

CNN Travel

Atlantic City's pleasant surprises

By Jonah Flicker, Special to CNN
Wed June 11, 2014



Note to casino hounds: There is fresh air and sunshine in Atlantic City. The Jersey Shore gambling resort offers plenty to do beyond the gaming tables.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Atlantic City has some of the glitz of Vegas and the grime of Reno
- It also has oceanfront lounging, a historic boardwalk and public art parks
- Venture beyond the casinos to discover this Jersey Shore destination

(CNN) -- There's a standard Atlantic City itinerary: arrive at one of the many casinos along the Boardwalk, head straight for the card tables and slot machines, drink some complimentary cocktails and proceed to empty your wallet.

Sometimes it feels like it would be easier to cut out the middleman and simply hand over your money directly to the dealer because, let's face it, the odds are not in your favor.

But don't let this dissuade you from visiting Atlantic City. Even if you're not a gambler, good times can still be had in this iconic Jersey Shore spot, which has largely bounced back from the devastation wrought by Superstorm Sandy.

Atlantic City falls somewhere in between Vegas' glitz and Reno's grime, and you can find a bit of either, depending on your taste.

There are a myriad of eating, drinking, sightseeing and shopping options, both inside and outside the casinos. So venture past the slot machines and try some of the following activities to see what AC truly has to offer beyond gambling.

Belly up to the bar at local watering holes

Sure, Atlantic City's casinos offer a glut of nightclubs and ritzy bars with bottle service and pounding sound systems.

But for a cheaper drinking experience with more character, check out the city's local dive bars and pubs. Many are open 24 hours for those who wish to imbibe until the sun rises.

You might even chat with some regulars at places such as Culmone's (2437 Atlantic Ave.; 609-348-5170), a pleasantly seedy establishment a few blocks off the Boardwalk.

If you're looking for some bar food to wash down your beer, try the [Irish Pub](#) (164 St. James Place; 609-344-9064) or [Pic-A-Lilli](#) (231 S. Tennessee Ave.; 609-344-1113) -- both offer wings, burgers and more, with a hearty dollop of local flavor on the side.

Pretend you're an extra on 'Boardwalk Empire'

The [Knife and Fork Inn](#) (3600 Atlantic Ave.; 609-344-1133) was a Prohibition-era speakeasy and restaurant.

It frequently played host to a gang of colorful characters, including the real-life Nucky Johnson (the inspiration for the HBO show's Nucky Thompson character), before being raided and shut down by the feds.

It soon reopened, and the restaurant is still going strong today, having been fully renovated and restored in 2005. It's an elegant place to enjoy a steak, some seafood, a martini or two and soak in the aura of the Roaring '20s.

Get curious about history

If you're in the mood to do some historical sightseeing in the greater Atlantic City area, there are several interesting landmarks.

Just south of town, in Margate, sits [Lucy the Elephant](#), a six-story high National Historic Landmark. Lucy was originally constructed in 1881. Today, visitors can take guided tours inside the novelty pachyderm. Admission is \$8 for adults, \$4 for children ages 3 to 12, free for children younger than 3.

Margate is also home to Marven Gardens, a neighborhood of beautifully restored houses from the '20s and '30s. The Monopoly property, Marvin Gardens, is actually a misspelling of the name, an error Parker Brothers acknowledged in 1995.

[Absecon Lighthouse](#) juts up prominently from the north side of Atlantic City. Dating back to 1857, this is New Jersey's tallest lighthouse and visitors can climb to the top for a view of the ocean and surrounding landscape. Admission is \$7 for adults, \$4 for children ages 4 to 12, free for children younger than 4.

The [Steel Pier](#) doesn't look much like it did in the early 20th century, but it has entertained visitors for over 100 years and is home to an array of modern rides, games and food vendors. Single tickets can be purchased for \$1, or discounted books of 35, 80 or 200 tickets are available.

Take a dip

The gently sloping beach along the Atlantic City Boardwalk is surprisingly appealing and clean. When the weather is nice, you can find swimmers enjoying the warm water and calm surf, as well as surfers and kayakers.

From July 1 through Labor Day, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., there are lifeguards stationed on the beach from Caspian Avenue to Jackson Avenue. So grab a towel and some sunscreen, and claim your spot early.

Look at the fishes, or catch them

The [Atlantic City Aquarium](#) is a great place to take kids (it also hosts birthday parties), with exhibits featuring a bevy of fascinating fish and aquatic mammals. It's located right on the waterfront at historic Gardner's Basin, where you can dine at dockside restaurants and check out the Atlantic City artists' colony.

Charter sightseeing, dolphin watching and fishing boats leave from the marina. Admission to the Aquarium is \$8 for adults, \$6 for seniors, \$5 for children 4 to 12 and free for children 3 and younger.

Get some culture

It turns out Atlantic City is not entirely devoid of high culture. Artlantic is a project curated by [Fung Collaboratives](#) that turns vacant green spaces along the Atlantic City Boardwalk into temporary art projects that change from year to year.

The project began in 2012 and will last until 2016. There are two art park locations, both an easy walk from the casinos, one between Martin Luther King Boulevard and Indiana Avenue and another on the Boardwalk at California Avenue.

Indulge

This year's [Atlantic City Food and Wine Festival](#) takes place from July 25 to 27 at Caesars and features copious amounts of food, drink, parties and cocktails as well as talks and demonstrations from celebrity chefs. Packages are available to book now, starting at \$250.

Learn to gamble

This might seem like a cheat, but technically it's not gambling. Some casinos, such as the [Trump Taj Mahal](#), offer instructional lessons in their poker rooms. According to the casino's FAQ, you can ask the shift manager to set up a free private or group lesson.

Who knows, you might learn a thing or two for when you decide to hit the tables for real. Of course, the house doesn't like to lose, so maybe hold off the high-limit tables for just a little while.

Explore beyond the tables

There is plenty to do inside Atlantic City's casinos besides gambling. Take in a music or comedy show, pamper yourself at an upscale spa, eat at one of the many posh restaurants or budget buffets or embark on an epic shopping spree. If consumerism is your preferred method of relaxation, you've come to the right place.

[The Quarter at the Tropicana](#) is an Old Havana-themed cluster of shops, restaurants and nightlife, nostalgically harkening back to the days of pre-Castro Cuba.

The [Pier Shops at Caesars](#) is another area where you can spend a few hours away from the casino floor eating, shopping or watching The Water Show, a Vegas-style water, light and sound extravaganza that pops off once every hour (check with the hotel first, it is occasionally out of service).

Walk the Boardwalk

Finally, take a leisurely stroll down the entire length of the [Atlantic City Boardwalk](#), a tourist attraction that dates back to the late 1800s.

On one side lies the Atlantic Ocean, stretching out behind the dunes and grass, and on the other are countless casinos, stores, novelty shops and fast-food joints.

This summer, free events such as a concert by country singer Blake Shelton (July 31) and AVP pro volleyball (September 5-7) will take place along the Boardwalk.

Settle in for some serious people watching.

A diverse mass of humanity descends every summer, from Indian-American parades to teenage skaters to extended families from Ohio, all enjoying the sea air perfumed by the scent of fried dough and cotton candy.



The historic Steel Pier has changed a lot since the early 20th century, but it's still entertaining guests after more than a century.



The casinos are refining their offerings with more shopping and entertainment options.



In nearby Margate, New Jersey, Lucy the Elephant stands tall. Built in 1881, this six-story wooden pachyderm is open for tours.



DONALD BRONKHORST/GETTY IMAGES

Absecon Lighthouse in Atlantic City is the tallest lighthouse in New Jersey.



ANTHONY BRONKHORST/GETTY IMAGES

The casinos offer shopping and dining as well as gambling.



SHUTTERSTOCK

Leave the tables at night to see the buzzing boardwalk.

COMMENTS

[Cir Ago](#) • [2 days ago](#)

I remember Atlantic City as a young boy so a few years ago when we were on an east coast vacation we decided to spend a couple of days there. I would describe it as a ghetto with a few large casinos. There is absolutely nothing to recommend that dirty, rundown, shell of a 19th century resort. Never again..

[PaleMoon](#) • [2 days ago](#)

There are many far better seashore communities all along the Jersey coast. AC was a dump before the casinos came in, and today just a couple blocks from the Boardwalk it's still like Detroit by the sea. Still a dump riddled with crime and ignorance.

[TrulyWithoutParty PaleMoon](#) • [a day ago](#)

With an ignorant post like yours, I would have thought you lived there. Yes, there are probably some better seaside towns, and you could do worse, also. This is the east coast, pal, not exactly La Jolla. Show me a city without problems. Why not identify your hometown so we can all have a laugh.

Anyway, Revel has a truly dynamite pool party on weekends, Revel, Harrahs, and Borgata can rival the glitz of most of Vegas' casinos, and some pretty big entertainers show up on occasion. The next time Lady Gaga shows up in Chester, PaleMoon (pal), let me know and you can show us a tour in your hometown.

[InDogNito](#) • [2 days ago](#)

Looks too crowded.

[Guest](#) • [2 days ago](#)

Too many Philly meanies in that area.

[PaleMoon Guest](#) • [2 days ago](#)

Not really. Too many New York Neanderthals pretending to be Nucky Thompson. If a**holes could fly, Yankee Stadium would be an airport.

[LobsterGator](#) • [2 days ago](#)

A life long Jersey girl, I love AC, however it does need some more revitalizing. That can only happen if Trump decides to invest in entertainment outside of his shoddy casino hotels, or maybe if he jazzes up the existing ones. Crime needs to be addressed, too. Other than Trump and boardwalk pick pockets, however, it is a nice place to visit and deserves more respect than it has gotten.

[niteday LobsterGator](#) • [2 days ago](#)

Ewwwwwwww

[PaulEBNJ](#) • [2 days ago](#)

As a Jersey resident, you still can't put lipstick on this pig no matter how hard you try. There are some many better places along the shore and in the state. Skip this and save your money, unless you like funding casino owners.

[Bob](#) • [2 days ago](#)

Thank you for this article. AC has gotten such a bad rap for so many years, but they working hard to build it up and provide fun for everyone. Every weekend I am down in one of the shore towns visiting friends and family and it's always a positive experience. South Jersey Shore is where it's at.

[Drock240](#) • [a day ago](#)

Very cool. I am on vacation in Ocean City and just saw Lucy yesterday. Definitely worth the tour.

[1wwtom.](#) • [2 days ago](#)

Trump has little to do with the casinos anymore as he sold off his interests but still gets a little kickback for the Name. Trump Plaza has been said to be up for sale for a long time now. Harrah's (Ceasars "CET") has the most properties though rumors abound of them closing Showboat soon. Revel is still sputtering along after yet again refinancing their debt. Not as many High Rollers as you thought anymore Huh? The Trop seems to be doing OK and Resorts has made a good move with Jimmy Buffet's Margaritaville and the Shark Bar. The Borgata is steady and the Golden Nugget has done a very nice remodeling job on the old Marina. The thing about AC is that it IS a City. If you're expecting some cozy laid back Beach Town like some other resort areas, forget it. Maybe not so good if you've got to drag the kids along but it's OK for me.

[Isaac B](#) • [17 hours ago](#)

Some additional recommendations from a part-time local:

Long-time and recent AC local restaurants:

- White House Subs
- Formica's Bakery
- Tony's Baltimore Grill
- Tony Boloney's Pizza

Things to check out:

- Art Garage: Brand new galleries & shops attached to the outlet mall
- Sundown sound & light show against Boardwalk Hall (the old convention center)
- Bay side of Margate: Fishing, restaurants & bars (Sofia, Tomatoes, Maynard's, Steve & Cookie's)
- Chihuly glass at the Borgata
- Historic seaside architecture all about town (in varying states of repair)

Skip (unless you happen to be passing by):

- The "ArtLantic" parks. If you live in any world-class city, these are the kind of things you'll find in civic plazas and corporate courtyards