

PALA CASINO AND SPA

\$100M Expansion in Dining and Gaming Facilities

by RENE VILLAROMAN

WHEN I found my way to the locker room of Pala Spa, I opened my assigned locker, and was greeted by a welcome card that had my name on it; a bottle of drinking water, and an artfully folded beige bathrobe. I put on the bathrobe and waited for the next surprise in this wonderful one-day visit to Pala Casino Spa & Resort. The invitation-only trip would include a tour of the hotel's

different amenity-level rooms, the business center, the events center, several restaurants, and the casino floor, culminating in a "progressive" dining experience featuring the offerings of the resort's different restaurants.

I almost did not make it because of a persistent cough that began a week earlier, but to miss this once-in-a-blue-moon treat would be a shame.

I do not get to be invited to a luxury spa very often. In fact, the last free facial I received was some five years ago, at a clinic in Glendale. Those in the know, including my technician, a beautiful lady by the name of Monica, suggested that I should have a facial every week. I almost laughed out loud. "On a journalist's salary, you've got to be kidding," I whispered to myself.

But because this treatment was free, I willed myself to relax and enjoy the whole procedure, all 45 minutes of it. I thought that I could get away by wearing the bathrobe on top of a T-shirt, but I was wrong. Monica asked me to take off the T-shirt off, while she stepped out of the room. I found out later that the treatment included a massage of my upper chest and back area and my arms and hands. I looked around at the room, out to the open, adjacent space outside of it, all the way to the swaying eucalyptus trees beyond, and I settled on the warm massage table, and let Monica do the talking.

The operational words here are "peel" and "lift." These are what my face needs, anyhow. Monica takes control, applying a thin, even layer of exfoliating gel with fruit acids over

my face, neck and chest, just barely avoiding my eyes and lips. Sometimes the gels feel cold, sometimes they sting mildly. She covers my eyes with gauze that's been "soaked in rosewater," then she begins rubbing my face and forehead with circular movements of her hands, said to relax and relieve stress.

She follows this up with an application of cryo-elastic mask with Vitamin C, to lift, lighten and erase age spots. The mask stayed on my face for about ten minutes. Monica then gently peeled the mask off. Although there was New Age music playing over the PA system, and the gently swaying eucalyptus trees beyond the room was supposed to lull me to sleep, I remained fully awake.

After my relaxing massage, I tried a couple of slot machines, the ones in front of the Mama's Italian Restaurant, at a smoke-free area of the casino. I did not win, but my \$2 investment lasted me more than one hour. Enough enjoyment, if you asked me. Pala has one of the largest selections of slots available in every denomination, including one-cent, two-cent, nickels, dimes, quarters, half-dollars, \$1, \$2, \$10, \$25 and \$100. It has 87 gaming tables featuring



Photo by Rene Villaroman

Blackjack, Mini-Baccarat, Lucky Bonus Baccarat, Midi-Baccarat, Pai-Gow Poker, Ultimate Texas Hold'em Poker, Let It Ride, Super Fun 21, Three-Card Poker, Crazy 4 Poker, Pala Craps, and Pala Roulette.

It is now 5 pm, and time to meet our hosts again in front of the registration desk. They would take us around the hotel, including three different-size rooms with varying amenity levels, and to the Pala Event Center, where concerts and such are held. Then we would proceed to Mama's Italian Restaurant. Here pastas are made from scratch in one corner of the restaurant in full view of the diners.

At 7 pm, we all repaired for the first of the "progressive" dining lined up by our hosts. Waiting for us at the Oak Room, a steaks and seafood restaurant, was a host of chefs, with Pala Casino & Resort CEO Bill Bembenek, who welcomed us profusely. Mr. Bembenek is especially proud of Choices, the buffet restaurant, which was recently renovated under a \$100 million expansion. "Choices Buffet is now the largest buffet restaurant in Southern California," Bembenek declared. It has been expanded to 20,000 square feet, with eight live-action cooking stations - American, Italian, Asian, Mexican, Seafood, Soups/Salads, Desserts and Specialty. On any day, Choices features 200 different hot and cold food items.

At the Oak Room, we were treated to sushi and sashimi freshly made at Sushi Sake, a full-service sushi bar, just around the corner from the Oak Room. Next came one large quesadilla made by Chef Jaime de Alba of Amigo's. There were bottles of warm and cold sake and white wine to go with the tuna tartar and the salmon and tuna sashimi.

Oak Tree samplers, Choices Buffet, and its 200 different food items, would be our next and final stop. I have dined here twice before, and the food arrays were always overwhelming. With its recent expansion, Choices beckons much, much more. Lots and lots of shrimp cocktails, Alaskan crab legs, tender, succulent roast beef, ham, fried chicken, Italian pasta, Pacific Rim cuisine, cakes and pastries, ice cream, etc. I had five shrimp cocktail, one small slice of roast beef, a few pieces of sautéed mushrooms, and a tall glass of iced tea. If we were not plied with Japanese sushi and sashimi at the Oak Room an hour earlier, I would have had enough intestinal fortitude to tackle a fraction of the Choices' 200 food items.

Our hosts were very gracious, and they offered as much information as we could ask for.

"The Memorial Day weekend was our biggest weekend yet, even surpassing that of last year's" says Mr. Bembenek. "A lot of people have grown familiar with the hotel's design," he said. "The expansion is our largest endeavor since we opened in 2001," Bembenek added.

Pala Casino & Resort is located in northern San Diego County 15 miles north of Escondido, 12 miles south of Temecula and just five miles east of I-15 on Highway 76. It offers 507 luxury rooms, including 82 suites. The casino has more than 2,000 state-of-the-art slot and video machines, 87 Vegas-style table games, ten restaurants and four entertainment venues. Its 10,000-square-foot Pala Spa won the 2009 Best Casino Spa award from Spas of America. More information can be had by logging on to www.palacasino.com.

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