

Atlantic City embracing Roaring '20s party vibe - The Associated Press

Written by Administrator

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ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. (AP) — From flapper costumes to swing dance contests and whiskey-soaked cocktails, Atlantic City is going retro, embracing the Roaring '20s in a big way.

It's a new strategy to attract new business by invoking the round-the-clock party vibe of a

bygone era and cashing in on nationwide interest in the hit HBO show "Boardwalk Empire" about Prohibition-era Atlantic City.

Casinos are dressing workers in period costumes, serving drinks from the speakeasy era, teaching jazz and swing tunes to entertainers and sponsoring dance contests like the Lindy, the Charleston and the Shimmy.

Resorts Casino Hotel, whose hotel was built in the 1920s, re-branded itself in a Roaring '20s theme. Caesars and Bally's Atlantic City held '20s-themed events, and their parent company is considering sponsoring a "Boardwalk Empire" tour of Atlantic City, featuring the real-life spots where political and rackets boss Enoch "Nucky" Johnson held court and partook liberally of the shore town's vices — most of which he controlled, as well.

For 30 years, until he was finally sent to prison in 1941 for tax evasion, Johnson dominated Atlantic City, then one of the nation's leading resorts. He controlled not only the Republican political machine that had a stranglehold on government, but also made sure illegal liquor, prostitution and gambling operations flourished under the protection of paid-off officials.

"If you came to Atlantic City back then, it was non-stop partying and entertainment and fun," said Dennis Gomes, the new co-owner of Resorts, who hit on the Roaring '20s theme last summer, before the purchase even became final. "It was a major party environment, a backlash against Victorian conservatism. It was a fun time."

And a time people want to return to, it seems.

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"Things were rockin' down here," said Don Marrandino, eastern regional president of Caesars Entertainment, which owns Caesars, Bally's and two other Atlantic City casinos. "We need to get that back."

Indeed, they do. Atlantic City has been taking a beating the past four years, ever since the first casinos opened in the Philadelphia suburbs in November 2006. Since then, the nation's second-largest gambling market has lost nearly a third of its business, falling from \$5.2 billion in casino revenue in 2006 to \$3.6 billion last year.

And the competition keeps coming. Pennsylvania and Delaware casinos started offering table games last summer, competing even more directly with Atlantic City. Maryland opened its first casino last fall, and a new casino is to open at New York City's Aqueduct Racetrack this spring, which will siphon off even more of Atlantic City's customer base.

The challenge is to attract more business to the seaside resort, and going back 90 years in time to do it seems to be the prevailing consensus at the moment.

On Saturday night, Bally's held a swing dance contest as part of the Roaring '20s craze, where the contestants had to wear '20s-era outfits.

"The music and the fashion of that era was the ultimate," said one of the contestants, David Lochner of suburban Philadelphia. "Clothes looked much better. People got all dressed up."

His partner, Sascha Newberg, said the dancing of that era required much more involvement than it does today.

"You meet so many different people, and everyone has their job and their role, with all the moves," she said. "Instead of just sitting in a bar smoking, you have a real social interaction. A lot of people know nothing about this kind of music or dancing. It's like looking at a rotary phone and hearing it ring."

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On New Year's Eve, Resorts dressed six of its cocktail servers in flapper costumes, with black sequined headbands and feathers tucked inside, strands of pearls cascading down one side. A strolling violinist in a zoot suit greets arriving gamblers in the lobby, a singing bartender is memorizing all the top hits of the '20s. Most of the casinos workers will don those costumes for good when Resorts has its grand re-opening around Memorial Day weekend.

When "Boardwalk Empire" debuted in September, Caesars erected a giant billboard with the show's logo in its lobby, and it quickly became one of the most photographed spots in Atlantic City.

Bally's painted murals of '20s-era bathing beauties on its Boardwalk facade, and started a self-guided walking tour of "Boardwalk Empire"-related spots.

And casinos throughout the city offered food, drink and hotel promotions geared to the series, like hotel rooms (long-since sold out) for \$19.20 a night, dinner and buffet specials for the same price, whiskey-based drinks straight from the show, and even old-fashioned straight-razor shaves in a barber shop chair, just like those Nucky Johnson used to enjoy.

"People dig knowing where all those characters went and what they did," Marrandino said. "This thing is hot right now."

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