

Some Like it

HOT

Exploring the many allures of Sin City

By DAN SCHLOSSBERG



Las Vegas is hot by day, cool by night. But visitors to the arid oasis insist it is cool to be there even when temperatures soar into the triple digits. Alternately called Sin City or The Entertainment Capital of the World, Las Vegas has 150,000 hotel rooms, many of them concentrated in a dozen hotels that dominate a five-mile stretch called The Strip (for multiple reasons).

The MGM Grand alone has 5,304 rooms, making it the world's largest, but that's not surprising in a city that has 12 of the 13 biggest hotels on the planet. Both the Egyptian-themed Luxor and the Italian-themed Venetian have more than 4,000 rooms too.

Although many of the casinos look alike, virtually every Las Vegas resort has its own appeal. The exploding volcano outside the Mirage, the pirate fight at Treasure Island, the miniature Manhattan skyline at New York, New York, the double-decked lion enclosure at MGM Grand, the King Arthur motif at Excalibur, the fountains at Bellagio, the aerial acrobats at Circus Circus, the toga-clad servers at Caesar's Palace, and the Eiffel Tower at Paris keep tourist cameras clicking around the clock.

Because of its allure as a place to get-rich-quick, get-hitched-quick, or get-dumped-quick, Las Vegas is the fastest-growing city in the United States. Its population is just over 600,000 but its draw is remarkable, with 38 million visitors per year. A cool million of that number come to get married, which can be a gamble in any locale.

With direct flights from both coasts and proximity to Hollywood (five hours by car), Las Vegas lures top-flight shows and entertainers — many of them signing long-term contracts. It also attracts artisans and designers who love the enormous dimensions of casino showrooms. A spectacle like Beatles Love, one of eight Cirque du Soleil offerings in town, needs the flexibility of the moving platforms on the Mirage stage. The average ticket price of \$155 is a genuine bargain.

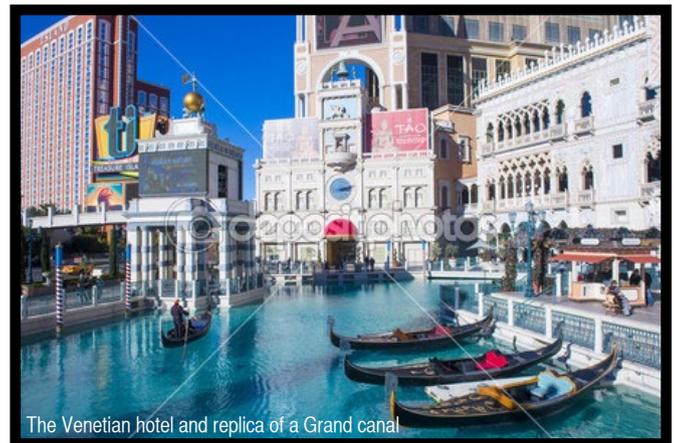
Wise gamblers just might be able to win enough money to cover the price of tickets. Statistics show that nearly 90% of gamblers are ahead at some point but only 17% actually finish in the black while the rest put it back. With 83% of casino patrons losing, casinos keep raking in healthy profits.

Much of that revenue covers their water bills; Las Vegas averages 4.49 inches of rain per year and 70 days of triple-digit temperatures. Air-conditioning systems, also big-time water consumers, are ubiquitous but must be stretched to meet the demands of new business.

More than 6,000 people move into the Las Vegas Valley every month, which is why the population of Clark County has tripled over the past 20 years to its present 1.3 million. Because 500+ new-business permits issued in Las Vegas every month, two acres are being developed for construction every hour.

None of that would have been possible without the hydroelectric power supplied by the humongous Hoover Dam, 35 miles southeast of town on the Nevada-Arizona border. Built by 21,000 workers over a four-year span during the difficult Depression years, the dam contains enough concrete to pave a two-lane highway from New York to San Francisco.

Named for president Herbert Hoover, it is one of many must-see attractions far from the frenzy of The Strip. Also on the list are helicopter tours to the Grand Canyon and Pink Jeep tours through the



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Top photo: King Arthur's Nights at the Excalibur Hotel and Casino.
Middle photo: Bellagio Hotel Casino during sunset.
Bottom photo: Eiffel tower in Las Vegas.

closer Red Rock Canyon, 20 miles to the west. The latter contains a 17-mile scenic driving loop. Lake Mead, created by the Hoover Dam, is a vast recreational playground filled with houseboats, sightseeing tours, jet-skis, and wind-surfers. There's no larger man-made lake in the country.

Families who prefer to limit their Las Vegas outlay will find plenty of freebies, including a sound-and-light show called the Fremont Street Experience. It was created to siphon visitors from The Strip to Downtown Las Vegas, the older part of the city.

Local museums are dedicated to the Guinness World of Records, Liberace, neon, atomic testing, natural history, and even organized crime, from Al Capone to Bugsy Siegel. Those who look hard enough will even find reminders of the Rat Pack, the Hollywood quartet headed by Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis, Jr.

Casinos have their own appeal. Masquerade Village, at the Rio, features a floating parade of dancers and musicians while Bellagio boasts a fine art gallery inside and a soaring music-and-light display of fountains that soar 240 feet into the deep desert sky.

Mayor Carolyn Goodman, who succeeded her husband Oscar when term limits ended his tenure, is one of the city's biggest boosters. The Goodmans are not only gregarious good-will ambassadors for their town but responsible for building businesses and bringing conventions. Since last October, the city has hosted both International PowWow, which attracted 6,500 delegates, and the North American Travel Journalists Association. The resulting media coverage was impressive.

The town's original founders would not recognize the place. Once known for mining and railroads, Las Vegas began to thrive after gambling was legalized in 1931 and Hoover Dam was completed four years later. The influx of mob money coupled with the curiosity of atomic scientists working on the nearby Manhattan Project brought prosperity in the '40s but the advent of universal air conditioning after the war was a bigger booster.

Named by 19th century Spanish explorers who found meadows (vegas) fed by underground springs, Las Vegas belonged to Mexico before joining the United States in 1855. Mormons came and went, along with various railroad lines, before the city was incorporated in 1911.

With the notable exceptions of its entertainers and politicians, the most famous current resident is former major-league pitcher Greg Maddux, whose dad is a card dealer at the MGM Grand. Maddux enjoys the climate, which is conducive to golf, plus the tax benefits (no state income tax).

Because traffic on The Strip sometimes slows to a crawl, the best way to get around town is by monorail. The sleek, silent, and well-scheduled line links the Las Vegas Convention Center with the MGM Grand.

Without comfortable walking shoes, however, the typical visitor will soon be victimized by foot blisters. Getting to a restaurant or show often requires traversing a couple of enormous casinos. Eating, like gambling, is a Las Vegas pastime *par excellence*. Southern Nevada alone has 1,400 restaurant and 260 buffets. Caesar's has one of the best — but one of the longest lines (word travels fast).

It's often easier to find tee time than tea time, since the area has 55 golf courses. Of those, only one (at the Wynn Resort) is actually on The Strip. Women who prefer private pampering will find a wide

variety of themed spas, including one (at Caesar's Palace) where falling snow is meant to serve as a stress reliever. Listening to the Las Vegas Philharmonic or watching the Nevada Ballet Theater are two other local stress relievers. Both make their home in Reynolds Hall, a 2,000-seat venue inside the \$485 million Smith Center for the Performing Arts.

On the immediate horizon are projected 2014 openings of MGM's Delano Las Vegas, with 1,100 suites; the 1,600-room SLS Las Vegas, the former Sahara rebranded; and the compact Gansevoort Las Vegas, whose 188 rooms will operate under the Caesar's umbrella.

When it opens in 2016, Resorts World Las Vegas will be even more ambitious. The 87-acre complex, which costs billions, will carry its Asian theme to extremes, with a replica of the Great Wall of China and an exhibit of live pandas. McCarran International Airport is striving to keep pace with the growing demand; it opened a \$2.4 billion terminal last year that is making connections easier for visitors.

They come to Las Vegas for a myriad of reasons: some for shows, some for the climate, and many to seek the thrills and spills only Sin City can offer. To attract both individuals and conventioners, the city has adopted an unofficial mantra: "What happens in Las Vegas stays in Las Vegas."

Although public pools prevent women from walking around topless, many Las Vegas resorts encourage it — especially Bare Pool Lounge (Mirage), Moorea Beach Club (Mandalay Bay), the Venus Pool Club (Caesar's Palace). Bare-chested females frolic even mark after dark, when showgirl costumes loaded with color and feathers often leave breasts exposed. The casinos reason, probably correctly, that more exposure sells more drinks and yields more tips.

And what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. ■

Former AP newsman Dan Schlossberg of Fair Lawn, NJ is host of Travel Itch Radio, heard Thursdays at 8 on BlogTalkRadio.com, and travel editor of both New Jersey Lifestyle and Sirius XM Satellite Radio's Maggie Linton Show. He is also president emeritus of the North American Travel Journalists Association (NATJA).