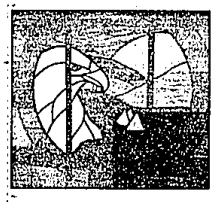
TRAVEL

Eagle soars for wonderful vacations

BY THERESE MICKELSEN
STAFF WRITER

From the moment you spot it, this huge complex sprawling over the landscape somehow looks out of place in quiet Mount Pleasant, Mich.

As you drive under the stone archway guarded by two giant eagles clutching gold coins and welcoming you to the Soaring Eagle Casino & Resort, you'll expect something spectacular. You won't be disappointed as you'll pull into the main hotel entrance area and have your car parked by the free valet service and have a bellman take your bags. The hotel lobby meets your eyes as you enter, and the mammoth stone fireplace surrounded by beautiful Aztec-design carpets and comfortable sitting areas beckons.



Powerful Images: *This stained glass window reflects the many Native American themes at Soaring Eagle.*

The Soaring Eagle Casino & Resort was opened in 1997 by the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe and features the largest casino between Atlantic City and Las Vegas. This venture is sure to be a winner for the tribe, which since 1994 has pumped $71.5 million into the Michigan Strategic Fund.

After you've checked in, just *finding your room can be an* experience in the huge 512-room hotel. My husband, Bob, and I have now stayed in two different styles of room and have been pleased with them both. Soaring Eagle advertises that here a "room" is not merely a "room." I'd have to agree, and I've stayed in a lot of hotels.

As a vehement non-smoker, I was immediately impressed that the first, third and fifth floors of the hotel are completely non-smoking. Indeed, I did not smell any smoke at all while in our rooms on both the third and fifth floors, or while going to and from them.

It was also impressive that, though the hotel was full on both of our visits, we did not hear noises from other guests while in our rooms. We felt we were in an oasis away from it all while in our rooms; the designs, furnishings and decor are all in the Aztec motif and are very warm and soothing.

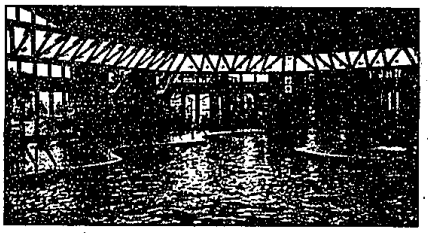
Serious pampering is realized when you come back from dinner or your evening's entertainment to find fresh towels in the bathroom, extra large and fluffy towels laid out at your antique tub or whirlpool, your bed turned down and fine chocolates on your pillow — it's like being on a cruise!

Dramatic entry: *Two eagles in flight greet visitors to the Soaring Eagle Resort in Mount Pleasant.*

All the hotel rooms here are downright luxurious, with amenities such as whirlpools, gas fireplaces, antique tubs and *terrazzo marble bathrooms.* First-class rooms are $119-179, deluxe class rooms $139-189, superior class rooms from $159-199 and premium class rooms $269-299. Hotel prices quoted here are standard rates; Soaring Eagle does offer entertainment, golf and casino packages.

Are you ready to venture to the casino? The walk to get there takes you through a magnificent, wide room called the Grand Foyer, featuring some of the most beautiful Oriental-style carpets in a floral pattern I've ever seen. The ceiling is a hand-painted work of art all on its own, with eagles flying in a majestic sky. The colors in this room are brought together by the hand-carved wooden staircases and accents. Numerous display cases appear here and throughout the resort featuring Native American art work and memorabilia.

Before you get to the casino, you'll see Kids Quest and Cyberquest. Kids Quest is touted as the ultimate "edutainment" experience for youngsters 6 months to 12 years old. There are plenty of age-appropriate things to keep them busy here, in a safe, supervised hourly setting. Cost is $5 per hour per child Monday-Thursday, $6 Friday-Sunday and holidays. Hours are 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday-Thursday and 10 a.m. to midnight Friday and Saturday. Cyberquest is unsupervised and lets those over 12 feed quarters into arcade games. Kids under 12 need a parent present.



Cool down: *When you need a break from gambling, the Soaring Eagle has a large indoor pool.*

As we enter the casino, Bob wanders off to put his name in for table poker. There are lots of folks here just standing around, so I don't feel too out of place as I try to decide what to do first. If you like casinos, it's all here; blackjack, craps, roulette, keno, poker, 95 table games and 4,000 slot and video poker machines. But, alas, the 24-hour bright lights and brilliant color atmosphere can't hide the fact that you'll find no non-smoking section here; what a shame!

Further down the hall is the home of the highest stakes bingo in Michigan. The bingo hall is also used for the big-name entertainment that is giving the facility a reputation. Look for Merle Haggard and Englebert Humperdink, among others, to perform in June. Ticket prices are between $14 and $40 and are available at all Ticket Plus outlets.

Don't forget to pack a robe and flip-flops for your visit to the spa (and budget a little extra cash for some top-of-the-line pampering). A visit to the fabulous pool, indoor whirlpool, swim-jet pool, outdoor jacuzzi or steam room is free. In addition, a myriad of body treatments, massages, hydrotherapy, facials, half or full-day bliss packages are available (priced $40-240; appointments necessary).

But by far, our favorite part of both of these getaways was the superb food and service offered at the Water Lily Restaurant and Lounge. A 47-foot-long wall welcomes you to this part of the resort. Most areas are in view of the lighted, five-story fountain outdoors. Book a reservation for dinner in advance and get a table for the best view.

A bread basket is served with at least four varieties of home-baked delights. A surprising number of great wines are available both by the bottle and the glass.

Bob ordered the elk both times and was pleasantly surprised to have it cooked to his well-done liking. I ordered the mahimahi the first time and the halibut the next; both were the best fish I'd ever eaten. Expect to pay $18-28 per entree including a starch and veggie; salads and soups are extra. As you might expect, a wonderful tray of desserts are available to pick from, as well as an array of coffees and teas. The service both times we were there was positively superb.

If you're looking for a quick, indulgent getaway, I'd recommend you consider the Soaring Eagle, just an hour north of Lansing. If you're a golfer, Mount Pleasant is somewhat of a "golf capital" for central Michigan, with more than a dozen highly rated courses close by.

Visit the Soaring Eagle online at www. sagchip. com/ soaringeagle/ main. htm. For hotel and restaurant reservations, call (877)232-4532; for casino information, call (877)732-4537; for concert tickets, call (800)585-3737 or visit any Ticket Plus outlet.

Therese Mickelsen is a freelance writer living in Redford.

GREAT ESCAPES

Great Escapes features various travel news items. Send news leads, story ideas or your own travel adventures to Keely Wygonik, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36351 Schoolcraft, Livonia, 48150 or fax to (734)591-7279 or e-mail to kwygonik@ oc. homecomm. net

UP NORTH

Every summer, regular as the season's turn, residents of southeast Michigan head Up North for recreation, relaxation and inspiration.

We'd like to know where you go when you go Up North. Tell us about your favorite Up North spot. Is it a beach house on Lake Michigan, a resort around Traverse City, a cabin in the deep woods, a river cottage near Lake Huron, a bed and breakfast on Mackinac Island or a hideaway in the UP? Do you enjoy boating on the Great Lakes, golfing on the designer courses, hiking the rugged trails, biking the back roads, antique hunting, fudge eating or simply watching the sunset on a beautiful beach?

Tell us in 50-75 words about your favorite Up North place and if you have a photograph send it along for a travel story about Michigan's special paradise.

Send your stories and pictures to Keely Wygonik at the Observer & Eccentric, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48150. Or e-mail your comments to kwygonik@ oc. homecomm. net

CANOE ADVENTURE

Pinery Provincial Park in Ontario will "celebrate the canoe" during Ausable Adventures weekend June 19-20. Many canoe-related activities will take place, including your chance to paddle a voyageur canoe. For information, call the Pinery Visitor Centre at (519) 243-8574. Back to Basics

Mission Point Resort on Mackinac Island is offering a family package that includes three days and two nights in a Family Double Room, one dinner, breakfast each morning, admission to historic Fort Mackinac a horse-drawn hayride and a round trip on Shepler's ferry. The package is available through Sept. 6. The package is available only Sundays through Thursdays. For more information, call (800) 833-7711 or go to www. missionpoint. com

TOUR GRAND RAPIDS

The Community House in Birmingham is sponsoring a two-day tour of Grand Rapids, including a night at the four-star Amway Grand Plaza Hotel June 22-23.

The docent-lead tour will visit the Grand Rapids Art Museum, Fredrick Meijer Gardens and the Van Andel Museum Center. For information, call (248) 594-6419.

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