

Upping the Ante in Atlantic City

BY Eileen Moon

MY NAME IS Bond.
James Bond.

Ok, that's a lie.

But for the moment, let's pretend that Bond is just stepping out onto the helipad at Trump Taj Mahal in Atlantic City, anticipating a night of Baccarat and espionage under the dazzling chandeliers of The Donald's most lavish casino.

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A SHORT LIST OF UPCOMING ATLANTIC CITY EVENTS:

June 16-17

The Atlantic City Seafood Festival steams up at Bernie Robbins Stadium, Atlantic City

June 20,21

Cirque Dreams Illumination lights up the Trump Plaza Casino. Running through the summer.

June 30

Reba McEntire will be stealing the show at Caesar's Casino

June 30

The Showboat presents *Tony and Tina's Wedding* (ongoing). Enjoy someone else's dysfunctional family wedding (complete with pasta) – and you don't have to bring a gift.

July 3

Foghat gets funky at the House of Blues.

July 15

Harrah's features the stage show, "Movin' Out" – the music of Billy Joel (ongoing).

July 21

Josh Groban is the star attraction at Boardwalk Hall.

July 27

Donna Summer heats up the crowd at Caesar's.

August 4

B.B. King and Etta James, together at the Taj Mahal

August 17

Pat Benatar's at the House of Blues

August 15

Thunder Over The Boardwalk, an annual air show featuring the U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds and the U.S. Army Golden Nights. Free!

September

Atlantic City In-Water Power Boat Show makes waves at the Farley Marina (adjacent to the Trump Marina Casino)

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But first, he'll don his white dinner jacket in the privacy of his Penthouse suite overlooking the blue Atlantic, and enjoy a Martini (shaken of course; not stirred) as he contemplates the indigo of evening from his vantage point at the top of the Taj.

While Mr. Bond is so engaged (or at least, as we imagine him to be), the rest of us will descend to ground level and begin our sampling of the myriad amusements of this city by the sea and the pleasure palaces that draw some 35 million visitors each year.

Good Times, Bad Times

Atlantic City had been a leisure destination for more than a hundred years by the time casino gambling arrived in 1977. The advent of Vegas-style gambling palaces injected fresh excitement in a city that, like other beachside communities in New Jersey, had lost its luster.

In the latter half of the 20th century, the increasing ease of travel sent vacationers farther from home. Events that in earlier decades had drawn crowds to the boardwalk here – the famous Diving Horse, the marathon dance contests, the carnival attractions, faded into the quaint and curious past, overtaken by the jangle of slot machines, the clatter of gambling chips, and the lure of a life-changing win.

While Atlantic City was never only about gambling, in recent years, the city has engaged in an all-out effort to reinvent itself as a premiere entertainment destination designed to offer something for virtually everyone.

While there's no way to list every possible attraction, the following will give you a sampling of what awaits you less than 100 miles down the parkway.

Upping the Ante:

The city's 11 casinos are leading the way into the 21st century with dramatic enhancements that include luxury spas, box-office busting entertainers, high-end shopping and

restaurants reigned over by celebrity chefs. While Atlantic City glitters 365 days a year, it's in summer that the city really shines: After all, it has something that Las Vegas can only dream about: a front-row seat on the Atlantic Ocean, four miles of boardwalk and beaches that are absolutely free.

After a cooling swim on a summer afternoon, you can sip a Pina Colada in your beach togs, listen to a live band and survey the utter beauty of the Jersey Shore from a seat at one of the casino beach bars.

Even when the winter moves in, however, visitors will be able to enjoy a taste of the tropics at **Harrah's Casino's** glass-domed water park, **The Pool**, whose centerpiece will be a 23,000 square foot pool in a faux tropical setting that covers more than four acres.

Family Friendly

While AC can be the quintessential Grown-up Getaway, it has become increasingly family-friendly, too.

Out on the world-famous **Steel Pier**, you can use the kids as an excuse to take a ride on the Crazy Mouse, or enjoy the view from the top of the Ferris wheel with a friend who's not afraid of heights.

The **Atlantic City Aquarium** is also a fun stop for small fry, who can make the acquaintance of Groman The Loggerhead Sea Turtle, learn about fish of the Amazon River and laugh at the clownfish who look as if they might be related to Ronald McDonald. For a larger than life day at the movies, take the kids to the **IMAX theater at the Tropicana**. Check for upcoming films at imax-theaterattropicana.com.

Retail Therapy

Shoppers interested in a little Retail Therapy can head to **The Walk**, located along Michigan Avenue between the boardwalk and the Atlantic City Convention Center. The Walk includes more than 100 outlet stores including **Kenneth Cole**, **Nautica**, **Coach** and **Harley Davidson**.

Casinos are also getting into the act. At **Caesar's Pier Shops**, well-heeled visitors may take their pick of more than 90 retailers including **Gucci**, **Salvatore Ferragamo**, **Hugo Boss**, **Brooks Brothers** and **Betsey Johnson**.

Harrah's Casino has gotten into the game recently with their **Waterfront Shops** featuring everything from sunglasses, handbags and jewelry to high tech electronics sure to bring out your inner geek.



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The Taj Mahal

The turreted **Taj Mahal** is building a new tower to house more luxury hotel rooms, and has recently opened **Spice Road**, a second floor promenade featuring luxury shopping emporiums and a first class spin on casual dining. Spice Road includes a 24-hour café known as **Plate**, a burger bar whose menu offerings include Kobe beef and Philadelphia sliders, and a soda-fountain style frozen drink bar called **Freeze**.

The Taj is also home to the **Hard Rock Café**, where you can enjoy a great burger while admiring artifacts from the rock-and-roll icons of the past half-century.

Nightlife at the Taj gets underway with a Happy Hour at **Ego Lounge** from 5 to 7 p.m. Ego Lounge features a few lavishly curtained tables and a live rock band. While you can dance at Ego, serious party-ers will want to save some energy for the Casbah Nightclub, which is open Fridays and Saturdays from 10:30 p.m. to 6 a.m. Well-past midnight on a recent Saturday, there was a line waiting to get in and dance the rest of the night away.

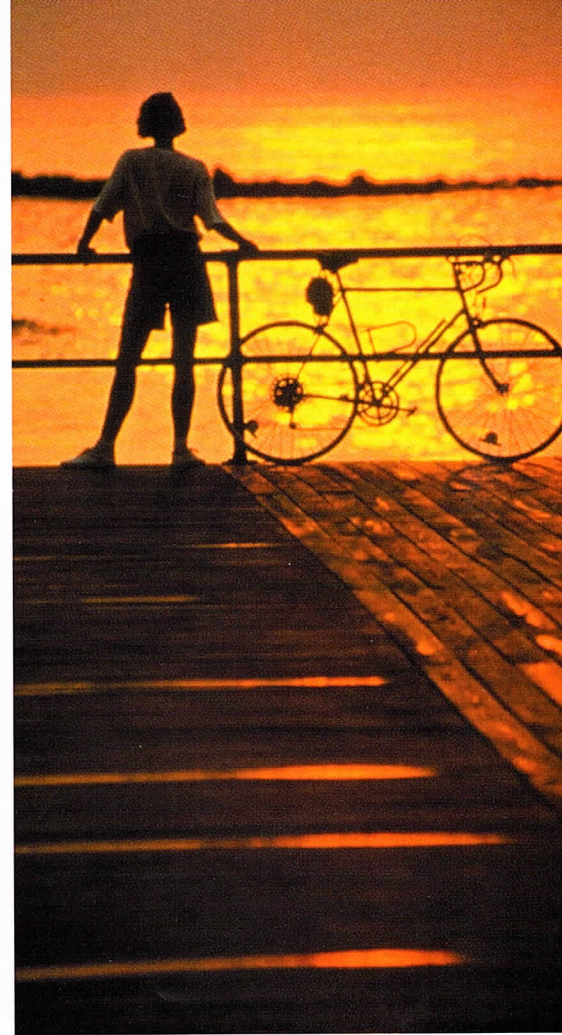
Resorts

Resorts is home to an outpost of **Gallagher's**, the famous upscale New York Steakhouse. If you are serious about steak, this is the place to go. Gallagher's recently added a more casual burger bar as well.

For a fun breakfast, with or without the kids, head to **Johnny Rockets**, which is at Resorts on the boardwalk. This 21st century take on a 1950s malt shop features singing and dancing waiters and a nickel-a-song jukebox.

Borgata

From the huge organically shaped glass sculptures to its atmospheric nightclubs, Borgata has earned its reputation as the most luxe of the Atlantic City casinos. Dining options offer celebrity chefs **Wolfgang Puck** or **Bobby Flay**, but don't miss **Specchio** for classically infused modern



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE ATLANTIC CITY CONVENTION & VISITORS AUTHORITY

Italian cuisine. To satisfy your sweet tooth or for a quick pick-me-up stop by **The Metropolitan** for gelato and espresso. If intrigue and action are what you are after, visit **Level One**. This post-modern bar hosts a high limit casino for "elite" black jack and roulette players. The management dares you to "step up" to level one and the atmosphere is dark and masculine.

Bally's Wild West

If you've been yearning to get in touch with your inner cowboy (or girl), Bally's is the place to be. The western theme casino is a fun stop on the casino fantasy ride. Enjoy a Margarita at the **Mountain Bar** while simultaneously playing video poker on the countertop. Better yet, head for **Bally's Bikini Beach Bar**, right on the beach outside the casino.

Tropicana

Feel like a fantasy trip to Old Havana? Tropicana's the place. At **Cuba**

Libre restaurant and rum bar, you can sample an authentic mojito, made with crushed sugar cane, while you peruse a menu featuring dozens of Latin classics including Ropa Vieja, Cuban sandwiches and Arroz con Pollo.

Later – much, much later, most likely—you'll want to head for **Brulee: The Dessert Experience** for dessert like you've never seen it before. In addition to their \$1,000 dessert special, you may choose a "main course" from their selection of sundaes, cakes and pastries, which will be preceded by an Amuse Sucree and followed by Petits Fours.

Among the offerings on their menu are the Milk Chocolate Banana Pleasure Dome, The Great Pumpkin, and an assortment of "adult ice creams."

Showboat

The Showboat Casino is home to the legendary **House of Blues**, which offers a regular lineup of contemporary masters of blues and rock. Recent

headliners included Johnny Lang, Buddy Guy and Eddie Money. Also not to be missed at the House of Blues: the **Sunday Gospel brunch**, which combines a southern-flavored buffet with a live concert presented by greats of the gospel world.

Olde Atlantic City

Before there were casinos, there was Angelo's. **Angelo's Fairmont** tavern sits approximately two blocks inland from casino row, an old-fashioned building so dwarfed by the casinos that it looks like it could be part of a 1930s train layout.

But Angelo's is deceptive. From the outside, this old-timey corner tavern looks cramped. Inside, there's an L-shaped mahogany bar with a parade of homey signs and clippings along the wall. Doors on either side of the bar provide entrée to Angelo's warren of dining rooms.

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On a Saturday night, the bar is four deep with customers sipping drinks as they wait for their names to be called. But not to worry. Everybody's friendly here, and the tables turn over like a carefully orchestrated ballet.

You're guaranteed to be seated before you start gnawing the woodwork.

The bartender will take your name and call you when you're table's ready. Nothing fancy here: he'll *call you*, out loud across the bar, by your first name, and you'll be ushered in to the inner sanctum, redolent of garlic and spaghetti sauce.

Order the house wine—they really do make it here—and make your choice from the traditional pasta, seafood, chop and steak menus or branch out a little and try one of the specials: tonight it's lobster ravioli, served with a 6 oz lobster tail on the side, and the house salad comes with everything.

As the evening idles by, you'll hear Frank Sinatra singing as if he's just in the next room, waiting his turn for a plate of the Mancuso family's signature spaghetti and meatballs, or perhaps the Lobster Ravioli special.

Other monuments to Olde Atlantic City include **The Famous White House Sub Shop** at Arctic and Missouri Aves. and **Irish Pub and Inn**, just off the boardwalk at St. James Place. Open 24 hours, The Irish Pub features live entertainment, a large selection of beers and prices that don't appear to have changed since John F. Kennedy ran for president.

With prices like that, it's a sure bet you'll have enough left over to join Mr. Bond for a round or two at the Baccarat table. Good luck! ■

ATLANTIC CITY IS MORE THAN A GAMBLE

South Jersey's premiere City by the Sea is now a stop spa destination

BY LILLIAN AFRICANO

FOR FANS OF high-stakes "hold'em", Atlantic City is not exactly a haven of tranquility, but in the last few years, the City by the Sea has become the Garden State's top spa destination, as casino hotels compete to provide bigger and better facilities.

When the **Borgata** (866-MYBORGATA; www.the-borata.com) opened in the Marina District in 2003, it raised the stakes with its 35,000 square foot **Spa Toccare**. Toccare (Italian for touch) dazzled with its facilities—whirlpool, steam, sauna, fitness center, and palm-ringed indoor pool—and such treatments as the Toccare Touch, a full-body relaxation massage and the Borgata Glow Facial, which uses a light exfoliation, followed by steam and extractions and the latest enzyme-based products to rejuvenate the skin.

Unlike the studied Zen of many spas, Toccare features high-tech cool with big plasma screens in the waiting areas. Shaving Grace, the super-luxe barbershop, is like a men's club, featuring drinks and billiards along with manicures, pedicures, or old-fashioned straight razor shaves.

As of May, **Harrah's Atlantic City** (800-HARRAHS; www.harrah.com) will call its neighbor's bet with a \$550 million expansion that includes a four-acre entertainment complex with a 90-foot-high, glass-dome-enclosed tropical oasis sheltering a 23,000-square-foot, 86,000-gallon heated pool, seven Jacuzzis, 12 cabanas, indoor and outdoor deck areas, as well as a pool bar. The pool complex will be open day and night, and feature dive-in movies, beach parties, poolside spa treatments and live musical entertainment.

Adjacent to the pool area will be a brand new **Elizabeth Arden Red Door Spa** with 23 treatment rooms, including a couple's suite with an in-room Jacuzzi and

shower, as well as a full-service fitness center. The Red Door Spa will introduce such signature treatments as The Harrah's Casino Lift, Jackpot Therapy and Roll The Dice. Many of the casinos on the boardwalk, including Caesar's (609-348-4411; caesars.com), Bally's (609-3340-2000; ballys.com), Trump Taj Mahal (609-449-10000; www.trumptaj.com) and the Tropicana (800-THE-TROP; www.tropicana.net), also have spas and fitness centers.

Caesar's full-service Spa and Fitness Center is complemented by a pool area with drop-dead views of the Atlantic. **Bally's** spacious spa complex includes a café and seven mosaic-tiled whirlpools set in a raised park-like setting of lit fountains and tropical plants. The spa at **Trump Taj Mahal** offers such skin-pampering services as seaweed wraps, deep tissue massage, and aromatherapy massage, as well as a glass-enclosed, rooftop swimming pool.

Located in Tropicana's shopping complex called The Quarter, the **bluemercury** spa offers oxygen facials, couples massage and a variety of body treatments in a hip and happening atmosphere; the spa's apothecary sells top-shelf indulgences from Kiehl's, Molton Brown, Fresh, Laura Mercier, NARS, Trish McEvoy, and Acqua di Parma.

Aficionados of Aveda's organic products and healing treatments can find solace at the new **Aveda Lifestyle Salon & Spa** (609) 441-1600; www.larimarsalonspa.com) on the boardwalk level of The Pier Shops at Caesar's, the posh shopping and dining complex that has replaced the dowdy old Ocean One mall. The salon and spa offer skincare, spa and nail services for men and women, as well as hair styling, coloring and makeup.