prevailing winds out of the south make the out-and-back courses pretty easy to choose: head into the breeze while you're fresh, and ride the tailwind as you head back.

The roar of the headwind in your ears has a lot to do with how hard the run feels, I found. On one run, I experimented by cupping my hands in front of my ears as I ran, thus blocking that roar. The result was astounding. Freed from that audible resistance, everything – stride, breathing, posture – felt easier. The wind velocity was the same, but the perception was immensely different. Of course, running efficiency is seriously compromised by running with your hands held up at your head, so that kinda cancels out the sound thing. Still, it was pretty cool. If you're a runner facing a headwind, try it sometime.

Much of the island-long beach is more or less reserved for the hotels and condos and apartments that stand behind it, but the focal point of the public beach has to be the volleyball courts at the Tiki Hut, the outdoor bar of the Holiday Inn. The Hut is not very large, but its popularity is. There is a medium-sized wooden deck surrounding the central thatched hut, and a handful of tables scattered around the deck. The chairs are plastic, which leads to some comical falls when a drunken patron tilts the chair back on its hind legs after they have been heating (and softening) in the summer sun. Cliff took that dive when he came for a visit. We all laughed, of course. We all laughed even harder when I made the same mistake only a few minutes later.



The deck is perched a few feet above the ground and has a ledged railing that gives a great overview of the two pro-sized volleyball courts. There actually was a pro tournament that came through there: The Jose Cuervo Tour, or something like that.

Lisa wasn't quite that good enough for that level, but she was a really good player. Her body was beautifully tall and lithe, and her playing partner was lean and strong. The two of them were a pleasure to watch. It was fun to stand there in the warm sunshine, sipping an ice-cold beverage, and watch them beat both women's and men's teams.

Lisa was a piece of work. Like many people that I met in the service industry on that island, she was a fugitive. Her husband had spent all of her money without her consent, so she had absconded with their Jeep in the dead of night, and skedaddled. Taxes and legal issues were in her wake, since all of the business' assets that he blew were in her name. Nice guy.

She was definitely a fun loving party girl, but she also had serious ambitions. Regrettably, I lost touch with her when I moved away. I had an address, but eventually my mail to her starting coming back with that "Undeliverable: No Forwarding Address" label on it. She's a sweet kid, and was doing a good job of staying ahead of the wolves. I know she has ended up on her feet and in someplace good.