

# Travel



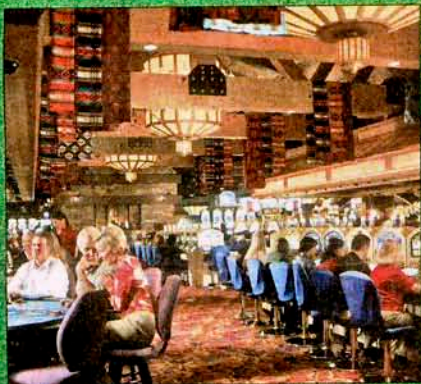
On [ajc.com/travel](http://ajc.com/travel): Read "Budget Traveler" Clara Bosonetto Maerz's columns every

## CASINOS SPECIAL SECTION



# BET

## on a great vacation



Barona Valley Ranch  
Test your luck at the Kumeyaay Indians,  
lovely Barona Valley resort near San Diego.

### Golden State shines with tribal hospitality

By ANNE Z. COOKE / For the Journal-Constitution

**L**akeside, Calif. — If there's one true thing about casinos, it's that they all feel alike. Walk through that big smoked-glass door and you know where you are in an instant. The casino floor, where the money is won and lost, could be just about anywhere. Day is indistinguishable from night. Cocktail waitresses prowl carpeted aisles between the slot machines, and neon lights flash. Digital beeps drone incessantly, and the rat-tat-tat of coins on metal reminds the losers that somebody else is winning.

But not in San Diego. The gaming-est county in the Golden State, this stretch of sunny real estate has 17 Native American reservations, 10 of them with casinos, most in scenic rural valleys. I'm not much of a gambler, but I've tempted Lady Luck in some of these places and gone away with the odd feeling that while I'd lost money, I'd actually done something useful.

Some American Indian casinos are as simple as a gaming hall with a restaurant;

► Please see INDIAN, L5

## CASINOS SPECIAL SECTION

# Indian: California tribes generous with gaming profits

► Continued from L1

others are complete resorts. Many of the tribes spend their profits on their members, providing attractive homes, building schools and community centers, surfacing roads, installing water reclamation plants and paying for health insurance and college scholarships.

But San Diego's most successful casinos also give away millions of dollars to nearby communities, not just because their legal compacts compel charitable donations (which they do), but because they're good neighbors. My current fave, Barona Valley Ranch Resort & Casino, gives to local hospitals, sponsors foundations, builds football stadiums for nearby high schools and awards large and small grants to college students.

If you're a visitor to San Diego and you've done the beach, the Temecula wineries, the USS Midway aircraft carrier tour and the hot-hot Gas Lamp District, treat yourself to a casino day, ask a lot of questions and see how money can make a difference.

With a rental car, you can get to Barona Valley, the home of the Barona band of Kumeyaay Native Americans, in about 30 minutes. Or take the free Barona shuttle bus from several suburban San Diego locations (check [www.barona.com](http://www.barona.com) for locations). Show a 10-spot (to prove you're a serious gambler), find a seat next to a housewife on holiday and take in the ride out of town through the funky village of Lakeside and north up Wildcat Canyon.

The drive up the canyon's winding road, a tortuous cleft in a hill studded with truck-sized boulders, crests at the top of the hill where you can see, spread out below, a pastoral valley, warmed by the sun, rimmed by low hills and shaded by ancient oaks. If it wasn't Eden, it was the next best thing. A former Spanish land grant, Barona Valley was a page out of history. I was in love.

The first thing my husband and I did was to check into the hotel, look in on the spa and make dinner reservations at the Oaks Steakhouse, the only restaurant that serves cocktails and wine. You can also order alcoholic beverages to be brought to your room, but Barona's limited liquor license prevents alcohol sales on the casino floor.

Then we scratched the itch, buying \$30 worth of quarters and playing the slots, winning some, playing more, losing it all in an hour. With that done, it was time for the main event: the resort itself.



The Barona Valley resort offers not only gambling and recreation but also the kind of scenery that made "Old California" legendary.

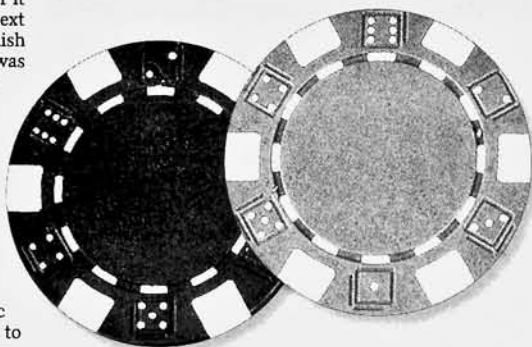
Photos by STEVE HAGGERTY / Special

## UPROOTED BUT NOT DEFEATED

The Kumeyaay (KU-meh-yay) Indian reservation was originally located in Capitan Grande valley. But in 1932, the city of San Diego wanted to build a dam and reservoir on the land, which it purchased from the Kumeyaay. With the money they made off the sale, some of the Kumeyaay — the Viejas band — bought land east of San Diego. The Sycuan band purchased land southeast of the city, and the Barona band bought the Barona Valley Ranch.

"A few of the very oldest members remember their old homes, and of course they have mixed feelings about it," said anthropologist Cheryl Hinton. "It was hard to forget what happened. But some members of the tribe had been ranch hands at Barona ranch and they'd seen the valley. They knew it had possibilities."

Indeed. In 1983 the tribe opened a bingo parlor. In 1994, it negotiated with the state, opened a casino and installed the first on-site water treatment facility. Six years later a state-of-the-art reclamation plant opened to reprocess 90 percent of the resort's waste water. In 2003, the present casino and 400-room hotel opened.



Oddly enough, you won't see many of the reservation's 450 tribal residents during your visit. This strikes an odd note with travelers who have crossed the Navajo and Sioux reservations and have met residents in cafes and trading posts, or at the very least

seen cowboys on horseback and kids playing outside. At Barona, not only are most of the homes out of sight of visitors, but the few tribe members who work in the hotel and casino blend in among the 2,500 people needed to run an operation this size.

The exception was the Barona Museum and Cultural



"The Greeters," by Native American sculptor Denny Haskew, is part of Barona Valley's display of natural beauty and traditional culture.



The museum and cultural center tell of the Kumeyaay tribe's long history in California and contributions to modern America.

Center, where we learned something about the Kumeyaay Indians' 10,000-year-old history. The collection, curated by cultural anthropologist Cheryl Hinton, exhibits both pre-European and contemporary arts, such as pottery, baskets, clay pipes, shell objects and tools. A timeline demonstrates Kumeyaay history, and the

Veterans' Hall of Honor celebrates the many members who've served in the military. A listening station gives visitors a chance to hear the native language.

If success is measured by profits, Barona has been one of Southern California's most successful casino resorts. The Western ranch-themed casino, which is tricked out

## IF YOU GO:

**Barona Valley Ranch Resort & Casino** is 30 minutes north of San Diego near Lakeside, off Route 67 (Wildcat Canyon). 888-722-7662, [www.barona.com](http://www.barona.com). Dining options include the Sage Restaurant and the Oaks Steakhouse, serving fine cuisine with spirits and wine, and the casual Ranch Buffet, serving cuisine representing six cultures.

## Other casinos

**Viejas Casino and Reservation:** 3,500 slot machines, table games, restaurants and an Outlet Center with 57 discount stores. Viejas is 35 miles east of San Diego near Alpine, off Interstate 8. [www.viejas.com](http://www.viejas.com)

**Sycuan Resort & Casino:** A casino with 2,000 slot machines, 45 table games, a poker room and 1,200-seat bingo room; two 18-hole golf courses and a hotel. The resort is 35 minutes east of San Diego near El Cajon, on Dejesa Road. [www.sycuanresort.com](http://www.sycuanresort.com)

with open-beam ceilings, earth tone appointments and Navajo-style tapestries, has 2,000 slot machines, 72 blackjack tables, roulette and craps tables, a poker room, off-track wagering and mini-baccarat. A live band entertains nightly, and non-alcoholic drinks are free and liberally served.

Efforts have been taken to attract high-stakes players. Gambling limits have been raised, a helipad has been built and private VIP gaming rooms and premium suites for celebrity gamblers have been created.

The resort facilities are top-notch. Hotel rooms are well appointed, and the grounds include extensive gardens and a pond with a walking trail.

On our last day we played at the Barona Creek Golf Course, an award-winning course with deep bunkers, natural contours and the kind of rough you might find in Scotland.

Equipment rentals come with a golf cart. There's also a 10-acre practice area, with a putting green, chipping green and a driving range — everything you'd need for an ideal golf weekend.

All that and a casino, too. Some people come to Barona Valley and barely leave the casino. But between the resort's other attractions and the golf course, even occasional gamblers will find enough to keep them busy for two or three days.