

[Skip to Main Content](#)[Vacation Packages](#)[Hotels](#)[Flights](#)

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## Categories

### Recent Posts

[All Inclusive Resorts](#)  
[Beach Vacation](#)  
[Business Travel](#)  
[California Vacation](#)  
[Caribbean Vacation](#)  
[Chicago Vacation](#)  
[Cruise](#)  
[Disney Vacation](#)  
[Europe Vacation](#)  
[Family Travel](#)  
[Florida Vacation](#)  
[Food & Wine](#)  
[Freebies & Discounts](#)  
[Gadgets & Gizmos](#)  
[Gambling Vacation](#)  
[Gay Travel](#)  
[Hawaii Vacation](#)  
[Holidays & Events](#)  
[International Vacations](#)  
[Las Vegas Vacation](#)  
[Mexico Vacation](#)  
[New York Vacation](#)  
[Nightlife](#)  
[On the Road](#)  
[Orbitz Parent Panel](#)  
[Orbitz Travel Insider](#)  
[Photography](#)  
[Romance](#)  
[Ski Resorts](#)  
[Spa Vacation](#)  
[Sports Travel](#)  
[Top 10 Lists](#)  
[Travel Deals](#)  
[Travel News](#)  
[Travel Tips](#)

## Archives

[August 2008](#)  
[July 2008](#)

**Wednesday, August 06, 2008**

## Family-friendly Orlando hotel offers Italy escape

Posted at 11:52 AM in [Family Travel](#) , [Florida Vacation](#)*By Samantha Chapnick*

**Orlando** is all about the fantasy. Like Vegas without the naughtiness, it's about being somewhere other than the middle of Florida. At [Orlando hotels](#), you can be on Safari ([Disney's Animal Kingdom Lodge](#)), in the South Seas ([Disney's Polynesian Resort](#)), in a castle ([Doubletree Castle Hotel](#)), under the sea with SpongeBob ([Nickelodeon's Family Suites](#)), or even in a bygone Florida existing only in our memories ([Gaylord Palms Resort](#)).

A few months ago, we got a chance to escape to Italy -- Orlando's version of Italy, that is. The [Loews Portofino Bay Hotel](#) is an oxymoron: a large hotel that remains well hidden -- at least to people like us who had never been to Universal Studios. Here are the top reasons to stay here:



**1) The Piazza.** Sure we'd passed it numerous times on previous visits, but the architecture is so clever and detailed we never quite realized it was a hotel. The illusion is magnificent. Built around one of Florida's lakes, the anchored boats and sea wall repeatedly fooled even this well-traveled writer into thinking we were in a harbor town.

The actual buildings have been disguised to look like a cluster of 20 or 30 palazzo all facing the harbor or the pool. And of course there's the obligatory tower with a dome.

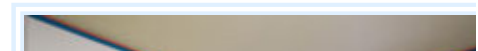
My normal skeptical self would be interested, but not particularly impressed, by even the most detailed replica. Architecture alone does not make a destination. As Italy is one of my favorite places, I do not take its imitation lightly. In this case, someone somewhere involved in the construction really got what makes an Italian town an Italian town -- namely, the outdoor public gathering space where people have a chance to interact and play without being surrounded by pi in music, overbearing commercialism, or fluorescent lights.

The heart of this Orlando hotel is the **Piazza** abutting the "harbor." It's a wide-open space that comes alive in the evenings. Families love it because the parents can sit peacefully at one of the outdoor cafes, restaurants or the gelateria, while their kids expend the evening's remaining energy running around, chasing each other, observing the ducks, or taking the bolted-down Vespas for a spin.

It's equally appealing to adults. Many of the guests I spoke with gave it kudos for being the most socializing-friendly common area of any of the [Orlando hotels](#) they had stayed in.

**2) Express line at Universal Orlando.** The hotel's room key is an express line ticket. Anyone staying at the hotel can bypass the long lines and go directly to the express lane.

**3) Kid suites.** We loved our kid suite. Imagine two full adjoining hotel rooms: both with the same



- [June 2008](#)
- [May 2008](#)
- [April 2008](#)
- [March 2008](#)
- [February 2008](#)
- [January 2008](#)
- [December 2007](#)
- [November 2007](#)

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view, about the same size. Now take away the risk by making the second room accessible only through the first -- there is no door to the hallway. And add kid-friendly decor, including big crowns on the end of the bed, whimsical tables and chairs, plenty of space to play. Some have bunk beds and some twins. For younger children, needing to walk through the adult room to get to the bathroom will go unnoticed. But for older tweens and teens it would have been nice if they had their own facilities or a bathroom accessible from either room.

And as of last month, they now have a few "Cat in the Hat"-themed kid suites with, as you'd expect, lopsided headboards, bright red duvet covers, and illustrations from the book covering the walls.

**4) The Boat to Universal.** We loved taking the Italian-style mini-yacht to **City Walk** and **Universal's Islands of Adventure**. It took less than 5 minutes (super fast!) and was free (\$\$ savings!), and most important, we didn't have to get a parking spot, deal with traffic or find our way, eliminating one major source of our family's vacation stress. Plus it was fun!

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