

= Sip ' n Dip Lounge =

The Sip ' n Dip Lounge is a tiki bar in Great Falls , Montana opened in 1962 , when Polynesian themes were popular , and it has survived to the present day with its tiki theme intact . Located inside a local motel that was considered modern and trendy at the time it was built , the Sip ' n Dip is known for having women dressed up as mermaids swimming underwater in an indoor swimming pool visible through a window in the bar . Decorated with a bamboo ceiling and a South Seas theme , the bar also features " Piano Pat " Sponheim , who has played piano there since 1963 and is noted for her unique " jazzy " style .

The mermaid concept was introduced in 1995 , when there was a revival of the tiki fad , and it was the brainchild of the bar 's current owner , who wanted to add a " fun factor " . It became popular , particularly for Montana , a landlocked northern state where a tropical tiki theme is unexpected . Beginning in 2003 , the bar began to gain prominence outside of Montana , when the magazine GQ listed the lounge in its list of the top 10 bars in the world , ranking it as the " # 1 bar ... worth flying for " . The bar employs six women , who wear mermaid outfits designed and hand @-@ made by the bar 's manager , Sandra Johnson @-@ Thares . Mermen were brought back in 2016 , having previously appeared on occasion until 2004 .

Celebrity patrons of the Sip ' n Dip have included Nick Nolte , star of The Deep , and Daryl Hannah , who reprised her portrayal of a mermaid in Splash by swimming in the pool while wearing a mermaid tail . Both actors signed the glass window , though their autographs were lost two years later when the window cracked , forcing the pool to be drained , repaired , and the double @-@ paned glass replaced with a triple @-@ paned version .

= = History and design = =

The establishment features a glass wall behind the bar looking into an indoor swimming pool where swimmers can be seen under water . It is located inside the O 'Haire Motor Inn , which was built in 1962 . The concept of a swimming pool designed so underwater swimmers can be viewed from inside the bar was original to the building , as the person who built the O 'Haire had been inspired by a similar design he saw when visiting the Playboy Club in Chicago . When built in the 1960s , the O 'Haire Motor Inn was considered " swank " and modern , and the tiki concept was popular , in part due to the then @-@ recent admission of Hawaii to the United States as a state . The concept of a tropical theme was also viewed as a fun concept for Montana , a landlocked state with long , cold winters . Though tiki bars in general declined in popularity in the late 1970s and 1980s until the revival of the style in the 1990s , the Sip ' n Dip survived with few changes . During the 1990s , the idea of having mermaids swim in the pool during evening bar hours was the brainchild of the bar 's general manager , Sandra Johnson @-@ Thares and her mother , who wanted to add a " fun factor " . It began with a single " mermaid " in the pool on New Year 's Eve in 1995 . Today , Johnson @-@ Thares makes the mermaid costumes herself and said , " I never in my life believed the mermaid attraction would be such a big hit . People are fascinated with them , and it 's not something you 'd expect to see in Montana . "

The bar features a bamboo ceiling , traditional cocktails , local Montana microbrews , and specialty drinks such as the " fish bowl , " a 64 US fl oz (1 @.@ 9 L) cocktail that features nine shots of different liquors . It also has an outdoor patio open during the summer , from June to September .

= = Entertainment = =

= = Piano Pat = = =

" Piano Pat " Sponheim plays piano four nights a week . Called " the heart of the Sip ' n Dip , " Sponheim is an octogenarian and a great @-@ grandmother . She performs what one reviewer described as " unusual covers " of songs , particularly those of Frank Sinatra , Neil Diamond , and

Elvis Presley . She has a playing style called " jazzy " and a voice described variously as " lived @-@ in " , " soulful " , and " husky . " One of her most requested covers is " Sweet Caroline , " where she often leads patrons in sing @-@ alongs .

Sponheim was originally from Rudyard , Montana , where her family owned an auto supply store . She began playing the piano at age five , when her mother would drive her on an 80 @-@ mile (130 km) round trip to Havre to take classical piano lessons . By the age of 12 , she was playing with adults in a dance band , earning \$ 10 per night . She began singing as well as playing the piano during a time in her life when she lived in Billings , Montana . She was a 28 @-@ year @-@ old divorced single mother of three when she started working as the Sip ' n Dip 's piano player in 1963 , taking the position as a second job in order to support her children . She simultaneously worked as a medical transcriptionist for 38 years before retiring from her day job in 2000 . She celebrated 50 years of employment at the Sip ' n Dip in December 2013 and at that time she was featured on CBS Sunday Morning . She has released two albums , only for sale at the Sip ' n Dip , and though she takes requests , she refuses to play modern rock music . She continues to work because it is not only a job but also her social life , " It 's a chance to get out of the house . I enjoy the lounge , and it keeps me going . "

= = = Mermaids and swimming pool = = =

The bar employs six women part @-@ time to wear mermaid costumes and swim in the pool five evenings a week . They are local women from all walks of life . The " mermaids " explain that it is fairly easy to stay afloat while wearing a mermaid tail , but the difficult part of the job is not floating ; staying underwater as much as possible is necessary in order for patrons to see them through the window . Because they cannot use their legs in a traditional manner , they must work harder with their arms to swim . Mermen also swim in the pool . They were hired early on , but fell out of favor by about 2004 . In 2016 , they were brought back by popular demand , primarily working during the bar 's Tuesday ladies ' night .

The bar 's most famous patrons appeared in 2002 , when Daryl Hannah , Anthony Edwards and Nick Nolte dropped by while working on the movie Northfork , which was filmed in the Great Falls area . The actors stopped by the bar and both Nolte , who had starred in The Deep , and Hannah signed the glass window . Then Hannah , who had portrayed a mermaid in Splash , donned a mermaid tail and swam in the pool .

The pool is also open to motel guests , and , in spite of signs warning swimmers that they can be viewed from the bar while swimming , people have been known to skinny dip .

= = Recognition = =

The Sip ' n Dip was called a " Polynesia on the Plains " in 2013 by CBS Sunday Morning . In 2003 , the magazine GQ listed the lounge as one of the top 10 bars in the world , ranking it as the " # 1 bar ... worth flying for " . Frommer 's travel guide calls it " one of the kitschiest , wackiest , and flat @-@ out coolest nightspots , not just in Montana , but in the entire West . " In 2014 , USA Today ranked the Sip ' n Dip as one of the 10 best tiki bars in the United States .

= = Incidents = =

The bar faced a major crisis in October 2004 when a crack developed in the glass wall between the bar and the pool , which could have resulted in 22 @,@ 000 US gallons (83 @,@ 000 L) of water emptying into the bar . The bar was open when the crack occurred and was noticed immediately . Staff of the O 'Haire Inn immediately began draining the pool , which took four hours to complete . The fire department also kept their pumper truck standing by in case more rapid removal of water was needed . The old double @-@ paned glass was replaced with triple @-@ paned glass , and while the repairs were performed the pool area was also given a new rubber coating . The autographs of Nolte and Hannah were lost , as the bar 's manager explained , " the crack went right

through their signatures . "