

# Resorts World – adding it up

There're more pluses than minuses but it's early days still for the casino at Resorts World, reports **LEE U-WEN**

A MIDDLE-AGED woman strolled up to the roulette table, clutching her branded handbag as she reached inside for a wad of notes. She changed them for \$500 worth of chips and wasted no time in placing them on various numbers on the table.

"Time's up, no more bets please," said the spiky-haired dealer as he spun the tiny metal ball. The 15 or so other punters who had made bets barely blinked as the ball bounced around the colourful wheel, though one looked up and muttered to himself. Asking for divine intervention, perhaps?

The ball landed on a red "9". I looked at the woman, who soon realised she had lost her entire \$500 bet. But if she was upset, she did not show it. Instead, she dipped into her bag and fished out more cash to play again.

Such was the scene at one of the roulette tables in the main gaming arena of Singapore's first-ever casino at Resorts World Sentosa (RWS) on Feb 21, a week after its soft opening on the first day of the Chinese New Year.

While it was shaping up to be an unlucky night for the woman I saw, that same night was to be very lucrative for a high-roller from China, who was busy playing baccarat in a private VIP room upstairs.

According to a report in a Malaysian daily, the man won a staggering \$1.5 million in a single game. He was not alone for he was said to have carried a lucky charm in the shape of a golden Buddha palm he put in front of him as he gambled.

Superstitious or not, almost every punter I observed had their own quirks as they tried – mostly in vain – to make a killing. Remember that old adage? The house always wins.

## Smooth-sailing – almost

Driving into Sentosa that morning was a breeze. Traffic across the bridge was unexpectedly smooth and finding a lot in the 3,500-capacity car park was easy.

Next up was buying the \$100 24-hour casino fee levy – mandatory for all Singaporeans and permanent residents as a social safeguard and a deterrent against impulse gambling. I joined the queue and was served within a minute by a cheerful woman behind the counter. As she scanned my driving licence, she explained the levy rules clearly and demonstrated how to scan the card upon entering and exiting the casino.

Behind me was a near-constant stream of citizens and PRs waiting patiently in line to pay the levy. Each then proceeded to the respective gantry – most lanes were for foreigners, the rest were for locals – and scanned their ICs. A green light flashed on the screen if their levy was valid and they were welcomed in.

A senior RWS employee I spoke to would not disclose how many locals had paid the levy. But from what I saw on my two visits so far, a couple of thousand a day on average would not be too far off an estimate.

Any visitor to the RWS casino cannot fail to notice a lowering red structure that resembles a tangled mess of spaghetti stretching from floor to ceiling. It is a rare sculpture by artist Dale Chihuly costing over \$1 million. The American is also responsible for the eight red, blue and yellow-hued chandeliers hanging above the Casino Royale bar nearby.

There are many food outlets in the 15,000 sq m facility, and during the 12 hours that I spent at the casino, they seemed to be a welcome place for those wanting a quick bite before returning to the gaming tables. I found the fare reasonably priced at \$4 for a sandwich or \$2 for roti prata with curry. Some punters were using points accumulated on the RWS membership card to claim free meals.

There are many other freebies too if you are alert and know where to look. In one of the smoking areas, for instance, staff brought out trays of fried bee hoon – snapped up almost as soon as they appeared. In the main gaming hall there is a gourmet coffee machine and a soda fountain and boxes of bottled water – gratis.

But although RWS scores on service and decor, it falls way short when



**Jackpot:** It remains to be seen just how well the RWS casino will fare in the coming months, especially when its rival Marina Bay Sands opens on April 27

nature calls. As for the quality of the toilets in the casino hall, let's just say the floor in the Gents was wet, there was an unpleasant smell from the sinks and too few urinals to handle too many people in urgent need.

A long queue could also be seen emerging from the Ladies' side, and some people chose to leave the casino altogether in search of cleaner toilets outside.

## Cacophony of noise

Open for 24 hours, a casino is probably one of the most lively places to be in, no matter what the time of day. The minute I stepped inside the predominantly red-coloured RWS casino, the familiar jingles of slot machines filled my ears.

Bright blinking lights decorated each cluster of machines, displaying the names of the games, such as *Party Time*, *Island Delight* and *1,000 coins*. Some had a digital counter flashing the amounts of "minor" and "major" jackpots, which gamblers could win randomly if they bet certain amounts on each spin.

There was a separate, cordoned-off section near the entrance that was open only to Singaporeans and PRs. The security officer manning the section said that it was a new initiative in response to recent complaints that locals had to pay the levy and yet end up with hardly any-table or slot machines to play at due to the hordes of patrons coming in everyday.

"Picture, picture, picture," I heard someone chant behind me. I turned around and saw a bespectacled old man, with someone who looked like his son, hunching ever so slightly forward at a blackjack table as he watched the dealer in front of him unveil his next card.

The punter had made a \$200 bet on this particular hand, and was willing the dealer – whose initial two cards totalled 14 – to draw a Jack, Queen or King, which would make him "bust".

Lady Luck, however, deserted the man – this time, at least. The dealer revealed a "six", giving him a total of 20. Groans could be heard from the losing gamblers at the table as the

emotionless dealer swept every chip before him in one fell swoop, which at first glance amounted to easily over \$2,000. Yes, that old adage rang true once again.

While the gambling was going on at a relentless pace, a stone's throw away on a stage in the main gaming area were two RWS staff pulling lucky draw coupons from a barrel and calling out the numbers in English, Mandarin and Hokkien. The draw, held at regular intervals, featured instant prizes such as buffet dinner vouchers, five \$88 angpao packets and a grand prize of \$888.

After each draw, different groups of entertainers took turns to perform. Sometimes it was a pretty singer doing the popular *Nobody But You* dance by Korean pop group Wonder Girls. Other times it was a *mettal* show that had the many uncles and aunts clapping in appreciation. And it wasn't even the Hungry Ghost Festival yet.

I managed to sneak a peek into the prestigious Maxims' Club upstairs, open to select RWS and Genting casino members. There, one can gamble in peace, without the crowds and noise a storey below. Hot food and drinks are available for free. And it's easy to take a break without worrying someone will "snatch" your machine or spot at the table.

## Early days still

Of course, no new venture – especially one such as a casino – will be free from hiccups. Many people I spoke to said the dealers were generally friendly and knowledgeable but slow, inexperienced and nervous looking. A friend of mine changed \$100 cash at a blackjack table and was returned to receive \$200 of chips in return.

Yet another friend complained that a blackjack dealer drew a card when he should have not, according to the game's rules. A case of nerves should surely not be confused with basic carelessness.

It remains to be seen just how well the RWS casino will fare in the coming months, especially when its rival Marina Bay Sands opens on April 27. Let the showdown begin. And may the best man – or should be that man? – win.