

New Zealand

by David Moore

When an American arrives in New Zealand he definitely feels like he's a long way from home. Getting there involves what for most will be the longest plane trip of a lifetime. Practically every bar and restaurant has a sign on it advertising "casino" but chip collectors will be sorry to discover the sign only means the establishment has slot machines, which are called "pokies" in both New Zealand and Australia. Each establishment is limited to no more than 18 pokies. None of the machines seem to use tokens but instead all take the thick \$2.00 coin. The machines are set to register a different numbers of credits for a \$2.00 coin, giving 100 credits, 40 credits, 20 credits or 2 credits, depending on the machine. Complicating figuring out what you're gambling for an American is that a New Zealand dollar is worth about 60 cents U.S at this time. Almost all the machines seem to be Aristocrats, which are made in Australia.

Incidentally, New Zealand has the second highest number of slot machines per capita of any country in the world (Australia is first). As an example of how the inhabitants of "Down Under" love to gamble, the average amount lost gambling as a percentage of total consumer spend-

ing in the United States is one percent. In Australia and New Zealand the figure is 5.5 percent! Another example is that as of a couple years ago there were about 180,000 slot machines in Australia, compared to 500,000 in the U.S. although the United States has a population roughly 15 times greater than Australia.

But what about the chips? New Zealand has six "real" casinos" which use chips in the usual assortment of games played in an American casinos. The main game you won't find in

New Zealand is craps. Apparently the largest of the casinos, Sky City in Auckland, did have a crap table for a year or so but discontinued it because, with its high staffing requirements, it wasn't profitable enough.

Sky City is by far the largest casino in New Zealand, which isn't surprising since Auckland is by far the largest city in the country with more one million inhabitants. The casino is located alongside the imposing Sky Tower, which at 1076 feet is the tallest structure in the Southern Hemisphere. (If gambling



Sky Tower



isn't enough excitement, another diversion offered is jumping off the tower attached to a bungee cord. This writer passed on the opportunity because of the possibility that chips might come flying out of pockets in the endeavor.)

The main Sky City casino includes a 14,000 sq ft. gaming floor with 80 blackjack tables, 24 single-zero roulette wheels, money wheels, keno, Caribbean stud poker and pai gow, as well as over 1000 slot machines. Gaming takes place 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The smaller Alto Casino and Bar, which has a more intimate atmosphere, is open from 4 p.m. to late. Players must be over 20 years and the posted signs at the entrance of both casinos say patrons are required to "dress smartly." From my observations of the customers, it appeared as long as your T-shirt didn't have too many holes you were admitted.

Chips are not available at the cage, but only from the tables in denominations of 25cents, \$1, \$2.50, \$5, \$25, \$100 and \$500. The casino also uses a yellow plastic \$5 "match play" chip. The roulette chips are marked with the Sky City name. Sky City is the only New Zealand casino not to use generic roulettes.

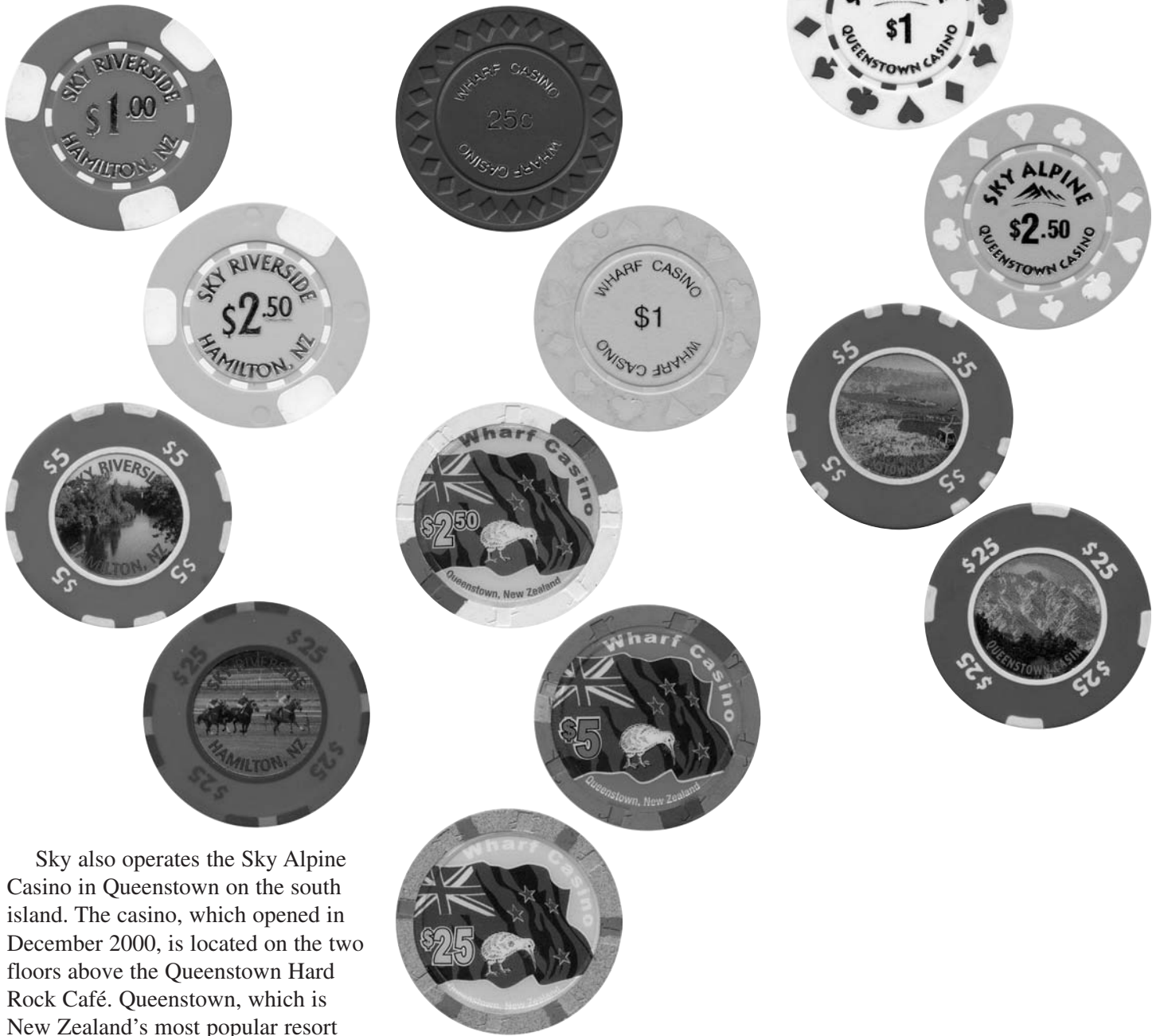
The second-largest casino in New Zealand is the Christchurch Casino in the city of the same name. Christchurch is the largest city on the south island and its casino has about 35 table games and 500 slots. The chips in Christchurch were in the same denominations as Sky City, as was true in all the casinos except for the casino in Hamilton, which didn't use a 25-cent chip. Incidentally, Christchurch, which was the first casino to open in New Zealand (1994) appears to be the only casino

to have issued a grand opening chip, which was given out when a patron bought a \$50 phone card. The chip, with a roulette wheel on it, apparently was a no-value \$50 chip.



Next in size is the Sky Riverside Casino in Hamilton, which is about an hour and a half south of Auckland on the north island. The Riverside is the newest casino in New Zealand, having opened in February, 2003. It is also likely to retain its stature as newest for some time as there is currently a moratorium on any new casinos in New Zealand.

seems to get less business than the Sky Alpine. Their chips seem designed to appeal to tourists, featuring New Zealand's national icon, the kiwi bird and the New Zealand flag. The tables look out on the stunningly beautiful snow-capped Remarkables of the Southern Alps and the lake. This view is featured on the casino's slot card.



Sky also operates the Sky Alpine Casino in Queenstown on the south island. The casino, which opened in December 2000, is located on the two floors above the Queenstown Hard Rock Café. Queenstown, which is New Zealand's most popular resort town, both for skiing in winter and water sports on the lake in summer, is the only city with two casinos. The Steamer Wharf casino in Queenstown



Dunedin Casino

The Dunedin Casino, which opened in 1999, is located in the Southern Cross Hotel, which was formerly the Grand Hotel, built in 1883 as the finest hotel in the Southern Hemisphere. Dunedin advertises itself as a “boutique casino” and is small with perhaps a dozen table games. Dunedin issued a \$5 millennium chip in 2000 and after polite inquiries on several visits from this American visitor the night shift manager was able to provide one. Rules, however, required that that chip be bought off the table, so a fill was ordered and a clear plastic box was brought from the cage accompanied by a security guard. The fill contained exactly one chip, the \$5 millennium chip.

All of the New Zealand casinos have slot cards. Obtaining one is a little like getting an American Express card, with a great deal of information requested. Although the three Sky casinos (Auckland, Hamilton and Queenstown) all have slightly different designs on their cards, any of the cards can be used at any of the casinos.

When the American visitor applied for a Sky card at the Hamilton casino, the worker in the booth said that since the computer showed the player already had two cards there might be a charge for another card. After checking with a manager it was decided a card could be issued without a charge. My wife said quietly that we were careless and had lost a lot of cards. This produced a chuckle from the staff member at the desk. The charge apparently is a deduction of 500 points from the player’s account if too many cards are lost. No “lost” card were observed lying around at unattended slot machines so the system does seem to get players to keep a close eye on their cards. Another “trick” in the collector’s arsenal that doesn’t work in New Zealand is offering a tip. All of the casinos have a strict no-tipping policy and when the unknowing American offered a tip after beating the dealer with a four-of-a-kind in Caribbean stud he was told that accepting the tip could lead to the firing of the dealer. The dealers seemed unfailingly friendly and completely professional despite the policy. Incidentally,



low-rollers will be happy to hear that almost all table games in New Zealand have a \$5 minimum bet, which comes to \$3 U.S. Typically the minimum straight-up bet on a roulette wheel is \$1, or 60 cents U.S.

One of the strangest things about visiting New Zealand is returning

home. Flying back to California, the 747 arrives 7 hours BEFORE it left, thanks to crossing the International Dateline. (Makes it hard to figure if its time for breakfast or dinner.) For Americans, it probably isn't worth traveling all the way to New Zealand for the casinos alone because a great

many U.S. states each have far more than the six casinos in New Zealand. But few American states can rival the diversity of natural beauty and allow a vacationer to stretch the dollar as much as New Zealand.