

Red Hawk Casino: New gaming spot in Placerville

Matt Villano

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It's fancy. It's schmancy. And Red Hawk Casino in Placerville (El Dorado County) is the newest gambling establishment in Northern California. Considering the facility is the first in the state to offer on-site day care for kids up to age 12, one could argue it's a great place for the whole family.

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The history

Red Hawk opened in December, so it doesn't have much history to speak of yet. The casino is owned by the Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians and operated by Minnesota-based Lakes Entertainment. Though Lakes doubled its revenue after the casino opened, the facility has not been immune to economic slowdowns - it cut 250 jobs earlier this year.

The games

Red Hawk has a plethora of gaming options. Table games are the main attraction - more than 75 in all. Highlights include a variety of blackjack options (single-deck, double-deck, multi-deck and Blackjack Switch), three-card poker and pai gow poker with a side bet that pays more when the dealer has a particularly lousy hand. There also are a few tables of card-based roulette, Let It Ride and baccarat. The facility has about 2,000 slot machines, including a host of progressives and video poker. One thing that's noticeably absent: a poker room.

The layout

Architects built the casino unobtrusively into the back of a hillside west of Highway 50, and the structure is more or less shaped like an upside-down U. The casino is on the top floor of this structure, with slots and table games in the center and restaurants around the edge. One floor below sits Kids Quest, an on-site day care complex complete with an indoor playground, (non-violent) video arcade and special cafe. The remaining floors of the building house a covered parking garage; parking is free.

The feel

Dark wood paneling and red felt on the gaming tables combines to create a feeling of sophistication. Dozens of small flat-screen televisions situated around the gaming area are a nice touch. Toss in a cadre of efficient cocktail servers, and if you didn't know better, you'd think the place was smack dab in the middle of the Las Vegas Strip. A bonus: Many of the restaurants have breathtaking views of the Sierra foothills.

The eats

With six - count them, six - restaurants on site, there's something for everyone. Henry's Steakhouse is a classic steakhouse, while Koto Grille offers more eclectic American fare. Wai Sushi and Seafood, the Waterfall Buffet and Two Rivers Cafe are other options. During my visit, I dined at Pearl Asian Cuisine, a pan-Asian restaurant that rivals any restaurant in San Francisco's Chinatown. Try the salt-and-pepper squid.

The nuts

Don't let the marketing campaign fool you: Though Red Hawk bills itself as "the easiest casino to get to from the Bay Area," that schlep to Placerville can be interminable if you time it wrong. Still, the chic vibe and diversity of games make the place worth the trip.

Red Hawk Casino, Highway 50, Exit 40, Placerville. (888) 573-3495. www.redhawkcasino.com.

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