



CHANGING THE GAME

Our region's Native American gambling meccas have become full-service resorts

BY MATT VILLANO

Years ago—as in, right around the turn of the millennium—you would have been wise to bet against local Native American casinos.

Most of these destinations were smoky, cavernous places with nothing but card games and slots. Restaurants were mediocre, other diversions nonexistent. Fast-forward 10 years, however, and everything has changed. A new crop of Vegas-style casino/resorts, coupled with the “Vegas-ification” of some of Washington’s oldest haunts, have become the most popular hot spots in the state.

These destinations now boast fine-dining restaurants and bars, top-notch spas, killer golf courses and a whole lot more. Here’s a rundown of some of our favorites.

TULALIP RESORT CASINO (PICTURED)

www.tulalipresort.com

The swanky T-Spa inside this Tulalip Tribes–owned resort calls its signature gentlemen’s treatment the “Royal King’s Bath Ritual,” and I certainly felt like a king while experiencing it.

During a recent visit, my three-part treatment began on a massage table, where a therapist exfoliated my back with a dry brush similar to the ones groomers use on horses. I won’t lie—the brushing hurt, but in a good way. Kind of like an epic back-scratching session.

Next, I plunged into a deep whirlpool bathtub filled with warming ginger bath salts and a bunch of other minerals. Soft music played in the background, and I soaked by candlelight for 20 minutes. By the time I climbed out, my body felt like putty: wet, warm, malleable and totally and utterly relaxed.

Finally, once I got comfy back on the table, the therapist administered a reflexology neck, shoulder and back massage—the perfect antidote to a long night in the poker room downstairs. All told, the experience was roughly 60 minutes of bliss. When I emerged, I felt rejuvenated, centered and ready to take on the world (or at least the Three-Card Poker table).

SNOQUALMIE CASINO

www.snocasino.com

Especially in casinos, where you can smoke while throwing dice, cigars are a man’s best friend. This not-so-secret fact means that Lit, the new cigar lounge inside Snoqualmie Casino, is a perfect place for local dudes to kick off a guys’ night out. (Of course, women are welcome, too, though on my recent visit to the Snoqualmie Tribes–owned resort, there were only two ladies in the entire lounge.)

The lounge essentially is two facilities in one. The main section is a bar straight out of an Old Boys’ Club, complete with tufted leather chairs, bistro tables and a bar that boasts some of the finest Scotch, bourbon and whiskey around (I heart any place that carries Laphroaig, single-malt from Islay).

There’s also the humidor, a walk-in-closet-size room that displays a “cellar” of more than 200 different types of cigars. Some of the highlights include Ashton Estate Sun Grown, Padron 1926 Anniversary and Diamond Crown Maximus.

Once you choose something to smoke, you sit in the bar, and a server brings the selection with a cigar-cutter and a giant ashtray.

With the formula of cigar, liquor and TV, Lit always has the makings of a great night.

CLEARWATER CASINO RESORT

www.clearwatercasino.com

No matter how many times I see Mount Baker looming on the northeast horizon, it never gets old. From the 18-hole White Horse Golf Course near Clearwater Casino Resort, the mountain is particularly breathtaking. All you need is a clear day.

Lucky for me, it happened to be one such day during a recent visit to the Squamish-owned resort on the Kitsap Peninsula, across the Agate Pass Bridge from Bainbridge Island.

After an uncharacteristically unlucky session at the slots, I set my sights on a game where the house can’t win and booked a tee-time for a round at White Horse. Situated on high ground between the Olympics and the Sound, the greens offered views from just about every vantage point. It’s amazing I was even able to focus on the holes. Not that you could tell by my score. Suffice it to say that there are 137 bankers on the course, and I must have hit my ball into most of them.

The high point of the day came on hole No. 7, which requires a well-struck tee shot over a 25-foot valley. I’m not known for my drives, but somehow managed to clear the chasm with room to spare. One of the folks in my foursome called it skill. As a gambler, I know better; it was luck.

NORTHERN QUEST RESORT & CASINO

www.northernquest.com

Fancy restaurants are as common as \$10 blackjack at new casinos. A fancy restaurant with authentic cultural underpinnings, however, now that’s unique.

Perhaps this is why I enjoyed dining at Masselow’s so thoroughly: The restaurant, tucked in the lobby of a 10-story hotel at this resort near Spokane, is named for the chief who led the Kalispel Tribe more than 100 years ago, and it offers a subtle yet intimate immersion into some of the lore around the man.

Upon arrival at the hostess stand, a smiling woman greeted me in Salish, the native language of the Kalispels. As I took my table inside, an image of Chief Masselow looked down on me.

Other photos depicted Kalispels digging for camas root, an important food source way back when, as well as Manresa Grotto, a culturally significant cave on the reservation near the Pend Oreille River.

The menu also paid homage to local Native American history. There were entrees featuring bison rib-eye steak and elk sirloin—all parts of the traditional Kalispel diet. My personal favorite: the pre-meal serving of fry bread delivered in a small canoe with a huckleberry puree. The treats were like donuts, only savory. The fact that they gave me a literal taste of Kalispel culture only made them more delicious. **■**

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high-rolling in Idaho

For gamblers itching for someplace new, the Coeur d’Alene Casino Resort (www.cdacasino.com) will be worth the trip when it opens this spring.

The \$65 million project, on which the Coeur d’Alene Tribe broke ground in June of 2009, is expected to be finished by May 2011. It will create a resort with 300 rooms overall, including two new wings overlooking the resort’s championship golf course, Circling Raven Golf Club.

In addition, the expansion will include a centerpiece pub area called Yop-Keethin-Um (which means “gathering place” in the Coeur d’Alene Tribe’s Salishian language), a gourmet steakhouse, a 15,000-square-foot spa and pool, as well as a 10-acre “front yard” that will offer a natural amphitheater for concerts and other outdoor events.