

Virgin Hotels set to open Thursday. Here's what to expect.

By [Bailey Schulz](#) and [Richard N. Velotta](#) Las Vegas Review-Journal

March 19, 2021 - 12:05 am

Imagine taking a drive toward Las Vegas at sunset.

The light has started to dip behind the horizon, filling the air with pastel shades pink and purple. The desert landscape stretches before you, eternal, spotted with surprising bursts of green from cacti and shrubs. Then, you see it: the hazy glow of Las Vegas' lights in the distance.

That's the feeling Virgin Hotels Las Vegas wants to give its guests when they step inside the newly renovated resort-casino. The property, set to open at 6 p.m. Thursday, has combined modern with mid-century; floral with industrial; loud, colorful pieces with white space.

"A lot of the inspiration really came early on from the travel that you would see as you came to Las Vegas through the desert," said Gary Scott, chief operating officer for JC Hospitality, the hotel's operator. "You're going to see a lot of greenery ... but it's light, it's fresh and it's airy. And really, it embodies the spirit you might have found at Palms Springs years ago."

The hotel will be put to the test by opening mid-pandemic, but management says they're ready to usher in guests to experience the newest product in Las Vegas' tourist corridor.

Reimagining the property

A lot has changed inside the off-Strip property since Feb. 3, 2020, when it closed its doors as the Hard Rock Hotel for good. Thirteen months, \$200 million and one global pandemic later, the property is ready to welcome back guests.

[Food and beverage options have been updated](#). A tribal enterprise is heading the casino. And there's not a single guitar in sight.

"We really wanted to reidentify the property and make sure we gave Virgin Hotels Las Vegas its own history moving forward," Scott said.

The property hopes the design captures the attention of travelers from all over the world: Leisure and business travelers. International tourists from Asia and Europe. West Coast drive ins.

"You have everything coming into Vegas," David Givens, vice president of hotel operations for Virgin Hotels Las Vegas, said during a tour of the property.

"(We're marketing) anywhere from the 25- to 48-year-olds with disposable income."

Gaming Consultant Josh Swissman of The Strategy Organization said the venue's design should have no trouble attracting Generation X, those born between 1965 and 1980, and older millennials.

“It has a relaxed, kind of spa-like feel to it,” Swissman said. “That’s good, because it’s a specific design strategy, but it also caters to a broad range of consumers across the country and across the globe. ... They’ve got enough going for them to attract all types of customers.”

UNLV Assistant Professor of Hospitality Amanda Belarmino, a Gen Xer herself, also sees the property being popular among her generation, especially since this age group is already familiar with the Virgin Hotels brand.

“That’s a crowd that has more disposable income,” she said. “(But) this is something that’s exciting for the entire city. There’s going to be a lot of locals in there the first weeks to dine, to look around, and to see what’s going on.”

Macquarie analyst Chad Beynon said resort renovations don’t always equate to success, but there has been a history of new or updated offerings near the Strip attracting droves of visitors. Virgin Hotels could be exceptionally alluring since there hasn’t been a new resort opening on the Strip since the Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas in 2010.

“It’s been the ‘If you built it, they will come’ (mentality in Las Vegas),” Beynon said. “That’s why there were so many new hotels built in the ’90s and early 2000s. Every property you opened essentially increased the visitation to the market and people wanted to see that new, shiny item. Having Virgin open this spring ... and Resorts World this summer would be a huge positive.”

Changes inside the casino

Virgin’s 60,000-square-foot casino — relatively small by Las Vegas standards — will be the first ever operated in Las Vegas by a tribal casino enterprise.

Mohegan Gaming & Entertainment, operated by Connecticut's Mohegan Tribal Gaming Authority, was licensed by the Nevada Gaming Commission in October, and Joe Hasson, a 40-year casino veteran who once worked at Station Casinos, is its general manager.

Hasson said 90 percent of the casino workforce are returnees from the Hard Rock days.

"Certainly over the 25 years that this resort previously existed, there was a fabulous, veteran, talented workforce here," Hasson said during a recent tour of the property. "On the casino side, 90 percent of those team members are rejoining us and nothing could please me more.

Hasson said the casino will offer about a 50-50 split of slot machines that were at the old Hard Rock casino and new, updated video machines that are eye candy that scream out for attention. About 650 slot machines and 44 table games will dot the casino floor.

Virtually every slot machine is protected on two sides with plexiglass.

"Of course, I look forward to the day where medical science comes to the rescue and I don't have to do that," Hasson said. "They're easy enough to remove when that day comes. In an abundance of public safety, I want to start with it on virtually every slot machine."

There's a high-limit section with higher play limits and slot denominations.

In an area once occupied by the Heat Bar is a semi-public anteroom for highly rated players.

“We’re in a position where we can take care of a discerning guest before we’re ready to take them up to the 16th floor of the Ruby Tower and a private salon,” Hasson said.

Virgin’s casino will have a small sportsbook that won’t be operational until the second quarter of 2021. It will be operated by Betfred Sports, a wholly owned U.S. subsidiary of Betfred Group, a United Kingdom-based bookmaker that owns and operates more than 1,500 betting shops in the United Kingdom. Betfred has yet to be licensed by Nevada regulators, but Swissman described the company as a “top-notch” operator in other jurisdictions.

“They’re an international company that’s relatively established and well-known, but not super established in the U.S.,” he said. But “what a vote of confidence to have Virgin and Mohegan Sun behind you and ... having you operate their sportsbook.”

Hasson isn’t worried about the small size of the sportsbook, noting that most sports bettors make their wagers on cellphone apps — and Betfred will have one of those.

“They are still working their way through licensing and suitability with the Nevada Gaming Control Board,” Hasson said of Betfred. “While everything is illuminated and ready to go, we expect to be able to take wagers in the second quarter of 2021. We can’t get them fully to the starting gate by March 25 but as their licensing and suitability is completed, we’ll turn on the book.”

One thing the Virgin casino won’t have is a poker room. Mohegan Sun executives told the Gaming Control Board there weren’t any immediate plans for poker at the property.

‘Spirit of Aquai’

Hasson said the Mohegan Tribe will bring a cultural philosophy to the property that considers the long term.

The tribe calls it “the Spirit of Aquai,” a centuries-old guiding philosophy that encourages a warm and welcoming atmosphere, passionate and dedicated employees based on mutual respect, providing outstanding service “that goes above the beyond” and building productive long-term relationships.

Mohegan would bring the experience of operating casinos in nine properties in eight jurisdictions, with 25 million annual visitors, 4,600 hotel rooms by 2023, more than 110 restaurants, bars and nightclubs, and more than 22,000 employees by 2025.

In addition to its flagship Mohegan Sun property in Uncasville, Connecticut, that opened in 1996, the tribe operates the Ilani tribal casino in Ridgefield, Washington; the Paragon Casino Resort in Marksville, Louisiana; Resorts Casino Hotel in Atlantic City, New Jersey; Mohegan Sun Pocono in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania; the Fallsview Resort Hotel and the Casino Niagara in Niagara Falls, Ontario, in Canada.

“Don’t sleep on Mohegan Sun,” said Nehme E. Abouzeid, president of consulting firm LaunchVegas. “Yes, they will be the first tribe to operate in the Las Vegas resort corridor, but they are no stranger to the casino business. They have been expanding in the U.S. beyond their original Connecticut resort that everyone knows. And they are even building an integrated resort in Greece.”

Gaming analyst Brendan Bussmann, director of government affairs for Las Vegas-based Global Market Advisors LLC, said the multiple loyalty affiliations will help the property grab market share.

“Virgin has a lot of tools in its shed to attract customers between Mohegan that has a good database from the northeast and the two hotel database between Hilton and Virgin,” he said. “These will all be positives as consumers and business customers return to the destination in addition to a fresh product in the market. I think it is great timing for the opening of this property.”

Mohegan also has a global reach that can’t be ignored.

“The entrance of a Mohegan as a casino manager shows that operators still want to be able to have a Nevada gaming license and the power it still holds for other destinations in the United States and around the globe,” Bussmann said. “Mohegan continues to try and go after international developments such as those in South Korea and Greece while also looking at Japan with its partnership with Oshidori.”

Mohegan has a loyalty club program called Momentum and that, Hasson thinks, will help draw customers from casinos where Mohegan already operates because points will be transferable and transportable.

Other loyalty programs operated through the Hilton Curio Collection — Hilton Honors — and Virgin Hotels should also draw customers.

“In this integrated resort, consider that we’re a group of operators Hilton with the Curio Collection, Virgin Hotels, Mohegan Sun, AEG Presents, a fabulous array of restaurateurs, all under one roof,” Hasson said. “That alone is enough,

I think, to serve as a terrific magnet for people to say, ‘I need to try that. I need to experience that.’”

Still to come

Virgin Hotels opens its doors to the public next week, but its official “grand opening” has been delayed due to the pandemic. [Richard “Boz” Bosworth, president and CEO of JC Hospitality](#), said the typical celebratory event will come at a later date, once “it’s safer.”

Certain venues and amenities also will be absent on Thursday. The Betfred sportsbook isn’t set to open until summer, a second sports betting venue called Money, Baby! should open mid-spring and the property aims to have its dayclub open in time for Memorial Day weekend. Visitors will also need to wait to see the opening of [the property’s live music club 24 Oxford, Kassi Beach Club, resort pool theater](#) and two food options: Olives and Afters Ice Cream.

Scott said some of the offerings on the event lawn — built atop the Hard Rock Hotel’s Rehab pool party venue — will be worth the wait.

“We’ve got a considerable amount of investment going into the backyard,” he said. “The pools are being completely reimaged.”

Virgin Hotels’ operators also have the return of convention and meeting business to look forward to.

Flexibility will be the key to Virgin’s convention and meeting space, which also will double as an entertainment venue.

Lia Rispoli, vice president of events, sales and services for Virgin Las Vegas, said The Manor includes 130,000 square feet of indoor space, five acres of pool deck space and an outdoor event lawn.

“If you can dream it, we can do it,” Rispoli said during a tour.

The Manor will schedule a mix of concerts, special events as well as private and corporate meetings. Rispoli isn’t worried about whether meetings and trade shows will return.

“The feedback from corporate clients is that as much as they managed to figure out how to do it virtually, there’s something missing with it and they want to come back to meeting again,” she said.

The Manor can hold up to 10,000 participants at a time.

Rispoli said a big advantage Virgin will have is that “our stuff is right on top of each other,” meaning that there’s less likelihood that conventioners will drift away to the casino or restaurants because groups will move together within the venue.

In addition to the space at The Manor, the events staff will have access to Virgin’s as-yet-unnamed theater, known as The Joint in the Hard Rock days.

Rispoli said she expects to host some small board meetings in April and May before large-scale trade shows and conferences come back in June. She said the convention calendar is strong for late 2021 as well as 2022 and 2023.

Contact Bailey Schulz at bschulz@reviewjournal.com.

Follow [@bailey_schulz](https://twitter.com/bailey_schulz) on Twitter. Contact Richard N. Velotta

at rvelotta@reviewjournal.com or 702-477-3893. Follow [@RickVelotta](https://twitter.com/RickVelotta) on Twitter.

Virgin Hotels Las Vegas by the numbers

2,000 — Number of Virgin team members, with 1,600 set to work opening week and 400 joining later once the “backyard area” opens

650 — Number of slot machines on the casino floor

44 — Number of table games on the casino floor

60,000 — Square footage of the casino floor, operated by the Mohegan Sun tribe

130,000 — Amount of square footage for meeting space, known as The Manor

10,000 — Approximate number of people that can attend events at The Manor

1,500 — Number of hotel rooms and suites in three towers

\$0 — Amount charged in resort fees and for parking

5 — Acres of swimming pool area

4,500 — Capacity of hotel’s entertainment theater

415 — Number of days between the closure of the Hard Rock Hotel and the planned opening of Virgin Hotels Las Vegas