

HARRAH'S CHEROKEE CASINO & HOTEL

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Harrah's Cherokee Casino & Hotel has been a M since it opened in 1997. Following a major upgr it is now officially the largest entertainment co



North Carolina landmark
upgrade to full resort status
complex in the state



The 14,500 strong Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) is descended from those members of the tribe who resisted relocation to Oklahoma back in the 1830s, and for the tribe their casino is a principal source of income, funding education and cultural activities and having a huge impact on the local economy, not least through direct employment – 20 percent of the 2,000 employees are members of the tribe.

Harrah's Cherokee Casino & Hotel





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Cherokee started out with a bingo operation, licensed under the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988. When the casino was mooted, the EBCI made a smart decision early on to engage as its manager the world's most respected casino brand. Harrah's was founded in Reno Nevada in 1937: in 2005 it bought Caesars Entertainment and the brands now work in parallel to form the most recognizable and diverse gaming company in the world. No wonder then that annual visitor numbers at Cherokee have grown from around three million in 1997 to more than 3.6 million in 2010.

These numbers are expected to rise steeply from this year, however, following a \$650 million expansion of the facilities. The present day complex, even before the expansion was set in motion, was a far cry from the one story, electronic gaming only and alcohol free facility on the banks of the Soco Creek. Over the last 14 years slot machine gaming has taken off nationally and by the end of next year guests will be able to play 4,300 video games, bringing in most of the casino's revenues.

Expansion started very early on: hotel towers were added in 2002 and 2005, bringing the number of guest rooms to 576. The newly built, 21 story tower at the center of the expansion virtually doubled that, says Darold Londo, senior vice president and general manager of Harrah's Cherokee Casino & Hotel since 2006. Its standards couldn't be higher, he says: "We added 78 suites to our previous inventory of 29, 68 of them strategically placed on each of the floors; and the top level is an all suite floor, with two 'super suites' almost 2,000 square feet each." Balconies give you dramatic panoramic views of the Smoky Mountains – something that no other resort in North Carolina can offer.

The multi-phase expansion, one of the largest hospitality projects in the US, includes the original 500,000-square-feet, the new 532-room Creek Tower, an 18,000-square-foot spa, a 3,000-seat events center, as well as additional parking facilities and enhanced restaurant and retail offerings. The casino portion of the project called for general contractor Turner Construction to renovate the existing gaming

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space and supplement it with an additional 80,000 square feet, thereby nearly doubling the casino's total gaming space to 160,000 square feet.

Londo came to Cherokee nearly six years ago, having assisted with the transition of Harrah's Atlantic City casino to resort status within the group, and that experience has been invaluable in taking Cherokee through a similar process. The challenge has been to raise the casino and hotel from a worthy competitor in the firmament of attractions in the region as a whole into a stellar resort with few if any competitors and appealing to an ever widening circle of people. "We aim to appeal to resort connoisseurs by establishing a baseline of what resort providers in the region provide – and trump them by giving people all of that and gaming too!"

To achieve that the company has leveraged major opportunities in certain key areas, the first being the food offering. "We have partnered with branded companies in our Food Court which is just opening as we come into the first week of August 2011." Harrah's went out and looked for an exciting food portfolio to attract casino patrons partnering with the all-American hamburger joint Johnny

Rockets and other recognized brands like Uno Pizza, Boar's Head, and Dunkin' Donuts.

The Food Court is located in a very accessible location close to the casino and the motor coach lounge, and filled with a carefully selected range of dining options. On 22 January this year, Food Network star Paula Deen personally cut the ribbon for the opening of the 404 seat Paula Deen's Kitchen. Though Paula is no stranger to Harrah's, this was her first full service restaurant within the group. "We wanted something more reflective of her own offering in Savannah, which would further complement our planned food portfolio," says Londo.

There will be plenty of choice as the complex is completed, he continues. Ruth's Chris Steak House, the well-known, upscale steak restaurant, will open in early 2012 and mid 2012 BRIO Tuscan Grill will be added to the mix, bringing rustic Italian charm to the resort. Designed to seat approximately 400 people, the 12,000 square foot restaurant will offer authentic Northern Italian specialties. BRIO will feature a





hardwood infused pizza oven, oven-roasted steaks, chops, fresh fish and made-to-order pastas. The idea is to position the resort in a way that will appeal to people on a longer stay. “However good a particular restaurant may be people like to dine in different places on different nights,” says Londo. “This will be great for people on a three or four day stay who want several options so they can eat at a different place every day.”

Harrah’s loyalty program has been copied in other industries as an exemplary tool for customer relations management. It enables the company to build up a profile of individual customers as they swipe their card whether at the gaming facilities or the food outlets or when they check in at the hotel – then gladden their hearts by anticipating their likes and dislikes. It’s a great way of managing the Harrah’s customer community, Londo believes: “Over the years we have done a really good job of accommodating our guests and at the very least, meeting their expectations. We know a lot about Caesars Entertainment patrons that live in our region but for various reasons don’t visit here. But as a goal of our organic growth we want to widen that appeal from our core customers to the wider Harrah’s and Caesars customers, and also to other gamers in the region who haven’t visited Cherokee.”

The expansion has changed these people’s image of Cherokee already and as the message goes home he thinks they will realize it’s only a two hour drive from the outskirts of Atlanta, and the resort facilities are equal to anything they could find in Atlanta or Charlotte.

The creek is still the focus of the site, dividing the hotel complex from the casino. They are linked by two sky bridges, the older of them still under renovation. Guests traverse at an elevated level and descend via escalators into the casino. Though the entire project is not

going to be signed off until late 2012, construction is largely completed on the north side of the creek, including the entrance lobby and covered entrance (the porte cochère), says Londo: “The only major piece of construction left on that side is the Mandara Spa, and that is more a question of repurposing existing space than greenfield construction.” The spa is inspired by Balinese massage principles, but will also incorporate elements of Native American culture. “Guests who indulge in Mandara’s world-class treatments will leave Harrah’s both relaxed and exhilarated – and eager to return very soon!”

Carrying out a project of this size without affecting the day-to-day operations too much is hard to do, and takes a lot of pre-planning between the design and construction teams and the operators. “It is not like working on a green field: the work gets stretched to accommodate current business operations. This was at least a 48 month project from start to finish, whereas if the contractors would have had a clear run it would perhaps have taken less than three years.” Londo points out that the different phases had to be very carefully timed, for example ensuring that the old buffet space remains in operation till the new one is ready.

It was here that his Atlantic City experience was invaluable. Working normally in the middle of a huge project was a new experience for many of his staff. In fact his military background – he is a West Point graduate who flew helicopters in the army – probably helped as much. “It comes down to having a very good and detailed plan, I think,” he says. “The contractors and the architects understood it was a going concern and they had to be careful about chipping concrete and driving piles so as not to disturb our guests. The contractors did a fine job working with us.”

In the event Turner built the Creek Tower in just nine months, not losing a single day to the weather. The topping out ceremony in December 2010 began with a traditional prayer to the seven spiritual directions of the Cherokee, offered by a tribal elder. “I love the fact that Turner honors traditions,” Londo said. And

as might be expected, it was important to the tribe that the impact of the building on the environment was kept to the minimum. There's a new laundry that uses less water, less detergent and less energy than the old one. Cooking waste from the different kitchens is recycled and is not allowed to pollute.

In this Harrah's the corporation and the Cherokee community work on congruent principles. At the outset some of the tribe were opposed to the casino for bringing more people into the area, but the benefits have been palpable and the negatives, whether moral or physical, never materialized. Darold Londo expects profits at Cherokee to grow in double digits in both 2011 and 2012, at a time the industry as a whole is struggling to maintain profitability at all. "Though it couldn't have been foreseen, the expansion couldn't have come

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at a better time. The tribe was willing to support it and in the downturn material and construction costs were favorable." <http://www.harrahsherokee.com> ■

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