

ATLANTIC PALACE

TRUMP TAJ MAHAL TRUMP
BALLY'S

BALLY'S

Garden
BUTTER
ALL DAY LONG

GET
THE
BEST

CAR
EVA

CAR
EVA

CAR
EVA

CAR
EVA

CAR
EVA

CAR
EVA

CAR
EVA

CAR
EVA

CAR
EVA

CAR
EVA

CAR
EVA

CAR
EVA

CAR
EVA

CAR
EVA

CAR
EVA

The Jewish Traveler

Atlantic City

Nostalgic for neon, glitz and kitsch? This storied East Coast resort celebrates its colorful past while simultaneously wooing a new high-end, sophisticated crowd.

By **Rahel Musleah**

If Charles B. Darrow, the creator of Monopoly, had depicted the personality of Atlantic City, New Jersey, circa 1935, rather than simply borrowing its street names, the rotund, mustachioed little man in the tuxedo might have been wearing a *kippa* instead of a top hat. 🍀 The town's character has shifted dramatically since its boom times, which began with the development in 1854 of a train from Camden to Atlantic City, until then almost inaccessible because of primitive roads leading to its location on Absecon Island.

Driving around Atlantic City today still resembles a board game come to life, but most of the grand old hotels have been demolished, replaced by casinos like Trump Taj Mahal on Virginia Avenue, Caesars on Arkansas and numerous others that now front the five-mile boardwalk and overlook the city's free beaches. Gambling, which was approved in 1976 to revive the area's faltering economy, has re-

stored a measure of glitz to what was once called the Playground of the World and Queen of Resorts.

Wooed by the gaming, the visitors are back, totaling 30 million annually. A new marina district serves as home to Borgata's, Harrah's and the Trump Marina, with gleaming floors, endless slot machines and upscale restaurants and nightclubs. The city is trying to expand its appeal with projects like The Walk, a multimillion-dollar retail and entertainment complex.

History

The city's history dates to 1838, when Jeremiah Leeds, who was not Jewish, built the first permanent dwelling in the area. In 1870, a boardwalk was constructed to prevent sand from being tracked into trains and hotels. Working-class day-trippers, middle-class vacationers and wealthy tourists began spending their summers by the sea, lured initially by



Out for a Stroll *Hadassah* conventioners on the boardwalk in 1937; (opposite page) the scene today.

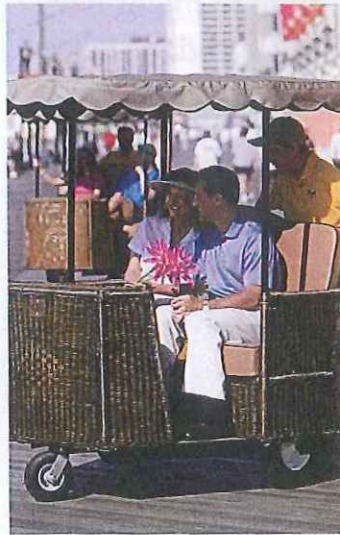
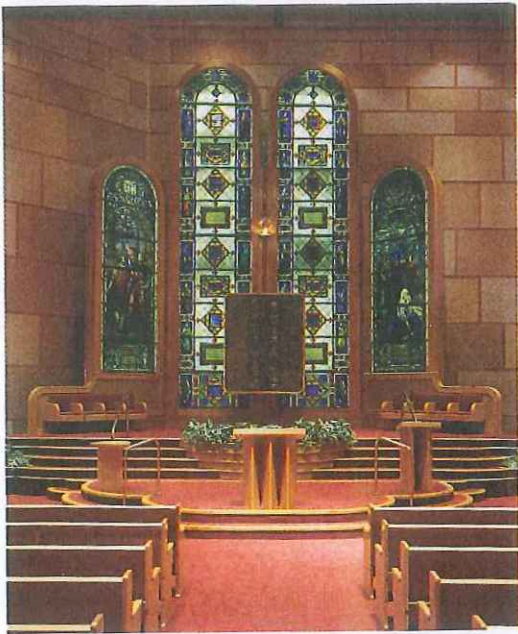
the healthy sea air. Atlantic City soon became a fantasy world from which they could come home with post cards (said to have originated here), souvenir trinkets, saltwater taffy and photographic portraits.

Italian, Irish and African-American communities preceded the first Jewish families from Baltimore and Philadelphia who settled in Atlantic City in 1880. The Southeast Inlet part of town became a destination for Jews of varied ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Many original-

ly came as tourists and returned to take advantage of employment and business opportunities. To accommodate them, the city teemed with Jewish-owned rooming houses, small hotels, apparel stores, jewelry shops, pharmacies, restaurants, groceries, theaters and clubs.

The first High Holiday service was held in a private residence in 1888, followed in 1893 by the establishment of the first synagogue, Congregation Beth Israel (Reform), on Pennsylvania Avenue. Its maroon awnings and Moorish windows are still visible, though the cream-colored building at the corner of Pacific and Pennsylvania Avenues is now in disrepair. The first kosher hotel, the Rosenaur Villa (St. Charles and Pacific Avenues), and the Orthodox Rodef Shalom synagogue both opened in 1896.

By 1918, 1,200 hotels had sprung up, many of them extravagant palaces that accommodated guests from Franklin Delano Roosevelt to Frank Sinatra and boasted elegant



There She Is.... (clockwise from above) Boardwalk Hall, home of the original Miss America pageants; rolling chairs; Beth Israel synagogue.

ballrooms, rooftop greenhouses, steam heat and private baths. Star-studded shows, theatrical productions, amusements on the Steel Pier and the Miss America pageant, starting in 1921, boosted the city's profile.

Jewish tourists flooded the resorts, too, and 10,000 Jews settled there permanently by mid-century, making up about a sixth of its total year-round population. Hundreds of small kosher hotels accommodated the swell of summer visitors. The Jewish businesses that once lined the city's avenues and its legendary boardwalk have now largely disappeared, as the community has spread to the more suburban Ventnor, Margate and Longport areas.

So many Jews converged on Atlantic City that some hotels began restricting their clientele, causing an uncomfortable period of discrimination but an upsurge in Jewish hotels. During World War II, the city served as a training site for military recruits and a recovery and rehabilitation center for wounded soldiers. The 400,000 soldiers it hosted over a three-year period trained on the boardwalk and were treated at a local hospital; Jewish troops were invited for High Holiday meals.

Many Holocaust survivors settled in Atlantic County, and though they had no farming experience, took on the chicken and egg business. They were not initially accepted by the established Jewish community, so they built their own synagogues and social network in Egg Harbor. Later, they made careers in real estate, construction and hospitality.

The son of survivors, Leo Schoffer has gathered many recollections in *A Dream, A Journey, A Community: A Nostalgic Look at Jewish Businesses in and Around Atlantic City*

(Comtec). Shelly Wiessler recalls working on the Steel Pier as a teenager, where she met a woman who convinced her to buy her fortune-telling bird concession. Wiessler's parents let her use some of her college money for the investment, and while she studied at the Philadelphia College of Art, her mother trained 12 parakeets to perform for audiences. The birds hopped to a house of fortunes, chose a fortune card using their bills

and dropped them into customers' hands—all for a dime.

Lew Tendler, a southpaw boxer who lost only 8 times in 167 fights and was inducted into the Jewish and Israeli Athletes Hall of Fame, opened Mammy's restaurant, where you could order two donuts and a cup of coffee for 15 cents. Margie and Stanley Berk remember the boardwalk in its heyday, with its rows of "rolling chairs"—which resembled wheelchairs for two—occupied by summer visitors who "sat in their finery and watched the evening's passing parade."

Al Gold became Atlantic City's official photographer, capturing images of presidents and movie stars. His personal favorite, recalls his daughter, Vicki Gold Levy, was Marilyn Monroe, who was the Grand Marshall of the Miss America Parade in 1952. Levy, coauthor of *Atlantic City: 125 Years of Ocean Madness* (Ten Speed Press), cocurator of photography at the Atlantic City Historical Museum and an independent film consultant, has her own fond memory of serving as a 5-year-old page in the 1945 contest, which ended with Bess Myerson being crowned the first Jewish

(TOP LEFT) COURTESY OF CONGREGATION BETH ISRAEL
(TOP RIGHT) COURTESY OF THE ATLANTIC CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU

Miss America. Gold carried Myerson's crimson velvet train onto the pageant stage each night.

Community

By the 1960s, the center of Jewish life had moved to Margate, Ventnor and "downbeach" communities like Longport. The Jewish Federation of Atlantic and Cape May Counties (609-822-4404; www.jewishbytheshore.org) counts 18,000 Jews in the area, with four Conservative synagogues (Beth El, Margate; Beth Judah, Wildwood; Beth Judah, Ventnor; Beth Shalom, Brigantine), two Reform synagogues (Beth Israel, Northfield; Emeth Shalom, Margate City), one Reconstructionist (Beth El, Hammonton) and four Orthodox (Chelsea Hebrew Congregation, Atlantic City; Rodef Shalom, Atlantic City; Young Israel, Margate; Chabad of the Shore, Long Branch). The federation's headquarters in Margate (501 North Jerome Avenue) also houses the Milton and Betty Katz JCC of Atlantic City (609-822-1167; www.jccatlantic.org).

The Trocki Jewish Community Day School in Egg Harbor Township (<http://tjcdsac.org>) accepts students from preschool through 8th grade, and the Seashore Gardens Living Center in Galloway Township (www.seashoregardens.org) offers assisted living, nursing, rehabilitation and other services for seniors. The *Jewish Times of South Jersey* (www.jewishtimesj.com) is located in nearby Pleasantville.

The boardwalk, long the place for both the sweet and surprising, will soon be home to a new Holocaust memorial (www.acbhm.org). Last year, a design was chosen from among 815 entries from 55 countries. Most of the designs will be reproduced in a catalog, *Memorializing the Holocaust*. The groundbreaking is scheduled for 2013.

The Sara & Sam Schoffer Holocaust Resource Center, located at the Richard Stockton College in Pomona, New Jersey, is named for Leo Schoffer's parents. The college offers a bachelor's degree in Jewish studies and a master's in Holocaust and genocide studies.

The Golda Meir and Shaloma Hadassah chapters have members in Atlantic City, Margate, Ventnor and the surrounding towns. In Hadassah's early days, several national conventions were held in Atlantic City at famous hotels such as the Chelsea.

Sights

Relics of the old neighborhoods remain: Across from the gilt-lettered Trump Taj Mahal, stained-glass windows, a me-

nora and Stars of David adorn the boarded-up Community Synagogue Beth Kehillah, built in the 1920s. You can still pick out the Hebrew letters that spell Emunath Yisrael over the front door of the Redeemed Pentecostal Temple at Indiana and Arctic. A Sefardic synagogue graced the site of the current Terminal Market at Pacific and Seaside. The iconic Breakers has been replaced by the Showboat.

Though Teplitzky's, the famous kosher restaurant, is long gone, you can order halla French toast at a (non-kosher) restaurant of the same name at the Chelsea, a nod to the hotel's original proprietors (111 South Chelsea Avenue). The Knife and Fork Inn, still operating at the intersection of Atlantic, Pacific and Albany Avenues, was originally an exclusive men's drinking and dining club frequented by the likes of mob boss Enoch "Nucky" Johnson until federal agents raided it during Prohibition. Milton and Evelyn Latz bought the building and converted it into a restaurant, operating it for decades until they sold it in 2005. The Dennis and Claridge's have been incorporated into Bally's Park Place; the Ritz-Carlton is now a condominium complex; and Chalfont-Haddon Hall is now Resorts.

Mr. Peanut points visitors to a miniature boardwalk at the Atlantic City Historical Museum (204 South Vermont Avenue; 609-347-5839; www.acmuseum.org). The permanent exhibit features costumes, posters, photographs, song sheets, post cards, souvenirs and Miss America memorabilia. Among the personalities featured is Louis Zaris, a World

War II hero, bombardier on a B-24 Liberator plane he called the *Boardwalk Flyer* and a captive in a German POW camp. His uniform is on display.

A documentary screened at the museum, *Boardwalk Ballyhoo: The Magic of Atlantic City*, is sprinkled with Jewish entertainers like Eddie Cantor and Jerry Lewis as well as short films of the beach shot by Thomas Edison and videos of the high-diving horses at the Steel Pier.

Visitors can also peruse the extensive resources in the Alfred M.

Heston Collection of the Atlantic City Free Public Library, and explore its changing online and on-site exhibits (1 North Tennessee Avenue; www.acfpl.org).

Atlantic City showcased a number of firsts, bests and assorted oddities. The world's first "Ferris" wheel turned at Missouri and Mississippi Avenues; created in 1892 by William Somers, it was the precursor to George Washington Gale Ferris's wheel constructed at the Chicago World's



Landmark Kitsch This pachyderm is a museum.



Display and Pray *The Atlantic City Historical Museum (above); the Brotherhood Synagogue in Woodbine.*



Fair. The Chesterfield sign, once the world's largest electric sign with 27,000 bulbs, lit up one of the piers. Boardwalk Hall (2301 Boardwalk), formerly Convention Hall (the site of the Miss America pageant) and now the venue for concerts and sports events, still houses a 33,000-pipe organ, the world's largest. Climb 228 steps to the top of the Absecon Lighthouse (Pacific and Rhode Island Avenues), the country's third tallest lighthouse, dating to 1857.

Lucy, a 130-year-old, 90-ton, 6-story elephant-shaped Atlantic City eccentricity made of wood and tin, was saved and refurbished in 1970 and moved to Margate (9200 Atlantic Avenue; www.lucytheelephant.org). Originally an attempt to attract real estate business and tourism, Lucy is now designated a National Historic Landmark. Visitors can ascend her leg, scramble onto the howdah on her back and learn about her history at a museum in her interior.

Side Trip

Less than an hour south of Atlantic City, the Sam Azeez Museum of Woodbine Heritage (610 Washington Avenue; 609-646-9400; www.thesam.org) records the history of the area purchased a hundred years ago by Baron Maurice de Hirsch, the wealthy German philanthropist.

In 1891, de Hirsch established a fund to assist Russian Jews immigrating to the United States. The trustees of the fund envisioned Woodbine as an agricultural-industrial colony where Jews could pursue the lifestyle they had been denied back in Russia. The Baron de Hirsch Agricultural College in Woodbine was the first school to impart secondary education in agriculture. However, because of poor soil conditions, Woodbine became better known as a factory town, the manufacturing center of Cape May County.

The museum, established in memory of a local entrepreneur, is located in the lower level of Woodbine's historic Brotherhood Synagogue. The sanctuary upstairs has been restored but is not in regular use. Designated as the

Cape May County Teaching Center for the New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education, the museum provides both on-site and in-classroom outreach.

Personalities

The philanthropic Tisch family has roots in Atlantic City. In 1946, brothers Larry and Bob purchased a 300-room hotel in Lakewood, New Jersey, and from there branched out to hotels in Atlantic City and the Catskills before acquiring Loews Corporation. Cousins James and Jonathan, who head the corporation and hotel chain today, were both born in Atlantic City. James is a past president of UJA-Federation of New York.

Atlantic City nurtured many musicians and showbiz stars. Harry Aaron Finkelman, a jazz trumpeter known by the stage name Ziggy Elman, played with Benny Goodman and also led his own band, Ziggy Elman and His Orchestra; his family settled in Atlantic City when he was 4 years old. Seth Justman, keyboardist for the J. Geils Band, grew up in Atlantic City.

Irving Berlin wrote some of his songs in Atlantic City; he composed "All Alone" at the Ritz after the deaths of his wife and mother. Actress-singer-comedienne Phyllis Newman was recruited from her parent's fortune-telling booth on the Steel Pier to perform in a kiddie revue in 1939. Her memoir, *Just in Time: Notes from My Life* (Limelight Editions), also deals with her battle against cancer.

One of The Three Stooges, Larry Fine (born Louis Fienberg), lived in the President Hotel and raised his daughter, Phyllis, there.

Films and Books

Boardwalk Empire, the HBO series based on the book by Nelson Johnson, has intensified interest in Atlantic City. Ironically, it is filmed in Brooklyn. Actor Michael Stuhlborg plays Jewish gangster Arnold Rothstein, who fixed the

(LEFT) COURTESY OF THE ATLANTIC CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU
(RIGHT) COURTESY OF THE SAM AZEEZ MUSEUM OF JEWISH HERITAGE

1919 World Series among other notorious claims to fame.

Louis Malle's *Atlantic City* joined the fates of a small-time criminal (Burt Lancaster) and an aspiring blackjack dealer (Susan Sarandon). In *Beaches*, child performer CC Bloom (Bette Midler) and wealthy Hillary Whitney (Barbara Hershey) meet in Atlantic City and begin a 30-year friendship. Other films partly set in Atlantic City include *Three Little Girls in Blue* (the theme song was "On the Boardwalk"); *The Burglar*; *The King of Marvin Gardens*; *Snake Eyes*; and *Ocean's Eleven*.

In *The Northside*, a sequel to the book *Boardwalk Empire* (both published by Plexus), Johnson traces the city's African-American heritage and includes a chapter on the Harlem Club, a venue for African-American entertainers like Sammy Davis Jr. and Aretha Franklin. The club was co-owned by "Pop" Williams and his Jewish partner Ben Altan.

Other books delineate the city's corrupt past and indulge in its nostalgia. A short selection includes *Steel Pier, Atlantic City: Showplace of the Nation (Down the Shore)* by Steve Liebowitz; *A Boardwalk Story* (Plexus), a novel by J. Louis Yampolsky; *Atlantic City Then and Now* (Thunder Bay Press) by Edward Arthur Mauger; and *Atlantic City (Postcard History: New Jersey)* by James D. Ristinc, published by Arcadia.

Recommendations

The Atlantic City Convention and Visitors Authority provides guidance and recommendations for hotel accommodations (1-888-acvisit; www.atlanticcitynj.com).

Sample falafel and other kosher delicacies at the dairy Shalom Pita (6514 Ventnor Avenue in Ventnor; 609-385-4785; www.shalomkosherac.com), which is open during the summer season; Jerusalem Glatt Kosher Middle Eastern Restaurant (6410 Ventnor Avenue in Ventnor City; 609-822-2266); and Shari's, a kosher steakhouse at the Clarion Hotel and Convention Center (6821 Black Horse Pike, Egg Harbor Township; www.clarionacwest.com).

The Downbeach Deli in Margate has kosher cold cuts though the restaurant itself is not kosher (8 South Essex Avenue; 609-823-7310; www.downbeachdeli.net). And the Pathmark in Ventnor City (609-823-1940) sells many kosher products.

James' and Fralinger's saltwater taffies are kosher; Chabad offers a Shabbat-in-a-box dinner (www.chabad.ac.org).

Whether it's the tang of ocean air, the pull of taffy, the whiff of nostalgia or the temptation of winning big that draws you in, try your luck in Atlantic City. **H**

Rahel Musleah's Web site is www.rahelsjewishindia.com.