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SAN DIEGO | GAMBLING

## At Harrah's Rincon in San Diego, poker goes poolside

Players can try their luck in the light of day, and in their bathing suits, at the San Diego County resort.

By Marc Cooper, Special to The Los Angeles Times

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[Click to Enlarge](#)*North San Diego*

As more and more Americans take to casino gambling, the industry has lately taken to water. Poolside is now the hottest spot in many a Vegas resort, the new ground zero for sometimes bawdy and naughty (sometimes even topless) adult-only frolicking and even a few swim-up games of blackjack.

There's nothing revolutionary about a resort hotel making its pool area more alluring -- unless you're in the business of gaming, where the whole idea has been, until recently, to keep clients inside as much as possible and solidly anchored to a slot machine or card table. Moving some of the action outside was only a matter of time.

I found the same watery trend much closer to Los Angeles but in a much more scaled-down and decidedly more G-rated format at Harrah's Rincon Casino & Resort in North San Diego County. Tiki torches, stacked surfboards, a waterfall and cave, piped-in beach music, oversized umbrellas and rattan-accented deck furniture lend its Cabana Cove pool area a definite South Seas air. The always-moderate local climate and the swaying palms don't hurt either.

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At its center is the Bikini Blackjack pit, a 500-square-foot octagon of sifted, soft, Caribbean-white sand shaded by an earth-colored canvas pergola. Underneath are three blackjack tables; each is captained by a "Baywatch"-class dealer in a striped black-and-white bikini and flip-flops.

My dealer was Lizzy from Maryland. Her glitter-tipped nails sparkled as she whipped out the cards, her dark Wayfarers concealing the boredom that inevitably comes with her job.

I, on the other hand, got immediately into the groove, sipping on a Captain Morgan and Coke and half expecting Jimmy Buffett to sit down on the stool beside me and dig his toes into the cool sand. Instead I landed a tourist from [New Mexico](#) named Steve, an aerospace engineer who glanced at the dealer, rubbed his hands over the pastel blue-and-pink table felt and grinned at me, saying, "Man, this is paradise."

I wouldn't go quite that far. Harrah's has built its national gambling franchise mostly by operating what is the casino industry equivalent of McDonald's. The main interior casino at the Rincon is garish, crowded and loud, the slot machines purposefully set for maximum clang and clatter. So the breezy, laid-back Bikini Blackjack pit is without question the most soothing spot in the resort. And even for the most die-hard veteran card hound, there's something pretty cool about playing on the shaded sand with a stripped-down dealer.

Such sensory indulgence, however, comes with a hefty price. The table minimum inside the bikini pit is a mere \$5 -- but, with no pun intended, the table rules are heavily stacked in favor of the house, and as blackjack games go, the ones offered here are even cheesier than the Beach Boys Muzak.

I caught the brunt of the unfair tilt by having good luck. I opened up three blackjacks within one five-minute period, but because the pit games pay only 6 to 5 instead of what should be 3 to 2, my winnings were waxed down.

I took the onset of dusk and the lighting of the tiki torches as a signal to gracefully withdraw from Bikini Blackjack, moving to a comfy rattan couch in front of a fire pit just a few feet away. For \$14 of my slim winnings, I couldn't resist ordering the Pupu Platter and was mightily relieved when it turned out to be an ample serving of chicken wings, coconut shrimp, fish cakes and quesadilla.

To my left, the bartender (or was he a moonlighting acrobat?) provided plenty of entertainment as he tossed and twirled the metal cocktail shakers high into air. To my right, the four bikini-clad dealers kept pitching the cards at a respectable rhythm, making sure the house maximized its odds. I decided it was much more fun to watch the Bikini pit than sit in it.

I also decided to suspend all remaining disbelief and surrender to the gentle wash of a perfect Southern California summer eve. It might not be paradise, but it was about as close to Margaritaville as you can get on half a tank of gas.

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**HARRAH'S RINCON CASINO & RESORT**

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