

A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY

Can Blackpool become Europe's Las Vegas?



Marc Etches: grand designs for Blackpool

Plans have recently been unveiled that would change the face of Blackpool forever. If, as expected, there is a major relaxation of current British gambling legislation in the wake of Sir Alan Budd's recommendations in the Gambling Review Report, Leisure Parcs Ltd aims to develop the UK's first 'resort casino hotel' on the Blackpool sea front. It hopes that others will follow, transforming Blackpool into a world-class destination for gambling and family entertainment. The proposals are at the heart of plans to regenerate not just Blackpool but the whole North West region. Owen Burdekin met the managing director of Leisure Parcs Ltd, Marc W. Etches, to discover more about the planned developments, and why they are receiving such widespread support.

'We have a vision for Blackpool that places the development of its tourism product at the heart of the town's economic and social regeneration. If Blackpool is to survive and prosper, it must find ways in which it can once again become internationally competitive as a destination resort. The development of Las Vegas style resort casino hotels here in Britain's favourite seaside town would provide a powerful catalyst for economic and social regeneration that would have an enormous impact throughout England's North West.

We believe the Government has the opportunity to make this happen. Whilst the recommendations of Sir Alan Budd in his recent review of gambling would make resort casino hotels possible, the Government must bring about legislative change to facilitate a development that will not only be internationally competitive but will also inspire

young, quality driven people possessing sufficient creativity, enthusiasm and talent to build successful careers and make a real difference to the consumer's experience of tourism and hospitality in the UK.'

When Marc Etches tells you he wants to transform Blackpool into Europe's Las Vegas, you had better believe him. Having started his career behind the bar of a nightclub on Blackpool's Central Pier, he is now managing director of Leisure Parcs Ltd, the company that owns all three of the town's piers, along with its major tourist attractions, including the Tower, the Winter Gardens, several theatres, amusement arcades, hotels and attractions including Louis Tussaud's Waxworks and the Blackpool Sea Life Centre.

If the proposals made by Sir Alan Budd in his Gambling Review Report are made law, Marc Etches would dearly love to add a new type of attraction to this already considerable collection: the UK's first 'resort casino hotel'. Based on the casino-hotels of Las Vegas, this new facility would offer punters a range of leisure attractions and facilities including restaurants, shops, conference and exhibition space, entertainment venues and, of course, gaming all brought together under one roof for the first time - and all at a second's notice (the 24-hour membership rule for casinos is also set to change in the revised legislation). 'Las Vegas is the entertainment capital of the world. More than 300,000 people from Britain alone visit there each year, more than from any other European country. Why do they go? For the best hotels, the best casinos, the best entertainment, the best restaurants and the best shopping. Perhaps Blackpool would never match the scale of Las Vegas but we can aspire to match the style of Las Vegas.'

The Atlantic City model

Looking away from Las Vegas for a moment, up the east coast to Atlantic City, we encounter a destination with remarkable

'Blackpool sees the development of resort casino hotels as a unique opportunity to drive economic and social regeneration'



Atlantic City: economic improvements have been driven by casino gambling

Could the same be done in Blackpool?

similarities to Blackpool over the last century. Like Blackpool, it was a popular coastal holiday resort back in the 1930s and 1940s – it even advertised itself as 'The Blackpool of America'. But by the 1970s it faced the same economic challenges Blackpool now faces – fewer visitors, low employment, and crumbling infrastructure.

Gambling was placed at the heart of the recovery plans for Atlantic City, as a unique catalyst for urban regeneration. By offering tourists the opportunity to walk off the street into a casino and play the tables or machines for a few hours, it was hoped that the town could be given the vital boost it needed in attracting not just new visitors but also those who would be needed to make the whole thing happen – investors, developers and operators.

Casino gambling was duly legalised in New Jersey, enabling development to commence. The belief of the public authorities that the new casinos would drive an upturn in the fortunes of Atlantic City has been proven conclusively. Some 50,000

people are now employed in its casino industry, and it welcomes 34 million visitors each year. Its 1,450 gaming tables and 32,500 slot machines generate annual gambling taxes of \$430 million, which is invested in housing, infrastructure, community and economic development projects.

The use of casino development as a tool of regeneration has clearly paid dividends in Atlantic City. Could it also work for Blackpool? There can be no doubt that the area is crying out for major local and regional regeneration. Despite attracting over 10 million visitors in 2000 to its attractions and convention venues, the borough of Blackpool has the fifth lowest GDP in the North West. Visitor numbers are 30 per cent lower than six years ago, conference business is declining and the number of hotels and guesthouses has decreased by nearly 40 per cent over the last ten years. 'As was the case for Atlantic City, Blackpool sees the development of resort casino hotels as a unique opportunity to drive economic and

social regeneration. By creating new jobs, new training opportunities and increased economic activity resort casino hotels can help reinvigorate the local and regional economies and deliver regeneration.'

Pharaohs Palace

In October 2001, Leisure Parcs submitted an application for planning permission to develop the UK's first resort casino hotel, which has the working title of Pharaohs Palace. Set on the site of the former Blackpool Central Railway Station, Pharaohs Palace would be strongly themed on Ancient Egypt both inside and out. Estimated to cost in the region of £150 million, the development would be on a grand scale, comprising 100,000 square feet of themed gaming space (on which 80 table games and 2,500 slot machines would be available), 1,000 hotel rooms and suites, 40,000 square feet of conference space, a 3,000-seat theatre for the performing arts, and 200,000



The Pharaohs Palace development would be the UK's first resort casino hotel



Above: Blackpool's famous illuminations: soon to become the town's new 'Strip'. Below: Rollercoasters at the Pleasure Beach, Blackpool's biggest traditional attraction. Opposite: Aerial view of Blackpool's seafront.



square feet of leisure and retail attractions. (Significantly, Single Regeneration Budget funding to the tune of £20 million has already been secured for the town's new conference facilities.)

Pharaohs Palace would also include an international-style gaming club aimed specifically at 'high rollers', covering 15,000 square feet and offering 50 high stake slot machines and 15 gaming tables. Taking another leaf out of the Vegas book, a gourmet dining experience would also be made available to these more affluent guests, bringing them exclusive cuisine from around the world. 'Pharaohs Palace would be the first step in the transformation of Blackpool into a year-round international holiday destination!'

Surely one resort casino hotel, however grand and glamorous, wouldn't change Blackpool overnight? 'It would be a fantastic new beginning for the town. This one property could generate 3,000 jobs and inject £100 million into the regional economy each year. More importantly, it would act as the catalyst to further development. We have been working in partnership with Blackpool Borough Council, the North West Development Agency, the North West Tourist Board and the British Tourist Authority to develop a long-term vision for Blackpool. All are in agreement with our view that Blackpool's history, location and economic situation make it the best destination in which to pilot resort casino hotels, as a test case for any new gambling legislation. We believe that the town has the capacity for as many as six such hotels, which would bring with them not just added value to the town's tourism proposition but also huge benefits to the region as a whole.'

Economic impact

If a recent report by Pion Economics is to be believed, Mr Etches may be justified in his optimism. It claims that the creation of six resort casinos hotels would create 13,000 direct jobs for Blackpool, suggesting an annual injection of more than £500 million into the local economy. For the town whose unemployment stands at 6,000, these predictions are not to be sniffed at. The full impact for job creation could be as many as 25,000.

'The huge advantage of the resort casino hotels would be their ability to generate income on a constant basis, not just according to the ebb and flow of traditional

resort seasonality. They would not be dependent upon the weather for their success, making them attractive to visitors all year round! But just how attractive? 'With the growth in attractions we would anticipate visitation to rise to 30 million by 2020 if all goes to plan. If we can hit that target, we would expect to generate annual tourism related revenues approaching £2 billion.'

Allaying fears

Few would deny the potential economic benefits that the proposed developments could bring to Blackpool. But would they do so at the expense of the town's traditional attractions? 'The great strength of Blackpool is that it has the potential to offer something for everybody. We must never lose that. Whether it's a ride on a roller coaster at the Pleasure Beach, a dance at the Tower Ballroom or a paddle with the toddlers, Blackpool can give so many visitors what they want. Families have always been at the heart of the Blackpool experience, and there's no reason why this should change.'

Some might argue that this is easier said than done: casinos and Kiss-Me-Quick hats have never traditionally gone hand in hand. 'Maybe so, but there is nothing to say that those two things aren't simply two sides of the same leisure coin. I see a future where the traditional attractions are not lost but are integrated with new attractions that can compete with the allure of holidays abroad.

Blackpool must continue to be all about fun and entertainment and resort casino hotels will ensure this is the case by providing a greater range of leisure activities readily accessible to holidaymakers.'

Understandably, perhaps, the proposed ease of access to the exciting new facilities has been a cause of some anxiety amongst certain residents. Are there any guarantees against problem gambling or the attraction of criminal elements to the casino-dominated Blackpool of the future? 'The current stringent regulatory control already present in the UK is likely to be strengthened rather than relaxed, maintaining the world-wide reputation this country has for a gaming industry free of crime and operated with the highest degree of probity. We also expect to work closely with those organisations providing support services, such as GamCare, to ensure resort casino hotels make a positive contribution to UK tourism without losing sight of those few for whom gambling is a problem.'

Cementing support

For proof that the social argument is being won, you only have to look at the list of organisations to have pledged their support to the Pharaohs Palace development and the longer-term vision for Blackpool. It includes the Borough Council, other local councils, local MPs, residents groups, and the Blackpool Challenge Partnership, the public-private partnership spearheading Blackpool's

regeneration initiatives. Support is also forthcoming from the town's private sector tourist and leisure operators, who are eager to improve their own balance sheets through increased visitation.

At a regional level, both the North West Tourist Board and the North West Development Agency are firmly behind the plans, and the British Tourist Authority has also provided vocal support. And the region's major service providers, among them Manchester and Liverpool Airports, are keen to see more visitors to the North West.

As the clock ticks towards the probable announcement of changes to current gambling legislation, Marc Etches is itching to get development underway. 'Blackpool has a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to embrace an economic catalyst powerful enough to re-establish itself as the premier seaside resort destination of Europe. Such radical change will not happen overnight, it will require unprecedented partnership between public and private sectors and it will need enormous energy from all those involved. But it can be done!' Judging by the depth of support for the proposals and the dynamism of the man behind them, you wouldn't back against it.

