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Revel Resort playing for keeps

Atlantic City's newest resort is betting on attracting leisure-seeking vacationers rather than gamblers on an overnight jaunt

By Stephanie Citron, Special to The Baltimore Sun



Do you ever find yourself wishing for a stylish and luxurious beach resort within a reasonable drive from home?

Meet the new Revel Resort in Atlantic City, N.J.

Atlantic City? Seriously.

Ditch the image of a traditional casino packed with cigar-puffing high-rollers and day-trippers wielding free buffet coupons. Atlantic City's 12th casino opened its oceanfront doors to the public April 2, pioneering an innovative concept: a health-minded resort that also happens to have a glamorous casino targeted to the "beautiful crowd."

What's different about this place? Rather than a ceremonial grand opening with ribbon-cutting and

champagne, guests were served blueberry smoothies, oceanfront, at sunrise. Front and center is a sizzling beach scene, enchanting rooftop gardens with fresh and saltwater pools and theme bars, a chic New Age spa and edgy, lavish nightclubs. There are no smorgasbords; instead, there are swanky eateries operated by celebrity chefs. Buses delivering day-trippers aren't even permitted.

And the whole place is nonsmoking.

Perched at the extreme north end of the boardwalk, Revel aims to change the neighborhood. Gone are the vagrants, dirty beaches and vacant buildings. Now stands a gleaming, 47-story, blue-tinged tower, soaring above an eccentric curvy base that syncs with the curls of the ocean. Guests arrive seaside, accentuating that this is a beach resort. A bellman promptly takes their luggage while directing them into a waiting elevator. The sun-streaked lobby, 11 floors up, is surrounded by an indoor-outdoor Sky Garden — nearly 2 acres of New Jersey greenery, pools, fire pits and lounging areas. Self-parkers enter via a garage-breezeway linked to the lobby. There, vacationers can avoid check-in lines by using automated kiosks that dispense room key cards.

To reach the rooms, key card-carriers pass through a private lobby encompassing a living room and library to guest-only elevators. Upstairs, the wow factor begins before opening the door of the room. Guest rooms have doorbells that change colors, informing housekeeping staff to make up the room (green), or do not disturb (red). Upon inserting the key card, the bellman is "pinged", alerting him to deliver the luggage.

Inside, it's simply stunning; every room has unobstructed floor-to-ceiling ocean views. Beds are dressed in crisp linens and down comforters. A remote control adjusts the window blinds, overhead lighting and room temperature. Spacious marble bathrooms contain two-person walk-in showers and a separate space for the commode. What's more, room service trays contain microchips, notifying housekeeping to remove a tray outside the door.

Slip into a spa robe and head downstairs. No worries: These elevators are routed so overnight guests can avoid the lobby in their robes and workout attire.

Bask Spa (developed by operator Exhale) is a 32,000-square-foot sanctuary featuring a magnificent coed bathhouse with a heated mineral water hammam (or Turkish bath) and a Himalayan salt grotto. Its Bathhouse Bar serves healthful snacks and organic cocktails. Single-sex locker rooms contain steam rooms and hot tubs. Among the items on the "Treatments" menu, try the Vichy Shower Renewal. It involves detoxifying body scrubs, full body and scalp massages, and hydrating skin masks, before a guest is sprayed down under pulsating Vichy jets.

Gym (its official name) is outfitted with high-tech fitness equipment, including a surf-style cardio and resistance trainer. It also offers outdoor therapy programs: beach boot camp, yoga for foodies and a bar for barre classes, to promote rejuvenation through social encounters. There are 10 swimming pools, including an 85-degree, year-round, indoor-outdoor roofdeck pool.

In essence, Revel is Atlantic City's first year-round vacation resort that also happens to offer gambling. In contrast to AC's casino-resorts, which depend upon gambling revenue to finance operations, Revel expects its casino to account for just 40 percent of its revenue (already proving to be a shrewd strategy, since March gambling figures reported a continued decline — down 5 percent at \$266.3 million, compared to last year's \$280.5 million).

Still, Revel's gambling area is spectacular. Large windows deliver natural daylight and ocean views — a

no-no in conventional casino design. Other casinos rely on the reverberations of the slots and gambling tables to generate a thrill factor; Revel provides a sensory experience among a series of vibrant "neighborhoods" around the casino, intended to fuse digital gambling with social interaction. As a rule, dealers are good-humored and friendly. Entertainment is strategically positioned throughout, including theme bars and "The Social," an intimate open-air nightclub featuring live indie rock bands and Vegas-style performers, including burlesque dancers from Ivan Kane's Royal Jelly Burlesque Club.

Casual — and surprisingly affordable — eateries border the casino. Lugo Cafe, a New York City Italian bistro, specializes in fresh-pulled mozzarella, brick-oven pizzas and handmade pasta. Robert Wiedmaier's Mussel Bar (of D.C.-area fame) hosts live bands while serving up inventive mussel dishes, Parmesan frites and a Belgian-inspired beer menu featuring 150 brews. There's Mexican fare at Jose Garces' Distrito Cantino, next to his Guapos Taco Truck (a stationary food truck with picnic tables). Fine dining is available at Garces' tonier Amada, an oceanfront tapas restaurant with a flamenco stage. Two of Revel's other signature restaurants are the traditional steakhouse American Cut (chef Marc Forgione) and the Mediterranean-inspired Azure (New York's Alain Allegretti).

Arguably one of Revel's biggest attractions will be its nightlife. The 5,500-seat Ovation Hall has already booked such headliners as Beyonce, who is performing four shows over Memorial Day weekend.

HQ is an ultra-hip four-story nightclub opening this summer. Each level offers a different clubbing experience. In the morning, the party continues at the HQ Dayclub, a European-inspired private beach club, promising a hedonistic vibe of oceanfront pool parties and clubby beach amenities. Revel also provides its own beachfront accommodations. Sun-seekers preferring to avoid the sand and crowds can rent furnished rooftop cabanas with entertainment centers, private pools and cocktail service.

About half of Revel's venues, including a retail quarter, are launching with a grand opening on Memorial Day.

If you go

Revel is at 500 Boardwalk, Atlantic City, N.J., 154 miles from Baltimore. Take Interstate 95 North to exit 3 on the New Jersey Turnpike. Follow Route 168 South until it becomes the Black Horse Pike. That merges with Route 42 to the Atlantic City Expressway into town. Turn left on Atlantic Avenue to New Jersey Avenue. Make a right and follow signs to Revel.

Lodging: Rates begin at \$329 per night with a two-night minimum.

Dining: Restaurants are plentiful around the resort, but summer promises to be a busy time. Reservations are highly recommended to avoid long waits. revelresorts.com/dining/

Information: Call 855-348-0500 or go to revelresorts.com

—*Stephanie Citron*

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