



## **CRUISING THE LOCAL INDIAN CASINO**

These are desperate times, what with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, banks and car companies failing, lost tourism, homes in foreclosure, and employee retirement plans tanking. So I did what every self-respecting American should do in times of economic trouble, I paid a visit to our local Indian casino.

Ever since the River Rock Casino was hastily constructed on a slippery hillside above the Alexander Valley, it has been a bone of contention with many of the locals. River Rock is located on an Indian Reservation, so the casino owners have pretty much been able to do whatever pleases them, mostly out of reach of State and County officials, and generally indifferent to local environmental and safety concerns.

Because the casino generates huge amounts of cash, the ubiquitous gambling center has spread its hasty wealth to the local schools, fire departments and media, and is now firmly entrenched as a bonafide Sonoma County institution. It is not going away anytime soon and it's safe to say that the River Rock Casino is, when the economy recovers, going to move forward with its plans to expand its operations with a hotel and God knows what else.

Located at the end of a dangerously narrow, winding two-lane access road, the casino is perched high above the bucolic valley and sports a motif that is at odds with its surroundings. With a six-story "Tower of Babel" parking structure, complete with creeping-ivy, dwarfing a temporary big-top tent in which the casino is located, the property exudes a soothing "trailer-trash-gone-wild" style of architecture. Though they manage to incorporate actual river rock into the building's facade, it is safe to assume that this project never would have made it to the planning stages if a winery had been considered for the location.

A four-color brochure had been mailed to me and so I was interested to take in the million dollar view from the deck of the restaurant. As a fan of kitsch and someone who enjoys the absurd, fatalistic high energy of Las Vegas, I wanted to check out the process with which these slick gambling operators were using to separate customers from their hard-earned money. Needless to say, I stayed for the buffet and managed to lose 100 bucks.



I use the word “customers” loosely because many of these people looked like they had just been bused in from inner city retirement homes. As it turns out, they had. Buses from all over Northern California and the Bay Area arrive in a steady stream, dropping optimistic pigeons at the front door. As I watched them unload, it was clear from their appearance that many of these folks should not be frittering their money away in such a mindless, albeit entertaining fashion.

Once inside the casino, I could not find Ashton Kutcher, Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan, or anyone pretending to be. In other words, there was no one under the age of 40, or of celebrity stature. What I saw instead were hundreds of seemingly anesthetized folks of all ethnic backgrounds as well as a couple of meth-freaks who clearly looked like they were at the end of a serious gambling jag.

As I worked my way around the wheelchairs and oxygen-laden walkers, I was struck by the fact that most of these folks were not only here to gamble, but to chain-smoke cigarettes. Smoking is legal in all California Indian casinos. These gamblers were sucking down cigarettes at such an alarming rate that the casino’s ventilation system was unable to keep up.

There is nothing more surreal and discouraging then seeing row after row of individuals, who most assuredly have more important things to buy with their limited resources and more constructive things to do in their twilight years. Being glued to brightly colored, humming and buzzing slot machines, ceaselessly banging on the maximum bet button seems like such a waste of human spirit.

Whether playing “Wine Country Lucky 777s” or “Double Diamond,” these slot machines have been coldly and calculatingly set with the same odds of winning—slim and none. Once your brain has become hooked on the sites and sounds, no amount of caution or warning is going to dissuade one from believing they are one spin from winning that elusive jackpot.

As I continued to take in the sights and sounds, two things came to mind. The first is: How did these operators ever get a liquor license? The second is, thank goodness they have a liquor license. I believe I need a drink.

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