

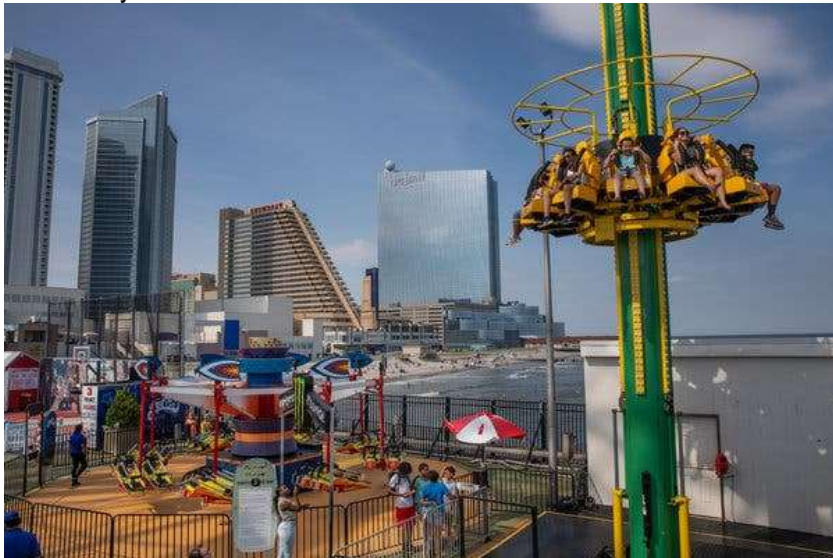
The New York Times

36 Hours in Atlantic City

Beyond the casinos: locally distilled spirits, an African-American museum with a local perspective, and, for the funnel-cake-averse, deep-fried cheesecake.

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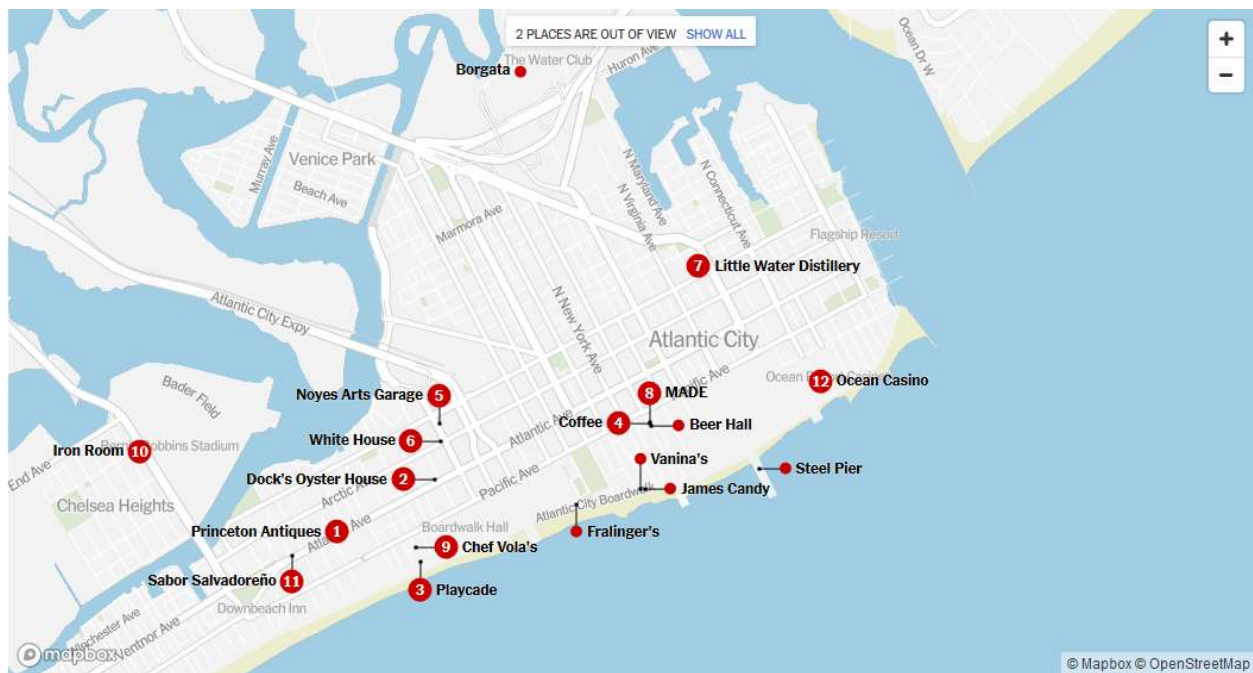
Credit Tony Cenicola/The New York Times



By Nell McShane Wulfhart

July 18, 2019

Atlantic City's boom-and-bust cycle has been in motion for decades now, with new casinos and restaurants sowing high hopes for revitalization, followed by mass closings, and then the whole thing happening on repeat. The key to enjoying this seaside New Jersey city, where the beach is often a secondary consideration, is to revisit old favorites interspersed with whichever new places have opened their doors, whether that's the newly legal sports books in the casinos or hip beer gardens. The longtime pleasures of Atlantic City — the gambling, the funnel cake and the amusements — never change and should be enjoyed to the fullest. And, if you can squeeze in a whiskey from an innovative local distillery, an oyster happy hour and a stimulating museum on African-American history at the same time, consider it a bonus.



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Friday

1) 3 p.m. Ancient history

Start off your visit with a little background. Strolling the aisles of [Princeton Antiques & Book Service](#) means turning up unusual volumes and dusty copies of childhood favorites, but the real treasure is the shelves of binders at the front. The owner, Robert Ruffolo, was the chairman of the Atlantic County Historical Museum for 20 years and his collection of local photographs, preserved in these binders, is an illuminating and hugely entertaining way to learn about the city's history. From bathing beauties to old family group shots and much more, the photos are remarkable and evocative. The store itself has been operating for half-a-century and is itself a piece of local history, occupying a site on Atlantic Avenue, the city's main thoroughfare, among the pawn shops, hair salons and outlet stores.

2) 4 p.m. Oysters and cocktails

Arrive a few minutes before the opening hour of 4 p.m. so you can snag a seat at the long, elegant bar at [Dock's Oyster House](#), one of the surprisingly few seafood-focused restaurants in town. The popular happy hour (4 to 6 p.m. daily) means discounts on appetizers like calamari and crab dip as well as oysters, from Chesapeake Bay to Cape May Salts to Blue Points, which the aproned shuckers open right in front of you. The stools lining the wooden bar fill up fast with well-heeled guests ordering up martinis, Pimm's Cup and Aperol spritz cocktails, but there's a small bar upstairs that's worth a try if the downstairs bar is full. Happy hour drinks and snacks for two, around \$60.

3) 6 p.m. Boardwalk Empire

Strolling the boardwalk as the sun sets is one of Atlantic City's great pleasures. While the casinos dominate the skyline, the salt water taffy shops, food stands and the whirling riot of neon that is Steel Pier are more accessible and family-friendly. Start at the west end at Playcade: an old school, tickets-for-prizes arcade and a good place to cool off with a bucket of quarters for the claw machine and a game of Skee-Ball. Heading east, stop in for the city's best funnel cake, made to order at Vanina's, where the strong of stomach can also sample deep-fried cheesecake and cookie dough. Then go comparison shopping at the trio of salt water taffy strongholds, [James'](#), [Fralinger's](#) (which has the same owner as James') and [Shriver's](#). Ride that sugar buzz to century-old [Steel Pier](#), which was once home to Atlantic City's famous diving horses (with a rider on their backs, they leapt off a platform around 40 feet high into a tank of water). After dark it's a riot of families and groups of friends riding the Ferris wheel and the bumper cars and generally making the most of summer.

Located on the boardwalk, James' is one of Atlantic City's salt water taffy strongholds.
Credit Tony Cenicola/The New York Times



Saturday

4) 9 a.m. Coffee and a stroll

Grab a quick coffee and pastry at the coffee shop of a gambling resort like [Harrah's](#), [Caesars](#) or [Ocean Casino](#), then stroll down the block to the boardwalk, which is almost deserted in the mornings, before families start setting up on the beach and the hard-partying groups of 20-somethings have rolled out of bed. Enjoy the water views, the sea gulls and the quiet before a day of exploring the city.

5) 11 a.m. Art and History

The [Noyes Arts Garage](#) (free admission), part of Stockton University's Atlantic City campus, houses a collection of shops and studios selling everything from prints to jewelry to sculptures to sneakers. The highlight, though, is the African-American [Heritage Museum of Southern New Jersey](#), nearly overflowing with paintings, maps and advertisements documenting the fascinating history of African-Americans in the area, including the prosperous black neighborhood that used to occupy a large part of that city. You can also find newspaper articles about "Nucky" Johnson, the notorious Atlantic City crime boss made famous in HBO's "Boardwalk Empire." If you're lucky, the museum's founder, Ralph E. Hunter Sr., will be on hand to tell you fascinating stories about the collection he has amassed over three decades.



Strolling the boardwalk is one of Atlantic City's great pleasures.

Credit Tony Cenicola/The New York Times



There's always a crowd at White House Subs, a sandwich shop that has been open since 1946.
Credit Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

6) 1 p.m. Hoagies vs. subs

Just down the street from Noyes is [White House Subs](#), a sandwich shop of almost ludicrous reputation. White House has been open since 1946, and is probably as old as the debate over whether the sandwich is called a hoagie or a sub. Takeout lines are often longer than those for a table, so either arrive early if you're taking your sandwich to the boardwalk or beach, or settle in and order up an Italian (\$15; half \$7.50): an impeccably fresh roll stuffed with provolone, ham, Genoa salami and capicola topped with hot pepper relish. There's [another location](#) in the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino which is convenient if you're spending the day on the beach.

7) 2 p.m. Prohibition payback

Little Water Distillery, a relatively new kid in town, opened for production in December 2016 in a former Prohibition-era warehouse (some of the bottles they dug up when digging the foundations are displayed in the bathroom). The names of the spirits, like "48 Blocks Vodka," pay tribute to the city and the airy, garage-like space, where the owners distill their silver and aged rum, whiskey and gin, is the first legal distillery to open in Atlantic City. A tour and sampling is \$8 (including a \$3 credit toward any purchase), and there's a bar at the back where ambitious cocktails incorporating homemade ginger beer and garden herbs are on offer; take yours outside to the cigar garden where there are chairs and lawn games.

8) 3:30 p.m. Tennessee trends

Just a block from the boardwalk, Tennessee Avenue is spawning a number of new small businesses that are adding extra flair to the city. Get your chocolate fix at [MADE Atlantic City](#), a combination chocolate lab and bar, where the bean-to-bar chocolate is part of every cocktail and dessert on offer (the staff will even set you up with a chocolate and wine pairing if you want). Farther down the street is the all-day [Tennessee Avenue Beer Hall](#), where the patio's AstroTurf and picnic tables make a relaxing spot for sunny afternoon pints of sour ales, bacon-brewed stouts and the dozens of other craft beers on tap.



The Ferris wheel, bumper cars and specialty shops at Steel Pier help visitors make the most of summer.
Credit Tony Cenicola/The New York Times



Dock's Oyster House, with its long, elegant bar, is one of the surprisingly few seafood-focused restaurants in town.
Credit Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

9) 6 p.m. Book in advance

Chef Vola's is an Atlantic City landmark: a cash-only, reservations-only B.Y.O.B. with the kind of enormous portions and retro Italian dishes that conjure up ghosts of the Rat Pack. There's no website (call well in advance for a reservation), tables are crowded next to each other, and the dining room is essentially a basement, but it's not uncommon to see a limo roll up to drop off loyal clientele (it's particularly popular with the professional poker crowd). As everyone does, disregard the menu and instead order some of the specials from the long spiel the servers deliver: Try linguine with clams; thin, pounded veal layered with eggplant, mozzarella, prosciutto and marinara; garlic-laden broccoli rabe; and an unforgettable banana cream pie for dessert. Dinner for two (with abundant leftovers), around \$150.

10) 9 p.m. After-dinner drinks

Recover from dinner with a stroll over to the [Iron Room](#), a cocktail bar and restaurant tucked away in an unfashionable neighborhood. (A new location at 131 South Tennessee Avenue, is now in preview mode with breakfast offerings; a formal full-scale debut is scheduled for September). The front bar of this small spot has the best selection in town, with hundreds of whiskies, an excellent wine list, plenty of craft beers, and ambitious cocktails (often made with local spirits from Little Water or Bluecoat Gin from Philadelphia) that change often but are consistently delicious — try the "Buzz Word," a blend of gin, chartreuse, lemon juice and honey syrup, if it's on offer. Drinks for two, around \$40.

Thanks in part to the prevalence of casinos, the beach isn't as crowded as in towns farther south.
Credit Tony Cenicola/The New York Times





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Sunday

11) 10 a.m. Desayuno Salvadoreño

Join the families and couples who fill the tables at the unpretentious [Sabor Salvadoreño](#) for a late breakfast or early lunch. The outstanding pupusas — hefty corn tortillas stuffed with pork, beans, cheese, among several options — are a house specialty but there are also pancakes, savory soups and tamales, as well as a bakery case full of icing-heavy cakes in primary colors. The Salvadoran breakfast plates of eggs, beans, rice, fresh tortillas and salty cheese, washed down with a horchata, will keep you full for hours and are great value. Breakfast for two, around \$25.

12) 11:30 a.m. Break the bank

Sports betting became legal in the United States in 2018 and Atlantic City casinos were quick to take advantage of it. A handful of the city's casinos, including the Borgata and Harrah's, now offer sports betting, but the William Hill Sportsbook at the [Ocean Resort](#) (which opened in June 2018 in what was the Revel Casino) sets the standard with the biggest screens in town and the best odds board, plus a comfortable and spacious seating area where you could easily while away the day. If you're not into sports, the [Borgata](#) has an 85-table poker room and all the casinos have plentiful slots.

13) Noon. Hit the beach

Take your mind off your money and step across the boardwalk to the sandy beach for an afternoon of sunbathing. Thanks to the prevalence of casinos, the beach isn't as crowded as in towns farther south, like Ocean City and Wildwood, and tags aren't required, so you can lounge for free. If you're planning to spend more than a couple of hours on the beach, though, it's often worth heading a few miles south to Margate where you'll need to buy beach tags but the beach is wider and a bit cleaner.

Lodging

If you're looking to stay off the boardwalk, the [Chelsea Pub & Inn](#) is central, and just a couple of blocks from the beach. The individually decorated rooms are clean and comfortable. Rooms start at around \$170 in the summer, including breakfast and parking. Information: chelseapubandinn.net.

If gambling is more important than beach access, the [Water Club](#), part of the [Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa](#), is one of the poshest spots in town and home to [Izakaya](#), a top-notch Japanese restaurant from Michael Schulson. Rooms start at \$109 in the off season but go up in the summer to around \$159. Information: theborgata.com/hotel/the-water-club.

Rental houses or rooms in casino hotels seem to be most visitors' preferences, although there are Airbnb listings available. Book as far in advance as possible for the best deals. Expect to pay at least \$120 a night in high season for an apartment near the boardwalk (proximity to the beach also means quick access to restaurants and casinos), and much more on weekends.