

Atlantic City striving to make tourists feel rich
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By Gretchen McKay, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



The Pier Shops in Atlantic City

ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. -- No doubt the bells were ringing wildly on the slots in Harrah's ornate lobby casino. But lying on my back just a few hundred feet around the corner in a dark treatment room at Elizabeth Arden's Red Door Spa & Salon, with nothing but the soft hiss of steam filling my ears, I was the picture of calm. Transcendental, even.

My hour-long ceramide anti-aging facial -- my first -- had started with aesthetician Adriene Pasmanick cleaning, toning and exfoliating my face with a succession of lotions. Then it was on to a relaxing massage of my cheeks, neck, decolletage and hands, followed by a fragrant seaweed mask that was gently wiped off with a warm towel. I could have wept, I felt so pampered.

Slots? Who needs 'em!

Gambling, of course, is still the main draw in this coastal New Jersey town, which opened its first casino in 1978; in 2007, visitors bet \$112.3 million a day on slots alone.



If you go: Atlantic City

- Atlantic City is about a 6 1/2-hour drive from Pittsburgh. If you're short on time, fly into Philadelphia International Airport and rent a car for the 60-mile trip via the Atlantic City Expressway; Southwest Airlines' "Wanna Get Away" fare is \$109 round-trip between Pittsburgh and Philly (www.southwest.com). Or take a train from Philadelphia's 30th Street Station: it's \$8 each way.
- Lodging options include small inns, motels and B&Bs in communities to the south to swanky casino hotels on the boardwalk or Absecon Bay. Mid-week rates are cheaper; the Tropicana Casino & Hotel, for instance, offers a \$99 rate mid-week, \$295 on Fridays and \$399 on Saturdays.
- A cheap, easy way to get around town is via one of the city's light-blue jitneys. A ride costs \$2, with stops on Pacific Avenue. The maximum cost for a taxi ride for up to 5 people is \$11, plus tip.
- For more info, visit www.atlanticcitynj.com.

-- Gretchen McKay

In fact, Atlantic City -- a 6 1/2-hour drive from Pittsburgh -- just two years ago equaled Las Vegas at roughly \$5 billion a year in the amount won by its casinos, according to Jeffrey Vasser, executive director of the Atlantic City Convention and Visitors Authority. But Vegas also has been built into a major destination for nongaming visitors, a goal that Atlantic City is trying to replicate.

"We're where Vegas was 10 years ago," in developing amenities for the nongaming tourist and attracting those visitors, he said.

Up to half of the tourists visiting Las Vegas don't gamble. In Atlantic City in 2007, 78 percent of the visitors went for the gambling and 22 percent for nongaming activities. During the past five years, Atlantic City developers have pumped millions of dollars into upscale shopping and dining, spas and entertainment complexes to market the city for girlfriend getaways, reunions and other groups.

On our recent weekend trip, my husband and I tried to sample everything nongaming this resort destination has to offer.

If we were going to spend some money, we figured, we might as well have something to show for it. And spend we did, and not the least of it on the facial: even with a discount, it cost a whopping \$154, including a mandatory \$29 gratuity.

We started our two-night getaway on Friday afternoon with a quick drink at The Pool, a new \$33 million indoor pool under a 90-foot glass dome at Harrah's, where we'd scored a corner room overlooking Absecon Bay.

Your typical hotel pool by day, the space pulsates with hot music and even hotter bodies at night, the bartender told us, when its dozen linen-draped cabanas and half-dozen hot tubs are available for private rental. Hmm. Definitely worth checking out. But first, we had plans for a late lunch at Buddakan at the Piers Shops at Caesars, a \$175 million, three-story entertainment complex built atop a 90-foot pier over the Atlantic Ocean. We hopped in a cab and headed for the boardwalk.

Designed to look like a star-lit Asian village, this serene restaurant -- one of three by Philly restaurateur Stephen Starr -- was everything the guidebook promised: exotic (a huge, golden Buddha dominates the main dining room), comfortable and full of great Asian-fusion cuisine. Especially delightful was the Thai chicken salad (\$14), made with Napa cabbage and crispy rice noodles dressed in a chili vinaigrette. We quickly chopsticked the plate clean.

To work off the calories, we strolled through the Pier's vast collection of shops -- everything from Gucci to Levi's -- to the observation deck overlooking the ocean. Hearing music, we rushed back inside and took in the last few minutes of "The Show," a glitzy water show with lights and music. It made the fountain at Point State Park look like a sprinkler.

Given how much money flows in Atlantic City, it's not surprising complexes like the Pier have popped up, or that the city is billing itself as a shopper's paradise. And it's not just luxury retailers vying for shoppers' dollars. One of the hottest spots to spend your money is The Walk, a shiny outlet mall with more than 80 shops and a dozen restaurants. Customers arrive by the bus load to scour for bargains from the likes of Jockey and Corningware.

Just as popular is the Quarter at the Tropicana, a swanky indoor shopping, dining and entertainment complex. Here, you can nosh on Caspian beluga caviar (\$245 an ounce, toast points included) at Red Square before heading over to Jake's Dog House for gourmet doggie treats or karaoke at Planet Rose.

Seeing it was a beautiful, sunny day, I would have been content to spend the next few hours strolling the boardwalk in search of salt water taffy (James' taffy, a fixture since the 1880s, is reputedly the best) or splurging on a rolling cart ride (\$25/half hour or \$40/hour). But Caesars beckoned -- and my husband knew I still had pleasant memories of playing the "Deal or No Deal" slots while in Las Vegas with my sister last fall. It didn't take long. Literally three minutes later, we were \$10 poorer and back out into the sunshine.

Atlantic City's boardwalk, when it opened in 1870 as a way to keep visitors from tracking sand into hotels and restaurants, was 8 feet wide and a mile long. Today, its herringbone-patterned planks are 60 feet wide and stretch 6 miles along the ocean. But it still sparkles with the stuff you associate with the Jersey shore: sweet-smelling funnel cakes, 99-cent souvenir stores, henna tattoos, psychic readings, arcade and carnival rides. In the mood for something a bit more grown up, we followed the cheery urgings of a man wearing a sandwich board and turned left onto St.

James Street. A few minutes later, we were enjoying a \$4 pint of Guinness at the Irish Pub, a charming and fairly authentic Dublin saloon .

Drinking beer in the afternoon, of course, leads to a nap before dinner. As its motto proclaims, though, Atlantic City is always turned on. The crowds were still hopping when we arrived well after 9 p.m. at Wolfgang Puck American Grille in the Borgata, Atlantic City's newest and most luxurious casino hotel. The prices were a bit high in the main dining room, so we shared a plate of truffled potato chips with blue cheese and a spicy chicken pizza (\$50 with drinks). We headed back to Harrah's to check out The Pool after dark. Apparently, Gen Y'ers come out later than boomers, as it was completely dead. We ended up listening to a live '80s cover band in the Eden Lounge until the wee hours.

Casinos are legendary for their all-you-can eat buffets. But for breakfast the next morning, we took a \$2 jitney back to the boardwalk in hopes of finding a place popular with locals. Two cops pointed us in the direction of Bill's Gyro and Souvlaki, where we dined off Styrofoam plates on bacon and eggs. The decor was even better than the food: the entire joint -- seats, fridge, ceiling and soda machine included -- is papered in dollar bills donated by customers,

You might not expect it, but Atlantic City has several cultural attractions, including a historic museum with artifacts relating to local history, a city art center and a three-story aquarium.

Not so unexpected is that the city, which for 83 years hosted the Miss America beauty pageant, attracts some pretty big headliners. The weekend we were there Mary J. Blige and Jay Z were at Boardwalk Hall, Tom Jones at Harrah's, and Dolly Parton at Borgata. We made the mistake of paying \$35 each after dinner to see Tracy Morgan's so-called comedy act. Hilarious on "30 Rock," he tanked on stage.

Looking for something actually fun after the show, we checked out Borgata's two high-profile, high-energy nightclubs, Mixx and Mur Mur. Both, with their throbbing music, flashing lights and expensive cocktails were the perfect place to meet young, sexy singles -- but only if you're also young, sexy and single. My husband and I stood out like chaperones at the prom.

Before heading home the next morning, we toyed with the idea of driving the six miles to Margate to tour Lucy, a 65-foot-tall wooden elephant built in 1881. Then we remembered: No kids! Instead, we picked up two humongous cheesesteaks at White House Sub Shop (a fave of Frank Sinatra's) and headed north to the Absecon Lighthouse, billed as one of the oldest (c. 1857) and tallest (171 feet) lighthouses in the country.

I wanted to climb its 228 steps to drink in a panoramic view of the city and ocean. But we were 15 minutes too early. Waving away the seagulls, we settled for eating our subs on the boardwalk.

It was the perfect end to a fun, if exhausting, weekend.

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