

Desert Sun

Estimated printed pages: 4

November 11, 2004

Section: Local

Page: B1

Morongos realize a dream

Debra Gruszecki

Staff

The Desert Sun

9 years after setting out to open a casino, tribe shows off resort aimed at competing with those in Las Vegas
By Debra Gruszecki

The Desert Sun

It stands like a monolith to the San Gorgonio Pass, and holds promise to make the heads of Las Vegas aficionados roll.

Jutting into the azure sky, the \$250 million Morongo Casino, Resort & Spa was dedicated Wednesday before a bevy of guests from Inland Empire communities to celebrate the planned Dec. 10 debut of the four-star monument to glitz and glam.

And, to offer a preview of the newly completed property.

"It's a day of celebration for the community," Riverside County Supervisor Marion Ashley told a crowd of 600 who filled the foyer of the 148,000-square-foot casino holding high-octane slots that are silent - for now.

"This is turning into the economic engine that we all thought it would be," he said.

After citing a study that projects the tribe's new casino resort will have an indirect economic impact by 2008 of \$2.8 billion, Ashley said there's yet another exciting offshoot.

"You don't have to make that dangerous, expensive trip to Las Vegas," he said. "Once you come back here, you'll want to keep coming back."

Bill Davis, general manager of the casino, resort and spa, said the project has created 1,000 new jobs and promises to provide a casino resort experience that's been seen no place this side of Las Vegas.

If the proof is in the pudding, then Morongo Executive Chef Christophe Douhart and Director of Hotel Operations Tom Mueller would give the entire project four world-class stars.

Nestled in a valley between the San Gorgonio and San Jacinto mountain ranges, the resort was designed by the internationally known architect Jon Jerde, whose firm designed Las Vegas landmarks like the Bellagio, Treasure Island and the Palms Casino Resort.

The project, built by Perini Builders, one of the nation's largest construction companies specializing in hotels, features a 23-floor hotel tower with 272 rooms, 32 double-bay suites and a two-story glass penthouse restaurant and lounge.

Detached from the hotel are six private, luxury casitas each with granite-lined tubs, a private pool and a feel-like-you're-in-Fiji outdoor shower.

The resort has a 12,000-square-foot luxury health spa. The smell of eucalyptus wafts through the marble confines.

It has a ballroom and meeting space.

It has four restaurants, including The Nines Steakhouse, and a buffet where fresh fish and other food that suits one's fancy are cooked to order rather than sitting in chafing dishes.

It also has three nightclubs, including a club deemed the sister of Las Vegas' famed Rain, one studded with a massive dance floor and gadgets that elevate objects to 20 feet, and spit out imaginary fire and rain.

The pool area, studded with cabanas, thickly padded chaise lounge chairs and a lazy river, sparkles in some areas with white,

While the spa is named Sage, perhaps after an herb used in tribal ceremonies, tribal imagery is not a constant design theme of the property. That was done on purpose, explained Maurice Lyons, tribal chairman of the Morongo Band of Mission Indians.

So many tribes are represented on the reservation, Lyons said, the tribal council felt that it would be more appropriate to honor tribes and tribal ways in the museum. "We (also) did not want to offend any tribes," if one symbol were used more extensively than another.

Architect Sharmilla Tankha of The Jerde Partnership designed the hotel tower roof to reflect the natural shapes of the mountains, and the impact wind has on its craggy face. A desert flower sculpture graces the entrance to soften the bright desert light, and transition guests to a more subtly lit casino.

"We were inspired by nature," she said. "The mountains are right in front of you. The sun, the wind. It's in your face. It's beautiful, and it's all wrapped up in this project."

Chairman Lyons said the casino resort is a dream come true.

He said the tribe nearly embarked on a full-scale casino hotel project nine years ago, but opted to wait. The timing didn't seem right, he said, and now he knows it wasn't. "This is happening at a perfect time: We have our clientele, and a plan to keep gaming revenues in California," he said. "We know much more about the business now. We're better equipped."

And the community is behind us, he said.

"Without that support, this could never have happened. We would have had a rocky road to get it done," Lyons told the group during the dedication. "You're with us. And we're with you."

Barbara Kellum, treasurer of the Beaumont Chamber of Commerce, was dazzled.

As she waited to take her tour, she harkened back to the late 1950s when Beaumont was a sleepy, commuter town. It had no freeway running through it. A small Main Street. No Wal-Mart. And Gordon Simmons was employed by the U.S. Postal Service to throw mail bags on a passing train in Cabazon to connect the community with the rest of the world.

But now, with the opening of this resort and casino, Kellum she sees growth potential for places like Beaumont.

"I'll just spread the wealth, I'm sure," she said.

Debra Gruszecki covers tourism and Indian gaming for The Desert Sun. She can be reached at Debra.Gruszecki@thedesertsun.com or 778-4643.