

Inside the player lounges at the WSOP

Las Vegas – Most of the players competing in the World Series of Poker's Main Event kill time during the five breaks in play each day by using their cellphones, hitting the restroom and/or grabbing a quick drink or a bite to eat.

Chris Moneymaker, however, has a different approach. He plays foosball.

„I love it, man,“ said the 2003 Main Event champ on Saturday as he hurried back to the tables seconds after losing a game of foosball during the first break of the day,. „Keeps me alert. It's fun.“

Foosball isn't the only option available for Moneymaker and the other players here at the Main Event to kill time during breaks. Thanks to the player lounges that are set up each year, players can do everything from check their e-mail to play video games or watch their favorite movie during one of the four 20-minute breaks each day and the 90-minute dinner break.

This year, four online poker rooms have sponsored lounges – PartyPoker, Ladbrokes, Everest and Betfair. There's also the Champions Lounge – a creation inspired by Daniel Negreanu, Joe Hachem, Greg Raymer and Moneymaker. (All four of those players are PokerStars pros, but since that site accepts U.S. players, it can not host a player lounge here in Nevada.)

Some of the lounges are private, or semi-private, while a couple are open to the public. Since arriving on the scene here in Las Vegas on Tuesday, the Casino City editorial team quickly got tired of the food and drink options while covering the event. (The only thing worse than press box food is no press box food.) The Poker Kitchen is a made-for-the-WSOP

restaurant just outside the Amazon Room with overpriced, average food and drink (think USD 2.50 for a cup of coffee and USD 8.00 for a turkey sub). The only other place to grab a bit nearby is the São Paulo Café, which has decent food, but always draws huge lines during the breaks.

So we decided to use our journalistic license to its fullest extent and create a „Casino City Crashes the Player Lounge Day at the World Series of Poker,“ a date we hope to make an annual event. Here are the results.

The Champions Lounge

Size: Approximately 2,600 square feet

Hours of operation: Noon to midnight

Who can go in?: The lounge is open to everybody, all you have to do is fill out a registration form the first time you enter. The form gets you a „VIP pass“ back to the room. But when capacity gets to 70 people or so (which happens often during breaks) the door closes. Food: Various snacks and finger foods are brought out on a steady basis. Soda, coffee, tea and water are also available.

Alcoholic beverages?: No

Entertainment options: Pool table, foosball table, Nintendo Wii, PlayStation 3, Wireless Internet with two laptops available, two backgammon boards, chess table, 55-inch plasma TV.

What does it look like inside?: Once you step foot into the red and black clad lounge, it doesn't take long to realize whose idea it was. Plastered across the wall on the right-hand side is a massive banner that simply says „Champions Lounge“ and has the faces of Raymer, Negreanu, Moneymaker and Hachem spread across it. The players are not identified by name, which gives you the feeling that if you're inclined to ask,

„Who are those guys?“ you probably shouldn't be in there in the first place.

This is the lone lounge that does not have a poker table of any kind. According to Champions Lounge Host Neil Johnson, the players wanted a „alcohol and gambling-free zone.“ The design of the lounge is the work of Meridican Incentive Consultants in Canada and it has the look and feel of a Vegas nightclub with sleek drapery and retro couches and recliners. Raymer, Negreanu, Moneymaker and Hachem have a private set up in back that features massage tables exclusively for them and a place to sit down and eat in private, if they so choose.

What makes it unique?: This is the place to go if you want to see big-name professionals. While a lot of the big-name professionals duck into the Harrah's ultra-private VIP suite during breaks, many of them head to the Champions Lounge. Earlier this week, Moneymaker was taking on all comers at the foosball table. Greg Raymer was in there on Sunday afternoon playing Wii tennis. The 2007 World Series of Poker Europe champion Annette Obrestad has been a regular and has been spotted playing pool and Wii bowling. Isabelle Mercier, Humberto Brenes, Vanessa Rousso, Chad Brown, Kristy Gazes and Gavin Griffin are just a few of the other pros who have been made frequent stops in here, in addition to the four players whose faces don the walls. Negreanu and Hachem conducted book signings just in front of the lounge and it was a mad house as nearly 2,000 T-shirts were given out at each session.

A comment from the Champions Lounge staff: „When you come in here and close the doors you don't even know that you're at the World Series of Poker anymore and that was the goal from the start,“ says Johnson, who was a dealer at the World Series for the first three weeks before starting his full-time gig as Champions Lounge host. „When Joe and the other guys were at EPT Monte Carlo they had a PokerStars Lounge that they all loved. When they found out that PokerStars couldn't have one at the World Series they put their heads together and came up

with a plan. Everyone has really enjoyed it. It's worked out great."

PartyPoker.com Lounge

Size: Approximately 2,000 square feet

Hours of operation: 11 a.m. to 8:30 p.m.

Who can go in?: Restricted to PartyPoker sponsored players and the 94 players who qualified at PartyPoker.com

Food: There's a different menu item each day. We enjoyed the pizza on Sunday.

Alcoholic beverages?: Yes (beer and wine)

Entertainment options: Two big-screen plasma TVs, PlayStation 3, wireless Internet service.

What does it look like inside?: This is the smallest lounge of the ones we visited, but because of its location down a different hallway it is also the quietest, giving it a very comfortable feel. The lights are dimmed low, which adds to the serenity. A huge PartyPoker logo is generated on the main wall by a projector. The bar is on the right hand side. There are two 50-inch plasma TVs in the room. One of the screens has a PlayStation hooked up to it. And on the left, there is a small living room set up with comfortable couches and reclining chairs. If a player really wants to escape from the WSOP madness, this is a great spot.

What makes it unique?: The bean bag chairs for PlayStation players are a nice touch, but the movie selection is what sets this lounge apart. There is a wide variety of movies and other DVDs to choose from. „American Gangster“ was cued up on Saturday afternoon and on Sunday they were playing the entire first season of the TV series „Heroes.“

A comment from the PartyPoker staff: „The players really

appreciate a lounge like this, especially our online qualifiers who are playing in an event like this for the very first time," says PartyPoker Player Development Manager Angelica Hael.

„It's really a very good spot for them to come and escape. We like to keep the atmosphere low-key so they can unwind and forget about poker for a while. It really does have a nice, cozy feeling to it and that's what we wanted.“

BetFair Lounge

Size: Approximately 2,600 square feet

Hours of operation: Noon to 9 p.m.

Who can go in?: The main lounge is open to anyone and everyone. There is a VIP room set up in the back that is reserved for Betfair sponsored players and Betfair online qualifiers. The general public can win a free hour in the VIP room if they sink a hole-in-one on the two-hole miniature golf course that is set up in the main section of the room.

Food: The VIP section has snacks in the morning. A buffet lunch and dinner is served during breaks. Snacks, muffins and fruit are available in the main lounge, along with coffee and soda.

Alcoholic beverages?: Yes, but only in the VIP section where there is a full bar.

Entertainment options: Miniature golf course, wireless Internet service, a Heads-Up automated poker table, Nintendo Wii and a huge big screen projector TV that was playing a rebroadcast of last year's World Series of Poker Europe when we were there. You can also get your picture taken holding the WSOP Europe bracelet and then have it placed on a mock cover of Bluff magazine.

What does it look like inside?: The hours and hours of

preparation and creative work done by Betfair's Head of Events & Corporate Hospitality Glyn Cassidy and her staff – in conjunction with Vegas Props Event Manager Sylvia Ortega – paid off handsomely because this is one very cool lounge. First off, it has a prime location, just off the main entrance of the main hallway that leads to the ballrooms used for play. Before you even get inside the lounge you are attracted by the red and white MINI Cooper Convertible outside that is in a englassed case and filled with poker chips. Betfair is running a promotion where spectators can try and guess exactly how many chips are in the car. A correct guess wins a USD 24,000 seat into this fall's WSOP Europe, of which Betfair is the title sponsor.

After registering and making your guess, you then follow „The Route to Europe,“ which leads to the lounge. Inside, the miniature golf course is set up on the left. It has the famous „Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas“ sign at the beginning and leads to a mock Big Ben tower with the idea that you are going from Vegas to London for the WSOP Europe. Also, a white board near the exit updates all of the Betfair online qualifiers' chip counts.

The VIP lounge looks like an airplane from the outside and people in the main section can clearly peer in and see what's going on, which was done purposely to create a „jealousy factor,“ according to Cassidy.

What makes it unique?: Take your choice of all of the above things that are mentioned. Another unique aspect is that the patrons of the Betfair VIP lounge can use the reclining massage chairs that are set up in full view of the main section. This is also the only lounge that has a TV with a feed from the official WSOP clock.

A comment from Betfair: „We're stressing that the only route to the World Series of Poker Europe is through Betfair; that's what we've tried to capture,“ says Cassidy. „Basically, we

want to award our sponsored players and our online qualifiers and give them a place to come and relax and have some fun. At the same time we want to showcase Betfair to all of the spectators that are here and give them a chance to get to London for the WSOP Europe.“

Everest Poker Lounge

Size: Approximately 2,200 square feet

Hours of operation: 10:30 a.m. until midnight

Who can go in?: According to the staff, all „Friends of Everest Poker“ are welcome. That includes the 14 Everest-sponsored players, the 300 online qualifiers and any family and friends of those players. In addition, anyone else related to the poker industry is welcome, including Everest affiliates and journalists.

Food: „We chose to go with quality over quantity when it comes to the food,“ explains Rocio van Nierop, Everest’s PR & events manager. There is usually a wide variety of European fare and lots of finger foods and sandwiches available.

Alcoholic beverages?: A full bar opens at 7 p.m.

Entertainment options: Nintendo Wii and Guitar Hero, both on a 50-inch plasma TV. Two desktop computers with Internet access. Two foosball tables and a large screen projector TV that was a big hit during the Euro Cup finals last week. „The place was going crazy during the finals,“ van Nierop says. „Everybody was wearing orange for Spain. It was a fun night.“

What does it look like inside?: As far as temporary set-ups go, this is about as sleek and classy as you can get. The striking Everest Poker logo is prominent throughout, particularly on the six plexi-glass placards that hang from the ceiling. Everest’s motto for the lounge is „Your Passport to the World Series of Poker“ and they wanted the lounge to

have a „European feel“ and appear to be like an executive lounge at an airport. Mission accomplished.

„Everybody who comes in here travels overseas so we want them to feel at home,“ adds van Nierop. The atmosphere is festive and you don't have a problem getting waited on because 40 Everest Poker staff members are in town for the Main Event, which means a lot of the time the number of Everest staffers outnumbers the guests.

What makes it unique?: Everest has the felt rights for all of the tables here at the World Series and a custom-made table with a high-end design is propped up on a stage in the very back of the lounge. It is there for friendly games, but it has developed into a training ground for the Everest online qualifiers.

„Our sponsored pros have been spending a lot of time with the online qualifiers, teaching them some of the things they need to know about playing in the Main Event,“ says van Nierop. „It has been particularly helpful to the online players who don't have a lot of experience playing live games. They're all here playing for Everest so they are trying to help each other out as much as possible.“

Ladbrokes Players Lounge

Size: Approximately 2,200 square feet

Hours of operation: 10:30 a.m. until the end of the play („If play ends at 3 in the morning, we'll be here,“ says Marios Diamandi, the Ladbrokes Poker sponsorship manager.)

Who can go in?: The 120 Ladbrokes online qualifiers, the seven Ladbrokes-sponsored players and family and friends of the players.

Food: Snacks are always available. Coffee and muffins are there in the morning. Lunch and dinner are also served.

Alcoholic beverages?: Yes, a full bar.

Entertainment options: Pool table, poker table, 50-inch plasma TV, Nintendo Wii, wireless Internet service with two laptops available for use. The Ladbrokes team also plans different events for the evening hours such as a Karaoke night, darts night and a quiz show night.

What does it look like inside?: Ladbrokes' red and white colors are prominently displayed. Huge draperies are hanging throughout the room giving it a luxurious feel. The bar and food is located in a separate section in the back left of the room. The Ladbrokes staff diligently tracks their players' chip counts and updates them on a white board so they know where they and their fellow players stand.

What makes it unique?: Ladbrokes is hosting an ongoing friendly poker tournament for all players and their families. A board behind the table updates the standings. Bracelets will be awarded to the winners. (Note: No cash games are allowed in any of the player lounges).

A comment from the Ladbrokes staff: „It's a nice comfortable place for the players. And it's a great meeting point for them to meet their families or friends," Diamandi says. „We're here to cater to all of our players' needs. The entertainment events we've scheduled at night have been great. I think everyone has really enjoyed coming here and being able to escape from it all.“