

Hotel Watch: The Opening of MGM's 'Vegas on The Potomac'

BY JOHN ARUNDEL · DECEMBER 23, 2016



MGM CEO Jim Murren, Sen. John Warner, Carolyn Peterson, Lauren Peterson (Milt Peterson). Photo by Tony Powell)

This is not your grandma's casino.

In a star-studded opening worthy of P.T. Barnum, MGM Resorts International opened its \$1.4 billion resort and casino in Oxon Hill, Md., bringing Vegas-styled gaming to a 23-acre hilltop along the banks of the Potomac River.

Located just five miles from the U.S. Capitol, the MGM National Harbor Resort & Casino is the first resort-casino to break ground in the metropolitan D.C. area.

Over 2,000 construction workers spent more than two years transforming what was once the former site of Smoot Bay Co.'s sand and gravel pit into a gleaming new entertainment, lodging, restaurant and casino complex, which some are calling "Las Vegas on the Potomac."

"It's been a marvel to watch its incredible progress," said **Lorenzo Creighton**, president and COO of MGM National Harbor. "We are grateful to the thousands of talented individuals—architects, construction workers, contractors and more—who've worked with great pride to make this amazing achievement happen so quickly."

An Electric Opening

On opening night, the energy at MGM National Harbor was electric.

The VIP ribbon-cutting and celebratory grand opening Dec. 8 brought out the A-List from the worlds of entertainment, fashion, restaurants, media and regional politics, such as actress and entrepreneur **Sarah Jessica Parker** and restaurateurs **Jose Andres**, **Marcus Samuelsson** and brothers **Bryan and Michael Voltaggio**, all of whom have planted their retail or culinary flags at the new one million square foot casino resort in Prince George's County.

Guests in black tie strolled about the massive complex, sipping craft cocktails and small bites from its 15 new eateries. Also on hand were 21 contestants from Miss World 2016, in town for the 66th edition of the Miss World finals that weekend at MGM Theater.

Parker of "Sex and the City" fame greeted guests at her first stand-alone shoe boutique, SJP, with one guest excitedly gasping, "I just spent \$400 on a pair of shoes! It was so worth it."

On the terrace outside, ice sculptors carved a 5,500 pound lion ice sculpture, as white spotlights criss-crossed the 24-story hotel tower.

In the MGM Conservatory inside, Blue Man Group performed, and Cirque du Soleil took over the new MGM Theater with performances from their Las Vegas shows *O, Kà* and *Zumanity*.

The hip-hop dance group Jabbawoockeez, which normally plays the MGM Grand in Las Vegas, did a show on the 125,000-square-foot casino floor, and the Washington Redskins marching band and Yale-trained rock cellists Low Strung played in the conservatory, filling MGM's hallways and lobby with music.

The 15,000 square-foot MGM Conservatory, a signature amenity at National Harbor, is actually 20 percent larger than its Las Vegas counterpart, the Bellagio. It has three display beds, and an 85-foot-tall glass atrium that presents seasonally changing botanical exhibits made from thousands of flowers and plants.

More than 150,000 flowers were used in the MGM National's inaugural "Holiday Reflections" exhibit. All of the flowers come from Melwood, a nonprofit that employs people with disabilities.

Celebrity chefs Andres, Samuelsson and Brothers Voltaggio welcomed the VIP guests with open bars and heaping trays of freshly shucked oysters, fried chicken and ribeye sliders.

Embodying the Excitement of Vegas

Nothing about the gaming complex comes in small portions.

Encompassing a sleek, progressive design, it sprawls over one million square feet of prime shoreline real estate, with 3,600 slot machines and 140 gaming tables. It also has a 308-room hotel tower with villas, a luxury day spa, and dozens of branded, high-end retail shops and 50,000 square feet of meeting space.

Parking? No problem. MGM has built a massive parking complex which can house up to 5,000 cars. Security? Top notch. A security staff of 250 is supplemented by nearly 900 cameras in the casino and another 1,400 monitored by another team on property.

The luxury project marks the East Coast debut of MGM Resorts, the company that gave Las Vegas such prized assets as Bellagio, MGM Grand and Aria, among other properties.

"When we envisioned MGM National Harbor, we wanted to create a resort destination that embodied the excitement of Las Vegas and the amenities it's known for, while also embracing the essence of the Capital Region with its steep heritage and local roots," said **Bill Boasberg**, general manager of MGM National Harbor.

Boasberg, a casino industry veteran who lives in Chevy Chase, said he fully expects the resort to become a "tourism driver" for the Washington DC region, which last year welcomed more than 20 million visitors.

An Inconspicuous Casino

The 125,000 square foot casino entrance is inconspicuously tucked into a wall of the downstairs Conservatory, has some next-gen casino technology.

This includes first-to-market slot games, a bill validator that automatically converts currency, as well as machines that print out time-saving tax forms for lucky jackpot winners, saving them from waiting around for staff people to fill out paperwork.

On opening night, as the VIPs headed home around 10:30 pm, thousands of casino patrons rushed up from the garage and through the side doors, elated to be there opening night. Within a half hour the slot machines, blackjack and roulette tables and the high roller lounge were filled to capacity.

By midnight, the complex was turning away visitors, or making them wait until others cleared the casino floor. During opening weekend the resort became so full that MGM officials, in a bid to curb crowds, were politely asking visitors to postpone their visit unless they had a lodging, dining or spa reservation.

Since its opening, nearly 400,000 people have walked through the doors of the facility, said **Patrick Fisher**, executive director of hotel operations. He expects that trend of 25,000 to 30,000 visitors per day to continue.

"Looking at their faces and seeing how genuinely excited they are really feeds the energy in the building," Fisher said.

The 'Chameleon' MGM Theater

A week later, the chart-topping R&B band **Boyz II Men** became the first performers to take the stage to inaugurate the new 3,000 seat MGM Theater.

Olivier Berthiaume-Berge of Sceno Plus, the theater's head designer, calls the theater a "chameleon" which can adapt to accommodating everything from banquets to concerts to boxing. "We use something that's never been used before, telescopic seating, which can be expanded or contracted to allow more – or less – standing in the venue," he said. "Seating can just disappear if we need it to by lowering it into the floor."

In terms of acoustics, the theater was designed to absorb the highest frequencies, "so the sound doesn't linger," he said. "We're wrapping the audience around the artist."

In a ticket partnership with Live Nation, upcoming musical acts include **Lionel Richie** (Dec. 22), **Bruno Mars** (Dec. 27) and **Duran Duran** (Dec. 31, Jan. 1), followed by **Kings of Leon** (Jan. 12), **Earth Wind & Fire** (Feb. 18), **ZZ Top** (March 5), **Sting** (March 12), and **Cher** (various dates in March).

Bringing in Bob Dylan

Nearly \$30 million in artwork from the region and internationally is on display, including "Portal," a sculpted iron archway designed by legendary folk artist **Bob Dylan**. The 26-foot high piece adorns MGM's west entrance as part of its permanent art collection. It is Dylan's first permanent

work of art for a public space.

Dylan, 75, was not present for the grand opening, as it coincided with the awarding of his Nobel Prize Award for Literature that week in Stockholm (the reclusive Dylan was not present for that either).

Although best known as a singer and songwriter – Dylan has released 48 albums, written more than 600 songs and sold 110 million records – he is also known as a prolific visual artist who has exhibited his paintings for two decades.

“Mr. Dylan is undoubtedly one of the greatest musicians of our time, but his incredible metalwork sculptures are a testament to his creative genius and ability to transcend mediums,” Murren said.

Dylan has been more discreet about his iron work. While he has sculpted iron pieces for family and friends over the past three decades, it wasn't until 2013 – at London's Halcyon Gallery in an exhibition called Mood Swings – that his metal artwork was first viewed publicly. His works feature found objects, vintage scrap metal and industrial artifacts collected from junkyards. He collects everything from farm equipment, children's toys, kitchen utensils and antique fire arms to chains, cogs, axes and wheels, and then welds them into thoughtfully juxtaposed masterpieces.

Gates are elemental in Dylan's body of welding work, as the poet draws from their symbolism as doorways. “Gates appeal to me because of the negative space they allow,” Dylan said in comments released by MGM. “They can be closed, but at the same time they allow the seasons and breezes to enter and flow. They can shut you out or shut you in. And in some ways, there is no difference.”

Dylan's gate will have plenty of company.

More than a dozen artists working with a variety of mediums including clay, stainless steel, bronze, watercolors and photography were commissioned by MGM for its National Harbor Heritage Collection, with objects ranging from large-scale sculptures and paintings to photography and LED light boxes and even dirt, which are integrated into resort's public spaces.

Even dirt is used to create art. Above the hotel's long check-in desk, 10,000 pounds of soil excavated from the resort's construction site was used to create a massive map of the region.

A Culinary Destination

Dining at MGM National Harbor is top-shelf, with 15 chef-driven restaurants already open and taking reservations through next year. Culinary masters **José Andrés**, **Marcus Samuelsson** and brothers **Bryan and Michael Voltaggio** have opened new outposts here.

Andres' Think Food Restaurants opened FISH, a seafood eatery which features, among other items, Maryland blue crab and Rappahannock oysters. The Voltaggio Brothers' Steakhouse, with its elegant wood-paneled library-styled bar, offers craft cocktails and non-traditional steaks such as American Wagyu ribeye. Samuelsson has opened a hip eat-

ery, “Marcus,” with live music which serves up his signature Southern styled dishes, such as moist yard bird chicken and short-rib sliders.

In a nod to Asian gamblers, a Pan-Asian restaurant “Ginger” has opened in the conservatory. The National Market food court offers quick fare such as Shake Shack's “Shack Burgers,” or Asian bun-styled sandwiches from Bahn Mi Vietnamese Kitchen.

Three bar-lounges have also opened, including **Blossom Cocktail Lounge**, with decor inspired by DC's iconic Cherry Blossom Festival; **Felt Bar & Lounge**, which has a tableside mixology program, and **Tap Sports Bar**, whose menu includes lobster beignets and Maryland crab cakes.

“All of these chefs have helped to make us the new culinary destination in the DMV,” Boasberg said.

The Dream of Two Visionaries

For legendary developer **Milt Peterson**, 78, the addition of MGM National Harbor is a capstone of a storied career in real estate which started in the early 60's building residential housing in Fairfax County.

The Peterson Companies is now one of the region's largest privately-held real estate development companies, having developed, acquired, managed and leased 35,000 residential units and 10 million square feet of retail, hotel and office space in Virginia and Maryland.

This empire includes his signature property, National Harbor, nearly seven million square feet of restaurants, shops and condos spread over 350 acres of prime Potomac shoreline, and the Gaylord National, at 2,000 rooms the largest hotel/convention center on the Eastern seaboard.

National Harbor has not been without its share of setbacks, including The Walt Disney Company's decision in 2011 not to exercise its option to build a hotel and entertainment-themed complex on 100 acres sold to it by The Peterson Companies.

Undeterred, the Petersons formed an exclusive joint venture to build the \$100 million Tanger Factory Outlet Center, which opened at National Harbor in 2013.

Then along came the opportunity for Peterson to build a world-class casino at National Harbor.

Peterson's quest began three years ago when he met MGM Resorts Chairman and CEO **Jim Murren** for a National Harbor site visit.

“I picked up Jim from the airport and in the car we just talked about our mutual fondness for great art,” Peterson recalled. “Jim told me, ‘If you select MGM for National Harbor, I promise you I will bring the best artwork out there for this project.’”

In December 2013, Maryland voters awarded MGM Resorts the sixth license to operate a casino in Prince George's County, and construction began in May, 2014. Construction workers labored in an almost frantic dash to get the massive project completed by this month.

Gaming experts have been quoted as saying that MGM National Harbor could attract as many as 25,000 people per day and throw off \$250 million per year in profits, becoming – overnight – the most profitable casino on the East Coast.

That's positive news for Prince George's County and the State of Maryland; MGM keeps 44 percent of its slot revenue while the rest goes to various taxes, including an education trust fund, local impact grants and horse-racing purses and track facility renewals.

"Amazing," sniffed The Las Vegas Review-Journal's gaming columnist **Richard Velotta**. "a 56 percent tax rate."

After originally estimating the cost at \$800 million, earlier this year MGM officials boosted the estimated cost of construction to \$1.4 billion. Murren said the additional \$600 million was poured into more elaborate interior design, a re-design of the theater, a doubling of the number of specialty restaurants and building the complex to LEED specification.

"Our vision for building the finest luxury resort on the East Coast has come to fruition," Murren said. "When we began this journey, we set out to design a property that would rival any in our portfolio and bring great pride to the region. Looking at the project now, it is clear that we have delivered on that vision."