

Planet Hollywood makes long-awaited arrival

It is perhaps the quietest Las Vegas „implosion“ ever.

This is a town where resort casinos grow up to be megaresort casinos atop the dusty ruins of historic mainstays. The Aladdin Resort & Casino officially joined the Stardust, the Dunes, and the Desert Inn as the latest to depart stage left, even if the explosion was more glamorous than those of the dynamite sort.

In a not-so-subtle ceremony on Tuesday, partners in the newly branded Planet Hollywood Resort & Casino celebrated their property's gradual transformation from the failure-prone Aladdin to a hip new Strip spot. Only time will tell if indeed that old Aladdin bankruptcy genie is back in the bottle to stay. The official grand opening is still half-a-year away.

Pepsi & The Paint Job

Building its resort brand through strategic relationships – particularly taking advantage of its access to Hollywood glitterati – will perhaps be Planet Hollywood's signature saving grace. First, Pepsi Co. signed a 10-year commitment, and will distribute 12 million cans throughout California and Nevada. This tsunami of soda will hail Planet Hollywood's coming-out party as well as give it a marketing surge unlike any other.

Second, Panasonic agreed to outfit both the exterior and interior with the latest flat-screen visual technology. It has contributed a great deal already to the formation of a Times Square atmosphere along the property's front entrance.

Extensive renovations both inside and out have created several noteworthy changes, particularly at the front of the casino,

where the Aladdin consistently failed to entice boulevard onlookers. The interior is 95 percent completely renovated after 18 months of work. The design, by Dougal Design Associates, was created with the express goal of generating movement at every turn. This aesthetic extends from the geometric floor designs throughout, to the towering columns of light, cloth and metal on the casino floor, to projected imagery on walls as well as atop some of the games.

A Labor of Hercules

„This day has been a long time coming,“ said Robert Earl, Planet Hollywood International’s founder and CEO, who has fought a long, hard battle to resuscitate his brand.

It hasn’t been easy. Taking his own Planet Hollywood franchise restaurants out of bankruptcy, not once but twice, was already a herculean task. The chain went from 47 corporate-owned restaurants to nine, including one up the street at the Forum Shops. (As a result of the nearby restaurant, a Planet Dailies diner-style restaurant sits where a Planet Hollywood would likely go. A source at the casino says it will be interesting to market the casino at the Caesars location.)

But Earl didn’t quit. He turned around and bought the Aladdin, a failing, three-year-old property at the time, for \$ 635 million, or half what it cost to build. It, too, was in bankruptcy ... not the first time for the Aladdin either.

The renovations, which began in late 2005, did not exactly signal good omens – a blue, exterior paint job crept up the sides of the building, only to abruptly disappear, replaced by what critics say is a much more pleasing hue.

A-Team brings the A-Game

The PH, as it’s branded in some spots, will share many of the concepts that other Las Vegas properties do. A central Heart Bar is reminiscent of the MGM Grand Casino Hotel and Hard Rock

Hotel & Casino's centerpieces. Famous eateries like New York's Striphouse and L.A.'s famous Pink's will serve signature dishes. Pink's is actually a popular hot dog stand and will be part of Planet Hollywood's not-yet-complete sports book.

But the property will also feature a few twists on the common concepts. For instance, a bar near the Strip entrance called the Extra Lounge is themed after the „Extra“ gossip TV show. A mini-stage area will allow „Extra“ crew members to do standups from the property.

„What happens in Vegas, now happens on ,Extra,“ Earl proclaimed, referring to another partnership he hopes will drive foot traffic.

Themed suites in the Starwood-operated hotel tower are set aside for popular sports stars – famed pitcher Roger Clemens, tennis great Pete Sampras and boxing legend Sugar Ray Leonard are the first – and will be rented when the legends are not in town. „They are part of our ,Ambassadors of Sport‘ suites,“ Earl explained. „The rooms are tributes to their careers.“

The vast majority of costs incurred by the renovations are going into the timeshare/condo towers operated by Westgate. The trendy \$ 1 billion, 50-story towers are still under construction. When completed, they will be the largest timeshare complex in the country, with 1,200 vacation villas inside 3.2 million square feet of living space.

Stomping the Competition

With so much competition along the Strip, and so much on the way with MGM's Project CityCenter going up across the street, Planet Hollywood officials are hoping to carve out a niche. Spokeswoman Andrea Roqueni says something to entice everyone is available, from the show „Stomp Out Loud“ in its own theatre, to the magic of Hans Klok in the Aladdin Theater for the Performing Arts.

Miracle Mile, as the 1.3-mile shopping mall is newly named, will soon get a new look and some new merchants, too. Trader Vic's, Urban Outfitters and a Hawaiian Tropic Zone are scheduled to open.

Earl said the improved Miracle Mile, named in reference to famed shopping districts in L.A. and Chicago, will soon be „seamlessly integrated, inside and outside“ with the rest of the property. It will also still have to compete with Forum Shops at Caesars and whatever new retail component is added to City Center. „We will be completely different. We all go after a different niche,“ Roqueni said.

Earl says his aspirations are somewhat higher. „We had the biggest challenge bringing this to life ... to ensure Planet Hollywood surpasses all other properties,“ he said. „It's not just a resort and casino. It's an amalgamation of three important entities, the planet itself and the Miracle Mile“ as well as Westgate's Planet Hollywood Towers.

No matter how competitive Planet Hollywood ends up once all the pieces are in place in September, Actor Bruce Willis guaranteed that at least one record would fall to the property on Sept. 28 and 29. „We will be throwing the biggest party Las Vegas has ever seen.“