

COMMANDO GAMERS

Geyserville couple visits every Indian gaming facility in California

Take 14 days, 4,000 miles, 53 casinos and what have you got? Depending on who you ask, a detailed analysis of California's gaming industry or a fun-filled way to spend a once-in-a-lifetime two-week vacation.

But for Mike and Teri Molinaro, it all adds up to an ambitious excursion that took them from one corner of the state to the other.

"We were sitting at River Rock Casino playing one night and we began wondering just what the differences were between all of California's Indian casinos," explained Mike, 54.

A nearly \$6 billion a year industry, California's Indian gaming facilities do much more than provide dining, live performance entertainment and socializing opportunities. They also contribute millions to the local economies they serve through employment opportunities and related supporting service companies – and they provide a point of pride to the Native American population by allowing tribes to directly contribute to surrounding communities. For example, through River Rock Casino, the Dry Creek Rancheria Band of Pomo Indians has contributed more than \$1 million to community charitable organizations since 2003. California tribes have donated untold millions to community groups and charities across the state.

Spurred by their love of gaming – Mike and his wife, Teri, 52, concocted a plot to investigate the differences between California's 53 casinos. Borrowing an idea made popular by college students vowing to visit all 28 Major League Baseball parks in 28 days, Mike and Teri felt confident they could replicate the idea by making a marathon trip across California.

"I came up with the idea of what it would take to drive to and visit all of California's casinos in a two-week period," said Mike, as he carefully unfolded an oversized map of the state. "I took a look at a map to see how it could work."

Drawing on Mike's experience as an over-the-road trucker and Teri's knowledge as an accountant, the Geyserville couple carefully developed a detailed itinerary and research plan that would make Olympic organizers envious. The winning route, now etched in magic marker across Mike's statewide map, took several iterations to get just right.

They would start at their home in Geyserville, travel north along Highway 101 to Smith River, come back south to Eureka and then east – eventually making it to the southeast corner of the state near Yuma, Ariz. Finally, the return trip would take them through the San Diego and Los Angeles areas, north through Bakersfield and back home to River Rock as their final casino stop. All told, the couple traveled a total of 3,892 miles in the Cadillac CTS they rented.

Friends, family and co-workers thought the couple had lost their minds.

"At first, I thought they were crazy, but then I thought it could be kind of fun," said Victor Trentadue, general manager of Trentadue Winery, where Mike works since retiring as a trucker. "Knowing Mike, he does everything full throttle. I call it 'commando style.'"

So why take on this massive task in only two weeks? It's the only time the couple could take all at once. The trip was the first and only two-week vacation the Molinaros have ever embarked upon.

“I did a little research beforehand to see if anybody had ever done this before,” Mike said. “I found out that somebody in Costa Mesa had visited 30 of the casinos, but no one had visited all of them that I could see. So then it became a real challenge.”

To make their travels a real scientific study, the Molinaros agreed upon a stringent set of “rules” for the trip:

- They could gamble with a total of \$50 at each casino
- They could only play on slot machines (of any value)
- They could play for only 60 minutes at each casino (win or lose)

“We’re recreational gamblers,” explained Mike. “So this wasn’t about going out and trying to spend all kinds of money or win at all costs.”

It *was* about having fun and learning as much as possible about California’s Indian gaming industry. Still, to keep their data pure, the couple steadfastly maintained their rules throughout the trip. To help them do so, Teri created an elaborate filing system they kept in the car complete with a folder for each casino – where they would dutifully record which machine they played at each casino and how much they won (or lost). Inside each folder they’d place any brochures, player’s club information or other promotional items they gleaned from each casino. They even took a video camera along to visually document each stop along the way.

Even with the meticulous planning and record keeping, some days were less smooth than others. It was hard to wake up and get moving on some days, the couple admitted. More difficult were the days of long driving with many stops (on the couple’s first day they traveled 311 miles and visited seven casinos) – or the days of long driving with few stops (on the sixth day of the trip, the Molinaros traveled an astonishing 485 miles to visit a single casino).

From the casino décor, to the friendliness of the staff to the food served – each tribe works to demonstrate their uniqueness and openness, the couple said. And throughout the entire trip, the couple never encountered a single moment of discomfort or what they said is commonly thought of as “bad vibes” surrounding casino culture.

“People who say things like that just don’t get it,” Teri said. “It’s about the food, the people and the culture.”

Said Norm Runyan, acting general manager of River Rock Casino, “We were amazed when we heard the Molinaro’s story. They really represent the type of casino guest the Indian gaming community likes to see. They enjoy the games – and appreciate the unique culture at our facilities.”

**Mike & Teri Molinaro’s
California Casino Tour 2005
“By The Numbers”**

Longest number of miles driven on a single day: 485 on day six

Shortest number of miles driven on a single day: 62 on day 10

Total money gambled: \$2,650

Total money won: \$1,915

Casinos with the loosest slots:

Augustine Casino, Coachella, Calif.
Chicken Ranch, Jamestown, Calif.
River Rock Casino, Geyersville, Calif.

Casinos with best breakfast buffet:

Agua Caliente, Rancho Mirage, Calif.
Thunder Valley, Lincoln, Calif.
River Rock Casino, Geyersville, Calif.

After traveling through 41 of California's 58 counties, burning 165 gallons of gasoline and winning \$1,915, the Molinaros were tired but exhilarated. When the couple pulled into their final stop, River Rock Casino in Geyserville, a horde of friends and family greeted them at the door.

"I told Mike, 'Oh, we're home!'" said Teri.