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Atlantic City

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Atlantic City is taking a breather. After a spate of high-profile projects in the latter half of the 1990s--notably, a new convention center and adjacent headquarters hotel, several casino hotel expansions, a minor league baseball stadium, a visitors center, and expansion of the terminal at Atlantic City International Airport--the belle of the New Jersey shore is looking ahead to 2002. Two new casino hotels are scheduled to open that year, increasing the number of casino properties to 14 and adding at least 2,000 guest rooms to the local inventory.

Meanwhile, corporate executives will find a host of recently opened venues and amenities, from an aquarium at the city's Gardner's Basin to a Planet Hollywood restaurant, from an ice rink to a golf institute at a nearby resort.

hotel news * Resorts Casino Hotel's \$50 million renovation, completed in 1999, included newly designed guest rooms and corridors, new entrances and lobby, new restaurants (for a total of nine), and expanded gaming areas. Atlantic City's first casino hotel, Resorts has 644 guest rooms and 40,900 square feet of meeting and function space, including a 12,028-square-foot ballroom.

* The Trump World's Fair permanently closed in October 1999, and the nearby Trump Plaza, with 904 guest rooms and 20,000 square feet of meeting space, added a restaurant, the Atrium Cafe. Meanwhile, the Trump Taj Mahal unveiled several new retail shops, including Atlantic City's first Harley-Davidson store. The Taj Mahal has 1,250 guest rooms, and its meeting and function space totals 150,000 square feet, including 27 meeting rooms and three ballrooms, the largest of which is 30,000 square feet.

* Boyd Gaming Corp., in a joint venture with Mirage Resorts, is building The Borgata, a 1,200-room casino resort, in the Marina District. The Borgata will have eight restaurants, retail outlets, a health spa, a performing arts theater, a nightclub, parking for 4,100 vehicles, and a yet-to-be-determined amount of meeting and function space. It is slated for a mid-2002 opening.

* Mirage Resorts is planning a \$750 million casino hotel in the Marina District. Details have yet to be finalized, but the hotel will have significant meeting space. Groundbreaking is scheduled for early this year, with opening in 2002.

* Tropicana Casino and Resort, touted as the city's largest hotel, has 1,624 rooms; more than 47,000 square feet of banquet, meeting, and exhibit space, including a ballroom that can accommodate 1,450 people banquet-style; and more than two dozen meeting rooms. The Tropicana Showroom headlines top entertainers and live boxing matches.

* Caesars Atlantic City Hotel Casino had a new owner as of December. Park Place Entertainment Corp. purchased Caesars resorts in Atlantic City, Las Vegas, and Lake Tahoe from Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide for a reported \$3 billion. Caesars will join the two Atlantic City hotel casinos that

Park Place owns. Its New Jersey flagship is the 1,263-room Bally's Park Place Casino Hotel at the famous intersection of Boardwalk and Park Place. Its other property is the 804-room Atlantic City. Caesars Atlantic City Hotel Casino, which added a 620-room hotel tower in 1998, has 1,114 rooms. Caesars' \$280 million expansion also added four meeting rooms that can accommodate up to 75 each, bringing its total meeting space to 33,730 square feet.

* The Seaview Marriott in Absecon, 10 miles west of Atlantic City, completed a \$6 million renovation of its 297 guest rooms and suites last year. This spring, the resort, which has two championship golf courses, introduces the Nick Faldo Golf Institute, an instructional facility; in the summer, the 16,000-square-foot Elizabeth Arden Red Door Spa will open. The Seaview Marriott has 16,000 square feet of meeting and function space, including a 6,600-square-foot ballroom and a 6,600-square-foot all-weather pavilion.

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* 500,000 square feet of contiguous exhibit space and 45 meeting rooms, totaling 109,000 square feet.

Total Hotel Tax: 12 percent, plus a \$2 charge per night in a casino hotel, and \$1 per night in a non-casino hotel.

Venue Menu * A \$72 million renovation is transforming Boardwalk Hall, the city's former convention center and site of the annual Miss America Pageant, into a special events venue that will host professional ice hockey, concerts, and family entertainment. New seating will accommodate up to 12,000 people in "flexible bowl" seating, meaning the seats are removable and can be set in different configurations.

* The \$14.5 million Sandcastle, a minor league baseball stadium on a 25-acre site at Bader Field, is home to the Atlantic City Surf, a member of the Atlantic League. The 5,900-seat stadium offers grandstand and premium deck seating and 20 luxury sky boxes. A variety of suites accommodates small meetings; a 13,000-square-foot picnic area is available to groups before games. The Surf's season runs May through September. (609) 344-SURF.

* The Skate Zone, developed by Comcast-Spectacor of Philadelphia (owner of the Philadelphia Flyers hockey team, among other properties) opened in November 1999 next to the Sandcastle. Open year-round, the ice-skating rink hosts corporate parties. The facility's total capacity is 1,000 for a reception or party; the ice itself holds up to 400 skaters. In-house catering is available. (877) 23 SKATE.

* Opened in May 1999, the \$4.5 million Ocean Life Center is a marine education facility and aquarium at Gardner's Basin, near the Absecon Inlet at the north end of Atlantic City. The three-level center's 25,000-gallon aquarium contains fish indigenous to the New Jersey coast. The second-floor Harborview Room, with water views on three sides, accommodates up to 75 for a meeting. Groups of up to 300 can use the Ocean Life Center for after-hours receptions or buffet dinners; up to 1,500 are accommodated when the park-like grounds are included. (609) 348-2880.

* For a taste of what Atlantic City was like before casino gambling arrived in 1978, the Knife and Fork Inn, at Albany and Pacific Avenues, fits the bill. The restaurant occupies a Flemish-style, circa-1912 building that was originally a private men's club. Declining membership because of Prohibition led to the sale of the building to the Latz family, which operated the inn from 1927 until its close in 1996. Andrew Latz, grandson of the original proprietor, reopened the Knife and Fork in May 1999, banishing from the menu any item that appeared after 1964, when Atlantic City hosted the Democratic National Convention. Among the classics on the menu are seafood bouillabaisse, crabmeat Newburg, lobster thermidor, and filet mignon. The multilevel restaurant accommodates private parties of up to 75. (609) 344-1133.

Here She Comes ... Dorothea Heck, director of meetings for Destination AC!, an Atlantic City destination- management company, is often asked to pull off a Boardwalk theme in a hotel ballroom. Why not just hold the event on the Boardwalk itself? "First, you're dependent on the weather," Heck says, "and second, you have to go through a pretty stringent permit process to use the Boardwalk."

A Boardwalk theme can include games of chance, elements of the Miss America contest, and fare such as hot dogs, funnel cakes, and frozen custards. For a taste of the real Atlantic City, Heck also likes to include sandwiches from White House Sub Shop, a venerable hole-in-the-wall on Arctic Avenue. White House specializes in cheese steaks and Italian hoagies, and what sets them apart from their Philadelphia brethren is the bread. "Atlantic City bread is slightly more sourdough and not as crusty as Philadelphia bread," Heck says. Her suggestion: Serve White House Subs cut into finger-food portions.

Other Big Options Those showrooms in the big casino hotels in Atlantic City aren't just for headliner shows: They can also be used by meeting groups looking for a glitzy general session venue; the showrooms, after all, have theatrical lighting, proscenium stages, and tiered seating. Most showrooms seat between 400 and 800. Because the headliner shows are at night, the showrooms may be available during the day.

Corporate Meeting Executives Say: Why Atlantic City for a corporate meeting? Especially for corporations that draw their attendees from the Northeast, location is an important factor. Atlantic City is quickly reached by car from the New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore metropolitan areas.

International Trucks Transportation Corp. of Mount Laurel, N.J., which holds its three-day Northeast region parts and service trade fair every September at the Trump Marina, finds Atlantic City to be a central location. The company draws customers, dealers, and vendors from Maine to Washington, D.C., and between the easy highway access (Atlantic City is just off New Jersey's Garden State Parkway) and air service into Philadelphia International Airport and, to a more limited degree, Atlantic City International Airport, the city is easy to go get to, says Corey Thomas, administrative assistant for the Northeast region.

More important, many customers want to come to Atlantic City because of the built-in entertainment and gaming in the hotels. "The city is very energetic, but still very corporate in flavor," Thomas says, noting the professionalism of the hotel community.

And Atlantic City makes it easy for the planner in one way, she says: There's no need to go to great lengths to entertain attendees, because the entertainment--gambling, stage shows, fine dining--are part of the hotel package.

Thomas does not believe the 24-hour casino action is a distraction, but for companies that feel otherwise, there is an alternative: The Seaview Marriott Resort in Absecon. The property, which has

two championship golf courses, is 10 miles from Atlantic City--far enough to eliminate any concern that the casinos might siphon attendance from sessions or trade shows, but close enough to offer attendees a viable after-hours option.

Rebecca Donahue, a VTS Travel Direct meeting planner who is based at the Woodcliff Lake, N.J., offices of BMW of North America Inc., organized a two-night Eastern regional sales meeting at the Seaview last summer. The BMW employees and dealers, she says, "like the fact that they are not using an Atlantic City address, but when the meetings and dinners are over, if anyone wishes to make a donation (patronize the casinos), it's right there."

Donahue says BMW, which has many avid golfers within its ranks, likes the "country club" ambiance of the Seaview, which is getting ready to open a golf instructional facility.

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