Travel writer Robert Reid uses Monopoly to reinvent Atlantic City

Without its history, Atlantic City would be the frazzled Vegas-of-the-East that lost its gig hosting the Miss America pageant," jokes Robert Reid, U.S. travel editor for LonelyPlanet.com. "Most visitors stick with the casinos and Barry Manilow concerts. But there’s more to it than that."

Reid set out on a mission to charge up people to see the oceanfront gem. His starting point: the classic Parker Brothers board game Monopoly, on which players stake out every block of the city from Mediterranean Ave to the Boardwalk. The geography of the game board is real, and, Reid’s view, really worth seeing.

"All but one of its 22 color-coded properties are named after the city's streets," he says. Space by space, he sought out the patches of old Atlantic City that still exist, and he has posted a video tour on Lonely Planet's website so visitors can play along.

“Other than a plaque on a historic building, that era depicted in ‘Boardwalk Empire’ to search out survivors amid the scribbly street scenes of casinos and pawn shops, just use the board." - Amanda P. Sidman

Atlantic City's Top Six 'Properties'


1. ST. JAMES PLACE

Just off the Boardwalk, this one-time road is lined with a smattering of somewhat sad five-story rooming houses amid empty lots. But there is a reason to go. The Irish Pub (641 St. James Place, theirishpub.com) is a real deal bar with various nooks and a back patio, all filled with locals dining on $5 'Poor Richard' lunch specials or lounging Guinness pints. And it gets even better from there. Upstairs is one of the most atmospheric, time-warp hotels you'll find anywhere in the country. The Inn at the Irish Pub - originally Hotel Elwood (1904) - is like staying in a "Little Kascob" set. It's an absolute classic, if you don't mind a few quirks (no AC, no TVs in rooms, some noise when full, some peeling wallpaper). It has 60 rooms - all clean if a bit shabby - fitted with period fixtures found at local estate sales. Rooms with shared bath start at $29, with private bath from $45. Open seasonally only.

2. MARVEN GARDENS

Misspelled "Marvin" on the Monopoly board, Marven Gardens is named for its location near the Margate and Ventnor communities just south of Atlantic City.

It's a quaint, compact neighborhood from 1924, reminiscent of Seaside, Fla., the chic white-house setting for Jim Carrey's film "The Truman Show." It's fun for a quick look, and afterward you can visit "Lucy," (5200 Atlantic Ave, lucytheelephant.org), a 65-foot elephant built in 1881 that you are free to climb.

3. ATLANTIC AVE.

Atlantic City's main thoroughfare has a bit of everything - historic buildings, parks, pawn shops, new strip malls and historic restaurants.

The most Monopoly-esque stop and there are several to choose from - is Baltimore Grill (2800 Atlantic Ave), near the city jail. Originally located on Connecticut Ave, it moved here in 1906 - and hasn't changed a drop. Locals come for pizzas in the jukebox booths or $1.50 Coors on tap. By the way, don't ask about the grill - they haven't had one for years.
MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. AVE. (FORMERLY ILLINOIS AVE.)

Several midcentury buildings line the block off the Boardwalk — now an empty lot.

A site all locals know is the Carnegie Library Center (35 Martin Luther King Jr. Ave.), a grand three-story building with columns, marble and winding staircases that seems unchanged since its 1905 birthday.

It’s now part of the Richard Stockton College Center and hosts various classes and events.

VERMONT AVE.

At the corner of Vermont and Pacific Aves — in the mostly ignored east end of the city — an unlikely relic stands amid housing projects, fields and strip buildings. Left over from pre-1905 times, the Absecon Lighthouse (abseconlighthouse.org, built in 1857) is New Jersey’s tallest lighthouse — and it used to be much farther from the water. Turn down jetty and erosion have pushed back the shoreline.

“It was the area to live in,” says Atlantic City historian Eric Pergament, who grew up nearby and now lives in Margate.

“I remember playing stickball on Oriental Ave.,” a block from the lighthouse. From the observatory, you’ll find Atlantic City’s best views — and a good vantage point of most Monopoly properties.

BOARDFRILL

The Boardwalk is the last and most expensive property on the game board and the first place most visitors go to. A route to the doorways of a string of casinos, the walkway dates from 1880 and is lined with billboards designed like Monopoly property cards. The first saltwater taffy was made here in the 1860s (Barney Hagar’s Beach Bar came later). Fralinger’s and James’ still package their taffies in period-piece boxes.

You’ll catch a glimpse of all eras of Atlantic City here — well most of them. There’s a wonderful World War II memorial, glittering casinos, taffy and fudge shops and modern malls.

Not sure what to say about the pedi-taxis — guys in track suits pushing people by foot in fancy adult strollers. Maybe that’s the future.