

Vegas' storied Sahara casino reborn, transformed

Written by Administrator
Saturday, 23 August 2014 19:59 -

Michelle Rindels, AP Staff Writer 3:58 p.m. EDT August 23, 2014



In this photo taken on Aug. 20, 2014, a man walks through the Life Nightclub in the SLS Las Vegas in Las Vegas. The hotel and casino, formally known as the Sahara, has gone through extensive renovations is scheduled to open this weekend. (Photo: John Locher, AP)

LAS VEGAS (AP) — That's no mirage. The Las Vegas Strip has a new casino in business on the foundations of the old Sahara.

A \$415 million pleasure palace called the SLS Las Vegas — short for "Style, Luxury, Service" — opened Saturday with midnight fireworks and a party for 3,600 guests as the Strip's tired north end continues to enjoy a post-recession renaissance.

Nearby, visitors will notice that an end of the Strip long associated with empty lots, low-budget motels and frozen construction cranes is expanding once again.

A Malaysian conglomerate has announced plans to fold the half-finished Echelon casino into an Asian-themed Resorts World Las Vegas. Australian casino giant Crown Resorts has purchased land where the New Frontier casino once stood. An open-air concert venue set to house the massive Rock in Rio USA music festival next spring is in the works.

"Global gaming companies with deep pockets are investing in the north end of the Strip," said Michael Paladino, a Fitch Ratings analyst.

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A new chapter in Vegas life is replacing memories of the Moroccan-themed Sahara, which once hosted Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin and the Beatles. Its owners shuttered the 59-year-old casino in 2011 after years of keeping only one of its three hotel towers open and hawking rooms for \$1 per night over Twitter. Everything from the slot-machine chairs to the camel lamps were auctioned off in a fire sale.

"There were some dark days," said Sam Bakhshandehpour, president of Los Angeles-based SBE, which owns many hotels, nightclubs and restaurants as well as the SLS. "But we held on."

While \$415 million may sound like a lot, it's not for Vegas. A typical Strip casino overhaul includes a dramatic implosion of the old building, but SBE kept the Sahara skeleton. This meant the work cost about one-tenth of what a ground-up rebuild would have.

The casino floor is back, but it's smaller and spills into the same trendy restaurants that SBE develops in Southern California.

This restaurant-centric focus looks like a winner. Analysts say Las Vegas visitors have awakened from their recession slumber less inclined to gamble, but hungry for fine food. They'll find it at celebrity chef Jose Andres' Bazaar Meat, gourmet burger joint Umami and The Griddle Cafe, a Los Angeles staple whose larger-than-life pancakes attract epic lines for Saturday brunch.

Rooms starting at around \$100 a night are airy and modern, with white sofas under windows, mirrors on walls and over the bed, and whimsical details such as monkey prints on the ironing boards.

The battered Vegas economy remains an undeniable feature of the Sahara's SLS rebirth. Bakhshandehpour says they received 117,000 applications for 3,400 positions.

"It was absolutely humbling," he said.

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