Destination: Putting the “Atlantic” back in Atlantic City

This historic New Jersey town isn’t just about slot machines and craps tables

BY BARBARA PECK

First-time visitors to Atlantic City are often surprised to find that it has a beach at all—much less a broad, four-mile stretch of sand where seagulls soar, waves roll in, surfers glide and children toddle through the shallows. But back in the 1850s, long before the casinos arrived, Atlantic City got its start as a retreat for saltwater bathing, then believed to cure a multitude of ailments. The first boardwalk ever was built here in 1870, as a favor to beachside hotel owners irked by the sand tracked in on their Oriental carpets by careless guests. What started as an eight-foot-wide wooden promenade is now 60 feet wide and four miles long—and still a place to see and be seen.

THE BEACH, MADE EASY

Atlantic City’s beaches are handicap accessible, via ramps from the Boardwalk, and have public restrooms and showers at frequent intervals. You can surf off three designated beaches and fish (for free) from the jetties. Several locations rent lounge chairs, and a number of the casino hotels operate summer beach bars for those who prefer to do their relaxing with a frosty beer (and maybe some live music). With all this, why spend your summer days indoors?
BACK IN THE DAY
The Atlantic City Boardwalk loaned its name to Boardwalk Empire, the HBO series based on real-life tales of Prohibition Days. The show has inspired a new interest in Atlantic City history, and the Roaring Twenties Trolley Tour, which just launched in June, is the best way to explore it. Over the years many of the city’s historic buildings have fallen to the wrecking ball, but this tour searches out the spots that still remain.

Passengers board the vehicle, a varnished-wood replica of a Victorian trolley, for a four-hour excursion that takes in such sights as the Ritz, a former hotel (now condos) where notorious crime boss Nucky Johnson once sprawled over the entire ninth floor. You’ll also pass by the still operational Absecon Light, which your guide will tell you is the country’s third-largest lighthouse, having withstood every storm since 1857. And you’ll see two of the original boathouses used by Prohibition-era rumrunners—your guide might describe the “alcohol abuse” that took place when federal agents poured out confiscated hooch onto the beach. *Trolley tours, Thursdays at 10:15 a.m.; adults $25, children $20; including lunch at the historic Irish Pub, a former speakeasy. Call 609-884-7392 to reserve a spot. gatrolley.com*

PETTING THE SHARK
Atlantic City’s modest but sweet aquarium scores points with kids who like to get up close with marine creatures. It’s located in a stand-alone building on Gardner’s Basin. Much of the display space is devoted to touch tanks, home to creatures such as white spotted bamboo sharks, epaulette sharks and chocolate chip sea stars. In other tanks, look for beady-eyed piranhas, diamondback terrapins, a massive red-tail boa and some good-size red and green iguanas. The star resident is a giant loggerhead sea turtle named Groman, who weighed in at 180 pounds at his last checkup. After your aquarium tour, consider a cruise on one of the sightseeing and whale-watching boats that tie up in Gardner’s Basin, or stop by the roadhouse-style Back Bay Ale House for lunch (*backbayalehouse.com*). *Atlantic City Aquarium, 800 N. New Hampshire Ave.; 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; 609-348-2880; acaquarium.com; $8 adults, $5 children 4–12*

NEXT UP
The last few decades have handed Atlantic City some economic challenges, and there are plenty of empty lots to prove it. But development is picking up with the construction of Revel, a casino hotel due to open in May 2012. With 1,100 rooms, 12 restaurants, a spa and a 5,500-seat arena, it will be AC’s biggest hotel to date. And unlike most of the properties in town, it’s making the most of its oceanfront location: A two-acre sixth-floor deck will have cabanas, fire pits and gardens with 30,000 trees and plants. Even the lobby, also on sixth floor, will offer water views. It could be that “Atlantic” will once again be the operative word in the “Atlantic City” name. *revelinac.com*