

Imagine stepping inside a cruise ship, but instead of ocean water, you're surrounded by the Sonoran Desert.

We-Ko-Pa Casino Resort, about 30 miles northeast of central Phoenix on land owned by the Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation, is where this vision becomes reality as a reimagined one-stop vacation spot.

People who visited We-Ko-Pa before the pandemic will find a different, higher-end experience today, said Gail Manginelli, a spokeswoman for the resort.

"We have everything right here — fine dining, a casino, golf, outdoor activities and a spa," she said. "And you feel like you're away from it all, even though you're close enough. All you see is desert."

Coming soon: [This famous Scottsdale resort is getting a luxurious upgrade](#)

A reinvention and rebranding

The 166,341-square-foot casino resort, an AAA Four Diamond hotel, reinvented and rebranded itself upon the completion of a new, 100% smoke-free casino in October 2020. It replaced the original Fort McDowell Casino.

The resort closed in March 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but reopened in May, not long before its refresh was completed.

The resort is across the street from the We-Ko-Pa Golf Club, which has two award-winning golf courses with desert and mountain views, and close to Fort McDowell Adventures, which hosts outdoor experiences like horseback tours and desert Segway tours.

We-Ko-Pa resort, Fort McDowell Casino are now unified

We Ko Pa's new look

Written by Administrator
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Before the pandemic, the We-Ko-Pa hotel and Fort McDowell Casino operated as separate entities.

The casino opened in 1984 under the name Ba'Ja Bingo, Manginelli said. It was Arizona's first casino.

The hotel opened in 2006 as the Radisson Fort McDowell Resort & Casino, then was renamed the We-Ko-Pa Resort & Conference Center in 2014, she said. The hotel has 246 rooms, 25,000 square feet of meeting space, two outdoor pools and a spa.

Unifying the hotel and casino enabled We-Ko-Pa to build "a more cohesive brand" and operate more efficiently, Manginelli said.

More: [Gila River Indian Community breaks ground on 4th casino south of Chandler](#)

An upgraded, smoke-free new casino

Open 24 hours, We-Ko-Pa's casino boasts more than 900 slot machines, a 400-seat bingo hall, and 16 blackjack tables.

In the last 12 months, the casino introduced new gaming options including new craps and roulette table games and eight sports betting kiosks.

A key difference from the old casino is how the new one opened as a smoke-free venue, said Christi Windle, We-Ko-Pa's director of sales.

"No one has ever smoked in it," she said. "With other casinos, even if it's smoke-free, you can still have lingering smoke (from when smoking was allowed)."

More: [This resort hidden away in the mountains was just named No. 1 in Arizona](#)

Where to eat at We-Ko-Pa Casino Resort

One of the most prominent additions to We-Ko-Pa since its rebranding is [Ember](#), a fine dining restaurant specializing in steaks and seafood. It has attracted high interest among visitors and received high-profile recognition.

"It really is a freestanding destination," Windle said. "Some people come just for the restaurant."

OpenTable recognized Ember in its 2022 Diner's Choice awards as one of the 10 Arizona restaurants with the best service.

Ember's wine selection encompasses 22 countries with 800 wines by the bottle and 26 wines by the glass. These include 32 wines that scored a perfect 100 points on Wine Spectator's world's best wine lists.

Wine Spectator recently honored Ember for outstanding wine curation. The resort said on July 25 that Ember received the [magazine's 2022 Best of Award of Excellence](#).

Ember also received this recognition in 2021.

"That we won this award two years in a row – which also happens to be how long Ember has been open – is a testament to our entire staff's commitment to excellence," Zac Gallo, We-Ko-Pa's executive director of food and beverage, said in a statement.

Ember isn't the only place to eat at We-Ko-Pa. Other restaurants include:

- **WKP Sports & Entertainment**, which serves pub food and craft beer and hosts live

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music and sports betting.

- **The Market**, a quick-serve restaurant with on-the-go options, open 24 hours a day.
- **The Dining Studio**, with two all-you-can-eat restaurants in one: Las Tapas, which serves Mexican food, and Dragon Wok & Noodle, which serves Asian food.
- **Ahnala**, a breakfast and lunch spot specializing in American comfort food.

More: [Sheraton Phoenix Downtown's reno is done. Here's what's new for travelers, locals](#)

What's next for We-Ko-Pa

The rebranding and enhancements to the guest experience – right down to the Native American design elements in the lobby – were intended to reimagine We-Ko-Pa as a must-visit destination.

And there's still more to come. The poolside cabanas will be upgraded to "super deluxe," each with its own TV and refrigerator.

The new cabanas were supposed to debut in May, but supply chain disruptions delayed completion, Windle said.

Occupancy at We-Ko-Pa is up

The result of We-Ko-Pa's work is an occupancy rate that staff said is "well exceeding" pre-pandemic levels.

"Everybody's just super excited to come out and have an experience," Windle said.

Business travel is still overcoming pandemic-era challenges nationwide and in the Phoenix area, but We-Ko-Pa's business from groups is strong going into 2023.

Staff attributed this in part to upcoming events like the Super Bowl and the WM Phoenix Open.

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"(Travelers are) wanting it to be 2019," Windle said. "They give me three to four dates and we're all booked."

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