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Could new megaresort be Atlantic City's game-changer?

By Kitty Bean Yancey, USA TODAY

ATLANTIC CITY – The \$2.4 billion Revel is unlike anything ever seen in [Atlantic City](#). And maybe the biggest gamble.

The ultra-contemporary, curvy glass-and-steel oceanfront complex — the most costly resort built here — aims to rise above the competition and attract a more upscale clientele to a historic gaming destination undergoing a much-needed face lift in a bid for survival.

Due to open in stages April 2 at the southern end of the Boardwalk, with 500 of the total 1,898 rooms, the 47-story Revel boasts guestrooms with floor-to-ceiling windows that give everyone a coveted water view. There's a plush casino with burlesque stage and electronic table-game pit, plus a party pool run by a [Las Vegas](#) entertainment group.

Revel hopes to attract those who may not have considered vacationing or holding meetings in Atlantic City, says CEO Kevin DeSanctis, offering an early look at the 6.3 million-square-foot resort as workers hammer, paint and bring in furnishings. Grand opening is [Memorial Day](#) weekend, when all restaurants and shops are due to be up and running. A 300-room boutique hotel within Revel is planned next year.

"There are 47 million adults within a six-hour drive," DeSanctis says. He wants to draw AC newbies craving "a weekend of luxury" at the beach. Revel, whose name signifies enjoying oneself in the company of others, he says, aims to please a resort crowd by breaking casino-world conventions. It's the only smoke-free casino resort in Atlantic City. There will be one outdoor puffing area outside a nightclub.

"I think smoking is so yesterday" and turns off the clientele he seeks, says DeSanctis, 59, a trim and down-to-earth former [New Jersey](#) state trooper in jeans and brown suede blazer. "Interestingly, I have only heard from non-smokers, who are ecstatic."

More like Las Vegas

In other convention-breakers: You needn't walk through the casino to get to your room, and Revel plans no bus programs for day trippers. Neither will there be a buffet to feed gamers fast and reward them with free or discounted feasts. Buffets are "mass-market" feederies, DeSanctis says. While Revel will have a rewards card, he's less interested in doling out comped visits to gamers than attracting those interested in the spa, shopping, night spots and restaurants.

Revel's roster of celeb-chef eateries ranges from a steakhouse from [Iron Chef America](#) winner Marc Forgione to a budget replica of a taco truck run by another [Iron Chef](#), [Jose Garces](#). Pool food is from [Michel Richard](#), who has two other eateries at Revel and a restaurant at the Caesars Palace in Las Vegas. Revel's main InOut Pool starts indoors and meanders outside; swimmers pass through see-through automatic doors.

DeSanctis has A-list casino-world credentials thanks to stints with [Donald Trump](#), Sol Kerzner of Atlantis fame and Vegas' Steve Wynn. He served as president of industry giant [Penn National Gaming](#).

Revel, conceived by Miami's cutting-edge Arquitectonica firm, is coming to life after financing fits and starts. First, [Morgan Stanley](#) was involved. It withdrew after the crash of 2008 and wrote off more than \$1 billion as a loss to Revel's benefit, DeSanctis says. Little expense seems to have been spared. With so many kinds of polished and unpolished marble from Italy and China, it's hard to keep track. Arty mobiles of paper-thin, gold-colored rectangles dangle from an atrium entrance; rooms have brown leather desk chairs.

Guestrooms are as sleek and chic as any in Las Vegas, incorporating a neutral gray and tan color scheme, fabric headboards with embroidered bronze-colored drapings and 46-inch flat-screen TVs in standard rooms. Handheld tablet devices allow guests to control temperature, order spa treatments and room service. Introductory rates start at \$239 and will rise to the \$300 range after the grand opening.

Unlike other high-end resorts, not a jetted bathtub is in sight (DeSanctis says today's germ-conscious consumers think bacteria gets trapped in the jets). Suites do have deep soaking tubs.

The 130,000-square-foot casino has a "digipit" gaming area where players use electronic "chips" to play against dealers who flip "cards" using buttons. The pit is equipped with four stripper poles, where dancers will entertain.

Revel aims to be "theatrical," DeSanctis says. "Have you ever tried to take a kid out of a Chuck E. Cheese," with its video games and birthday-party vibe? "We're trying to evoke the same thing in adults." Also in the casino: a stage at the entrance of a burlesque club run by Ivan Kane, who drew crowds to now-closed [Forty Deuce](#) at Mandalay Bay in Vegas. Revel includes a 5,500-seat arena as well, where big stars will be booked.

'Going to be a boat-raiser'

As opening nears, Revel is raising a ruckus. Job seekers file in. The curious gawk at the tower with no name on it, just a 90,000-pound orb on top that has 250,000 programmable lights and is visible for miles (no deep meaning; it's art, DeSanctis says).

What's the feeling in town?

That "a rising tide raises all boats," says Jeff Vasser, executive director of The Atlantic City Convention & Visitors Authority. Revel "is going to be a boat-raiser."

The city has seen its fortunes fade as legalized gaming in neighboring states siphoned off business and the [Miss America](#) pageant moved out. Still-seedy areas near the Boardwalk, with pawn shops, panhandlers and boarded-up buildings, are a turn-off. Revel is redoing [Connecticut Avenue](#), so guests can cruise up without negotiating mean streets.

Part of a new tourist district master plan — initiated by New Jersey Gov. [Chris Christie](#)— is to clean up neighborhoods, put in parks, shops and more, Vasser says. Other resorts also are stepping up their games.

Revel's closest competition, the popular Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa — with more rooms and gaming space — is undergoing a \$50 million renovation, including 1,566 of its rooms. "Yes, they are going to be competitors," Borgata senior vice president of operations Joe Lupo says. "But we hope they do well and bring in more visitors. Atlantic City needs to grow and needs more resort-style amenities."

As opening day approaches (rooms went on sale this week at 855-348-0500 and revelresorts.com), and with big bucks at stake, DeSanctis seems unusually calm as he conducts a three-hour tour uninterrupted by frantic underlings or calls. He hopes Revel reframes Atlantic City as visitors "would like it to be."

"Look," he adds. "All the decisions we've made, if they don't work out, we can change. ...We'll find a way to fix them."

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