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FACTS ABOUT THE CASINO BALLROOM AND AVALON THEATRE

The Grande Dame of Art Deco

The Casino Building, Avalon's world-famous landmark, is not a gambling casino at all. As a matter of fact, casino is an Italian word meaning place of entertainment or gathering. It was never intended to house gambling and doesn't to this day. The building, perched at the edge of Avalon Bay, is the largest circular theater in the world that was built without support beams. It has been well maintained and has undergone restoration, inside and out.

The building itself is equivalent in height to a 12-story office structure and houses the Catalina Island Museum, the Catalina Art Association Art Gallery and a fitness center, a movie theater, as well as public restrooms. The Casino Ballroom, located on the top floor of the Casino Building, has been the site of major events since its grand opening in May of 1929. The ballroom gained nationwide fame in the 1930s and 40s when it hosted many of the big bands, including Jimmy Dorsey, Woody Herman and Harry James, just to name a few. And it was on May 15, 1934 that CBS radio listeners across the country first heard: "From the beautiful Casino Ballroom overlooking Avalon Bay, at Catalina Island, we bring you the music of ..." Today, the ballroom is the site of special events year-round.

Tours

The Santa Catalina Island Company offers walking tours of the Casino Building. "Discover the Casino" is a trip down Memory Lane to the heyday of the casino, when the big bands played and the ballroom floor was a sea of dancers – 6,200 dancers were on the floor as Kay Kyser played one spring night in 1940! This tour also includes a visit to the beautiful Avalon Theatre for a viewing of a new video on the history of the Casino. The "Behind the Scenes" tour focuses on the cultural history of the building, and pays visits to backstage areas, green rooms, the Ballroom stage, and an editing room where Cecil B. DeMille

watched “rushes” of movies shot on Catalina. Tours may be booked at www.visitcatalinaisland.com.

Opening Day

The Casino Building opened on Wednesday, May 29, 1929. The City of Avalon proclaimed a legal holiday that day and requested that all businesses close. Festivities included a parade along Crescent Avenue, a flag-raising ceremony, music by a variety of band groups, the arrival of Father Neptune, a fashion review on the boardwalk, escorted tours of the building, ceremonial presentations, a stage show and an organ concert, among other events.

Design

Architects Walter Webber and Summer A. Spaulding, Los Angeles, gave the Casino its Mediterranean design with Moorish Alhambra influences, and in 1930, it won the Honor Award from the American Institute of Architects, Southern California Chapter. The building is circular, with two wings, an overhanging balcony, and a 25-foot lantern cupola above a tiled roof. It was the first theater designed for talking films (engineers studied it to design another famous theater-- Radio City Music Hall).

Construction

Construction was under the direction of David M. "D.M." Renton, Vice President and General Manager of the Santa Catalina Island Company, who had been a contractor for many years in Pasadena. More than 60 subcontractors were employed. Construction started in early February of 1928 and was completed by May 25, 1929, with more than 500 workers who worked around the clock to complete it in time for the summer season.

Avalon Theatre

The Avalon Theatre has one film screen and a seating capacity of 1,154. The theatre is so well insulated that patrons cannot hear the band playing or the 6,000+ dancers on the floor above, yet the acoustics are so good that a speaker on the theatre stage can speak in a normal voice without a microphone and be heard clearly by all in attendance.

Current movies are screened in the Avalon Theatre, on the ground floor of the Casino Building. Attending one can be a magical experience – a step back into the grand movie palaces of Hollywood’s Golden Era. Arrive early just to get a look at the lavish murals that adorn the walls, and other opulent design touches. Additionally, the theatre still has its original 4-manual,



16 rank theatre pipe organ built by the Page Pipe Organ Company of Lima, Ohio, one of only three left in the world. It is played every Friday and Saturday evening.

John Gabriel Beckman, a well-known artist who had also worked on a number of movie theaters, including Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood, designed the murals in the theater and on the exterior of the building. Nine panels encircle the inside walls of the theater loggia and are stylized underwater scenes of marine life, inspired by a trip Beckman had taken on a glass-bottom boat. Originally designed to be executed in glazed Catalina tile, the murals had to be painted directly onto the concrete surface in order to be ready for the opening.

In 1986, under the direction of Beckman, the center mural was reproduced in tile, and it is intended that the rest of these murals will be reproduced in tile as originally designed.

In the theater, the walls are decorated with murals painted on a jute-like material using "11 grind" pigments in a medium of flatene, a binder that printers used to bind ink to paper. The murals have never been touched up. They were inspired by Southern California scenery and history, and are abstract in design, with great vitality of movement among the stylized figures and shapes.

In 1929, this work was dubbed futuristic but is now referred to as an example of Art Deco. On the left, the sequence of motifs includes exotic birds and flowers, a Spanish ship, hooded friars, and an archer aiming at a fleeing deer. On the right, the sequence features cactus and succulents, leaping goats, exotic foliage, and Indians astride chagrin. On the ceiling, a multitude of 22-karat gold leaf stars twinkle

Catalina Island Museum

The Catalina Island Museum, located at the Casino Building, is newly remodeled. It has an outstanding collection of archaeological material excavated on the Island, as well as Native American artifacts, historic photographs, fishing tackle, and Catalina pottery. The museum also has an extensive collection of books about Catalina Island for sale. The museum is open daily. For more information, call 310-510-2414.



The Ballroom:

The Casino Ballroom is 180 feet in diameter with no interior columns and is the largest ballroom of this type in existence, made possible by the building's cantilever construction. The ballroom dance floor is 158 feet in diameter, surrounded by two terraces 13 feet wide. The floor is laid in strips of maple, white oak and rosewood on a layer of felt and acoustical paper, over a subfloor of polished pine floating on cork.

The largest number of dancers ever in the Casino was 6,200 people dancing to the music of Kay Kyser, on May 8, 1940. Virtually every big band in that era played in the Casino Ballroom and many carried over CBS radio on live broadcasts from 1934 into the 1950's.

The Casino Ballroom plays host to many functions year round, such as dinners, weddings, dances, meetings and jazz festivals. The ballroom can accommodate 1,200 people for dinner only, 1,800 people in classroom style seating for meetings or concerts, 1,200 people for dances and a maximum of 1,000 people for dinner dances.

Every New Year's Eve, the Casino Ballroom comes alive with a festive party where guests can dance the night away and ring in the New Year on the legendary ballroom floor. For more information about the New Year's Eve event visit www.CatalinaChamber.com/nye

For reservations and information on having an event at the Casino, please call (310) 510-7400.

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