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At reservation casinos in San Diego, you can gamble for a good cause

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By Anne Z. Cooke
Special to the Express-News

LAKESIDE, Calif. — If there's one true thing about casinos, it's that they all look alike.

Walk through a couple, or a dozen, and you soon realize that the casino floor itself, where the money is won and lost, could be just about anywhere. Day and night are indistinguishable. Neon lights flash and digital beeps drone incessantly. Dealers rack up chips and the rat-tat-tat of coins on metal remind 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 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 I'd actually done something useful.

Some Indian casinos are as simple as a gaming hall with a restaurant; others are complete resorts. The smartest tribes have spent their profits on their members,

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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 to nearby communities, not just because their legal compacts compel charity donations (which they do) but because they're good neighbors.

My current favorite, Barona Valley Ranch Resort & Casino, donates to local hospitals, sponsors foundations, builds football stadiums for nearby high schools and offers large and small grants to students and colleges.

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 scene in San Diego's hot-hot Gaslamp 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 Indians, in about 30 minutes. Or take the free Barona shuttle bus from several suburban San Diego locations (check www.barona.com for locations). Show a ten-spot (to prove you're a serious gambler), find a seat next to a housewife on holiday and take in the ride through the funky village of Lakeside and north up Wildcat Canyon.

Here's what my husband said to me, shaking his head the first time we drove up the canyon's winding road, a tortuous cleft in a hill studded with truck-size boulders: "No wonder they gave this land to Native Americans; nobody else wanted it."

Then we reached the top, crested the hill and saw, spread out ahead of us, 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 we did was check into the hotel, look in the spa and make dinner reservations at the Oaks Steakhouse. Barona's limited liquor license permits wine and cocktails here, and the wine list is impressive. You can also order alcoholic beverages in your room, but they aren't served on the casino floor. Then we scratched the itch, buying \$30 worth of quarters and playing the slots, losing it all in an hour. That done, it was time for the main event: the resort itself.

Oddly enough, you won't see many of the Barona's 450 members during your visit. This seems strange to travelers who have been to the Navajo and Sioux reservations and have met residents in restaurants or trading posts or seen cowboys on horseback and families in their yards. At Barona, not only are most of the homes out of sight, but the few tribe members who work in the hotel and casino blend in with the other 2,500 employees it takes to run an operation this size.

The exception was the Barona Museum and Cultural 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 time line shows Kumeyaay history, and the Veterans' Hall of Honor celebrates the many members who've served in the military. The listening station gives visitors a chance to hear the native language, one of many in the Yuman group.

"I think ... of the museum as an ongoing historical society," said Hinton, who is not a tribe member. "This is a vital culture that's always growing. 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's 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 created premium suites for celebrity gamblers. They've also spent generously — and wisely — on the resort, with well-appointed hotel rooms, fine food, extensive gardens and a pond with a walking trail and map. Between the resort and the golf course, there's enough recreation to keep occasional players busy for two or three days.

“Not everybody wants to play poker all night — or play poker at all,” said Kathleen Eagle, director of ornamental horticulture, who designed the resort's gardens. “All sorts of people come over here to the nursery to talk to us about their roses or to see what we're growing in the chef's garden, where we grow greens and vegetables for the restaurants.

“These mountain valleys have their own ecosystems, with colder winters and warmer summers. The trees and shrubs here are either native plants or drought-resistant species, so people who are landscaping their homes will come to what grows well and looks the best.”

The name Barona, hardly an Indian word, comes from the land grant title, “Canada de San Vicente y Mesa del Padre Barona,” later shortened to Barona Valley Ranch. In 1932, when San Diego built a dam and reservoir in nearby Capitan Grande Valley, the Kumeyaay Indians, who lived on a reservation there, were pushed off. Some of them, the Viejas band, moved east of San Diego; the Sycuan band moved to land southeast of the city. The third band moved to 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 Hinton. “It was hard to forget what happened. But some tribe members had worked 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 a pact with the state, opened a themed casino and installed the first on-site water treatment facility. In 2000, it opened a more advanced reclamation plant, which reprocesses almost all the resort's wastewater to be reused for irrigation. And in 2003, it opened the present casino and 400-room hotel.

On our last day, we played at the Barona Creek Golf course, an award-winning, American-style links course with deep bunkers, natural contours and a rough of native shrubs, rocks and oak trees. The grass is a low-water Bermuda variety; the greens — so drought resistant they're watered just once a week — are fast and smooth. 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 need for a perfect golf weekend.

It's not typical casino fare, but then, not much at Barona is.

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