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Get a piece of the action at California's Indian casino resorts

05:09 PM CDT on Thursday, September 11, 2008

By ANNE Z. COOKE / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

LAKESIDE, 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. Digital beeps drone incessantly, and the rat-tat-tat of coins on metal remind losers that somebody else is winning.

But not in San Diego County. The state's betting-est county, this stretch of sunny real estate has 17 American Indian 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 Indian casinos are as simple as a gaming hall with a restaurant; others are complete resorts. Some 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 millions of dollars to nearby communities, not just because their legal compacts compel charity donations, but because they're good neighbors.

My current favorite, Barona Valley Ranch Resort & Casino, gives to hospitals, sponsors foundations, builds football stadiums for nearby high schools and awards grants to college students.

If you're a visitor to San Diego and have seen the beach, the Temecula wineries, the Midway aircraft carrier and the Gaslamp Quarter, treat yourself to a casino day.

You can drive to Barona Valley, home of the Barona band of

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STEVE HAGGERTY/Colorworld
Barona Valley Ranch hotel and wedding chapel is reflected in the mill pond.

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Kumeyaay Indians, in about 30 minutes. Or, take the free shuttle bus from several suburban San Diego locations (www.barona.com). Show a 10-spot (to prove you're a serious gambler), find a seat and take in the ride through the funky village of Lakeside and north up Wildcat Canyon (State Highway 67).



Barona Valley Ranch & Casino
Barona Valley Ranch Resort & Casino gives to hospitals, sponsors foundations, and awards grants to college students.

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The resort is set in a pastoral valley, warmed by the sun, rimmed by low hills and shaded by ancient oaks. A former Spanish land grant, Barona Valley is a page out of history.

My husband and I checked in at the hotel, looked in on the spa and made dinner reservations at the Oaks Steakhouse, the only restaurant that serves cocktails and wine. Then we scratched the itch, buying \$30 worth of quarters and playing the slots, winning some, playing more, losing it all in an hour. That done, it was time for the main event: the resort.

You won't see many of the Barona's 450 members during your visit. Most of their homes are out of sight, and the few tribe members who work in the hotel and casino blend in among the staff of 2,500.

At the Barona Museum and Cultural Center, however, we learned something about the Kumeyaay's 10,000-year history. The collection, curated by cultural anthropologist Cheryl Hinton, exhibits pre-European and contemporary arts such as pottery, baskets, clay pipes, shell objects and tools.



STEVE HAGGERTY/Colorworld
Gardener Nancy Brandon tends the experimental rose garden at Barona Valley Ranch.

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"This is a vital culture that's always growing," says Ms. Hinton, who isn't a tribe member. "Like any other Americans, the members watch television, play the same sports and read the newspaper, and their arts and interests reflect that."

If success is measured by profits, the Barona band has been one of Southern California's most successful business owners, doing what it takes to attract high-stakes players. They've raised gambling limits, built a helipad, provided private VIP gaming rooms and furnished premium suites for celebrity gamblers. They've also spent generously on the resort, which offers well-appointed hotel rooms, fine food, extensive gardens and a pond with a walking trail and map. Between resort attractions and the golf course, visitors will find enough to keep busy for two or three days.

"Not everybody wants to play poker all night – or play poker at all," says Kathleen Eagle, director of ornamental horticulture, who designed the resort landscaping, most of the gardens and the rose garden, which has 475 varieties.



STEVE HAGGERTY/Colorworld
Newly redecorated bedrooms at Barona Valley Ranch are sleek and simple.

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"All sorts of people stop by the nursery to look at our roses or to tour the Chef's Garden, where we grow greens and vegetables for the restaurants," she says.

The name Barona comes from the valley's former Spanish land grant title, "Canada de San Vicente y Mesa del Padre Barona." In 1932, the city of San Diego, which wanted to build a dam and reservoir in nearby Capitan Grande valley, moved the Kumeyaay (KU-meh-yay) off their reservation there, paying them for the land. 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 Barona Valley Ranch.

In 1983, the Barona band opened a bingo parlor. In 1994, members opened a themed casino. In 2003, they followed with the present casino and 400-room hotel.

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

Anne Z. Cooke is a California freelance writer.




WHEN YOU GO

Tribal casinos

- Barona Valley Ranch Resort & Casino 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. Non-alcoholic drinks are free and liberally served. Two restaurants, a buffet and a food court. Contact: 1-888-7227662; www.barona.com.

- The Viejas Casino and Reservation offers 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. Contact: www.viejas.com.

- The Sycuan Resort & Casino has 2,000 slot machines, 45 table games, a poker room and 1,200-seat bingo room. Also, two 18-hole golf courses and a hotel. The resort is 35 minutes east of San Diego near El Cajon, on Dejesa Road. Contact: www.sycuanresort.com.

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