

Last year we were at Harrah's Atlantic City for my brother's 85th birthday party. It was the first trip to that New Jersey hotel for my spouse and me. However, because we always stay at Harrah's Las Vegas and are Total Rewards Platinum cardholders, we were comped. With summer season prices at Harrah's A.C. up to \$300 a night for a room, we couldn't have found a better bargain.

Although I've lived in the Arizona desert for 20 years, I was raised in Philadelphia. I first went to Atlantic City at age two, but I don't remember much except the 1930s neck -to-knee wool bathing suits all the women wore. My most vivid memories of the resort town were right after World War II.

My aunt owned a little hotel on Atlantic Avenue two blocks from the Boardwalk. Because my brother (Air Force) and I (Navy) won the war (almost) all by ourselves, we were given a free room for a week by our kindly kin. It was a tiny alcove right behind the check-in desk, but we were grateful we didn't have to pay the enormous \$8-a-day rate.

Harrah's wasn't yet built then. In fact, the original hotel's name was the Holiday Inn Marina Casino when gambling came to Atlantic City in the mid-1970s. It became Harrah's Atlantic City in 1980. The hotel is in the Marina area, a long mile or two hike to the Boardwalk or a quick ride on the hotel's free shuttle.

There are a variety of rooms at Harrah's, including Marina Towers for ordinary folks like us, and Bayview, Harbour and Atrium for those who want more space and luxury amenities. My brother's family had a beautiful Super Suite, where we all gathered several times a day for drinks, mingling and finally, the night of the big birthday cake blow-out.

Our favorite restaurant during our visit, among the eight throughout the hotel, is simply called The Deli. It reminded us of the little eateries in South Philly and New York's Greenwich Village from the 1950s. It served real ethnic food and enormous portions. We had matzoh ball soup, reuben sandwiches and artery-busting slices of cheesecake, all washed down with Brown's Root Beer.

Among the high-priced places were Bluepoint (try the "erstes"), McCormick & Schmick's, the Steakhouse and Polistina's Italian Ristorante. Of course, as in Las Vegas, no casino hotel would be without the all-you-can-stuff buffets. Harrah's has a delightful one overlooking the water called, what else, the Waterfront and Fantasy Reef Buffets.

The prices aren't the same as they were in the 1940s, but the quality is good, and when rubbing shoulders with relatives we hadn't seen in years, it was a lot of fun. The food court has the usual chain eateries you'll find in any shopping mall anywhere, and the limp food is just adequate.

The casino area is big, flashy and varied, with rows and rows of all the usual table games and hundreds of slot and video poker machines throughout. When we left Harrah's, after three days and nights of celebrating, we all made sincere promises that we'd all gather together again in

good old Atlantic City for my 85th birthday in 2010. Let's hope we can all make it.