

## Chapter 15

# Going Beyond Las Vegas: Two Day Trips

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**L**as Vegas can be a bit overwhelming, so if you've already blown your bankroll, or you need to take a breather from the blackjack table, a day trip may be just the thing to recharge your batteries.

### *Day Trip #1: Hoover Dam, Lake Mead, and Valley of Fire State Park*

A couple thousand people visit Hoover Dam daily to pay homage to the engineering marvel, without which, frankly, there would be no Las Vegas. A visit to the dam does not fill an entire day, but two other magnificent spots nearby — **Lake Mead** and **Valley of Fire State Park** — also deserve your attention.

#### *Getting there*

To get to **Lake Mead**, go east on Flamingo or Tropicana to U.S. 515 south, which automatically turns into 93 south and takes you right to the dam. This involves a rather dramatic drive, as you go through **Boulder City**, come over a rise, and Lake Mead suddenly appears spread out before you. It's a beautiful sight. At about this point in the drive, the road narrows down to two lanes, and traffic can slow considerably. On busy tourist days, the drive can take an hour or more.

To continue on to **Hoover Dam**, go past the turnoff to **Lake Mead**. As you near the dam, you see a five-story parking structure tucked into the canyon wall on your left. Park here (\$2 charge) and take the elevators or stairs to the walkway leading to the Visitor Center.

To get to the spooky, otherworldly landscape of the **Valley of Fire** from Las Vegas, take I-15 north to exit 75 (Valley of Fire turnoff). For a more scenic route, take I-15 north, travel Lake Mead Boulevard east to North Shore Road (Nev. 167), and proceed north to the Valley of Fire exit. The first route takes about an hour, the second 1½ hours. From **Lake Mead Lodge**, take Nev. 166 (Lakeshore Scenic Drive) north, make a right turn on Nev. 167 (North Shore Scenic Drive), turn left on Nev. 169 (Moapa Valley Boulevard) west — a spectacularly scenic drive — and follow the signs. Valley of Fire is about 65 miles from **Hoover Dam**.

### *Taking a tour*

If you didn't rent a car, or if you would rather go on an organized tour, contact **CoachUSA/Grayline** (☎ 800-634-6579 or 702-384-1234). The company offers several packages inside and outside of Las Vegas. The 4-hour **Grand Hoover Dam Tour** departs daily at 8:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. There's also a **Neon & Lights Evening Tour** of Las Vegas that includes a narrative tour past the mega-resorts, a visit to the **Fremont Street Experience**, and a stop at A Special Memory Wedding Chapel. Both tours cost \$40. You can inquire at your hotel sightseeing desk about other bus tours.

Numerous sightseeing tours also go to **Valley of Fire**. CoachUSA has a six-hour tour from Las Vegas, including lunch, that costs \$100. Inquire at your hotel tour desk. **Char Cruze of Creative Adventures** (☎ 702-361-5565) also does a fantastic tour.



When you're in Las Vegas, look in the numerous free publications available at hotels for discount coupons that offer significant savings on tours to Hoover Dam and Valley of Fire State Park.

### *Seeing the sights*

You should start your day with Hoover Dam itself, or rather, the **Hoover Dam Visitor Center** (☎ 702-294-3517), where you can check out exhibits on the dam and buy tickets for the Discovery Tour, which replaces the previous hard-hat and traditional tours. The Visitor Center is open daily from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., except Thanksgiving and Christmas. You can purchase tickets until 4:15 p.m., but the center closes at 4:45 p.m. Admission is \$10 for adults, \$8 for seniors, \$4 for children 7 to 17, and free for children under 6. There is a \$5 parking fee. *Note:* Due to heightened security, visitors are not allowed on top of the dam after dark.

It takes about two hours, either on the tour or on your own, to see all that Hoover Dam has to offer. Although it's not compulsory, it's not a bad idea to call in advance for the tour (☎ 702-597-5970). Kids may be bored by the dam, unless they are budding engineers or just love big things, but your parents probably took you to things you didn't want to see, for your own good, when you were a kid — so why should your kids get off the hook?

## Hoover Dam fun facts

Surely this is one of the few examples of primo government efficiency. Construction on Hoover Dam began in 1931. Some 5,200 workers labored around the clock to complete the dam in 1936, two years ahead of schedule and \$15 million under budget. The dam stopped the annual floods and conserved water for irrigation, and industrial and domestic use. Equally important, it became one of the world's major electrical generating plants, providing low-cost, pollution-free hydroelectric power to a score of surrounding communities. The dam itself is a massive curved wall, measuring 660 feet thick at the bottom and tapering to 45 feet where the road crosses it at the top. It towers 726.4 feet above bedrock (about the height of a 60-story skyscraper) and acts as a plug between the canyon walls to hold back up to 9.2 trillion gallons of water in Lake Mead — the reservoir created by its construction.

After touring the dam, you can have lunch in **Boulder City** (see the upcoming section, “Dining locally”), or you can go to the **Lake Mead National Recreation Area**. Start at the **Alan Bible Visitor Center**, 4 miles northeast of Boulder City on U.S. 93 at Lakeshore Scenic Drive (☎ 702-293-8990), which provides information on all area activities and services. You can pick up trail maps and brochures here, view informative films, and find out about scenic drives, accommodations, ranger-guided hikes, naturalist programs and lectures, bird-watching, canoeing, camping, lakeside RV parks, and picnic facilities. The center also sells books and videotapes about the area. It's open daily from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., except Thanksgiving and Christmas. For information on accommodations, boat rentals, and fishing, call **Seven Crown Resorts** (☎ 800-752-9669). You can have a bite at the nautically themed restaurant, **Tale of the Whale** (☎ 702-293-3484), at the marina (approximately a ½ mile away).

If you don't want to spend your post-dam time on outdoor activities, you can always drive back to Vegas via the **Valley of Fire State Park**, or you can spend a day just on the park alone. This is an awesome, foreboding desert tundra, full of flaming red rocks. It looks like the setting of any number of sci-fi movies — not surprisingly, considering that a number of them have been filmed here.

Plan on spending a minimum of an hour in the park, though you can spend a great deal more time here. It can get very hot (there is nothing to offer relief from the sun beating down and reflecting off all that red), and there is no water, so be certain to bring a liter, if not two, with you in the summer. Without a guide, you must stay on paved roads, but don't worry if they end; you can always turn around and come back to the main road. You can soak up a lot of the park from the car, but try one of the hiking trails if you feel up to it.

Pick up information on **Valley of Fire** at the **Visitor Center** on Nev. 169, 6 miles west of North Shore Road (☎ **702-397-2088**). It's open daily from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and is worth a quick stop for information and a bit of history before you enter the park.

### *Dining locally*

After touring **Hoover Dam**, have lunch in **Boulder City**, 7 miles northwest of the dam on U.S. 93. You may want to check out some of the antiques and curio shops while you're there. For lunch, you have your choice of a number of family-style restaurants and burger and Mexican joints, including **Totos**, a reasonably priced Mexican restaurant (806 Buchanan Blvd.; ☎ **702-293-1744**) in the Vons shopping center. Or you can try the **Happy Days Diner** (512 Nevada Hwy.; ☎ **702-293-4637**), which is right on the road to and from the dam. A '50s diner in looks and menu, it has the usual burgers, shakes, and fries, plus complete breakfasts, and is quite inexpensive. It's a friendly diner and a good place to take the kids.

There are no food concessions or gas stations in **Valley of Fire State Park**; however, you can grab meals or gas on Nev. 167 or in nearby **Overton** (15 miles northwest on Nev. 169). I recommend eating at **Inside Scoop** (395 S. Moapa Valley Blvd.; ☎ **702-397-2055**), open daily from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. It's an old-fashioned ice-cream parlor run by extremely friendly people, with a proper menu that, in addition to the much-needed ice cream, classic sandwiches, and the like, features some surprising choices — a vegetarian sandwich and a fish salad with crab and shrimp, for example.

At the southern edge of Overton is the **Lost City Museum** (721 S. Moapa Valley Blvd.; ☎ **702-397-2193**), a sweet little museum commemorating an ancient Anasazi village that was discovered in the region in 1924. Admission is \$3, \$2 for seniors, and free for children under 18. The museum is open daily from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and is closed Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day.

## *Day Trip #2: Red Rock Canyon and Bonnie Springs Ranch*

For those of you craving a temporary escape from Vegas but not wanting such an ambitious trip as Day Trip #1, head over to **Red Rock Canyon**. Like Valley of Fire, it's a surreal and lovely landscape of outer-space-like rock formations, perfect for hiking or even just driving through while emitting cries of "ooooo!!!" It's a fine way to recharge your batteries — and it's only 19 miles west of Vegas.

### *Getting there*

Just drive west on Charleston Boulevard, which becomes Nev. 159. Virtually as soon as you leave the city, the red rocks begin to loom around you. The **Visitor Center** will appear on your right.

You can also go by **bike**. Charleston Boulevard has a bike path that starts at Rainbow Boulevard and continues for about 11 miles to the Visitor Center/scenic drive. The path is hilly, but it is not difficult if you're in reasonable shape.



You should only explore Red Rock Canyon by bike, however, if you're an exceptionally fit and experienced biker.

### *Taking a tour*

You can also see the canyon on an **organized tour**. **Grayline** (☎ 800-634-6579 or 702-384-1234), among other companies, runs bus tours to the canyon. Inquire at your hotel tour desk.

### *Seeing the sights*

Just off Nev. 159, you see the **Red Rock Canyon Visitor Center** (☎ 702-363-1921), which marks the actual entrance to the park. There, you can pick up information on trails and view history exhibits on the canyon. The center is open daily from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

The easiest thing to do is to drive the 13-mile scenic loop. It really is a loop, and it only goes one way, so after you start, you are committed to drive the whole thing. You can stop the car to admire any number of fabulous views and sights along the way, have a picnic, or take a walk or hike. In fact, if you are up to it, I can't stress enough that the way to really see the canyon is by hiking. Every trail is incredible, with minicaves and rock formations to scramble over.

You can begin from the Visitor Center or drive into the loop, park, and start from points therein. Hiking trails range from a .7-mile-loop stroll to a waterfall (its flow varying seasonally) at **Lost Creek** to much longer and more strenuous treks. Actually, all the hikes involve a certain amount of effort, because you have to scramble over rocks on even the shorter hikes. The unfit or the ungraceful should be cautious. Be sure to wear good shoes (the rocks can be slippery) and bring a map. As you hike, keep your eyes peeled for lizards, the occasional desert tortoise, flocks of bighorn sheep, birds, and other critters.



After Red Rock, you can keep going another 5 miles west to **Bonnie Springs Ranch** and **Old Nevada**. The latter is a kind of Wild West theme park (complete with shootouts and stunt shows) with accommodations and a restaurant — probably the best place to get a meal in this area. Okay, it's cheesy and touristy, but it's fun, honest. If you're traveling with

children, a day trip to Bonnie Springs is recommended, but it is surprisingly appealing for adults, too. It can even be a romantic getaway, offering horseback riding, gorgeous mountain vistas, proximity to **Red Rock Canyon**, and temperatures 5 to 10 degrees cooler than on the Strip.

For additional information, call **Bonnie Springs Ranch/Old Nevada** at ☎ **702-875-4191**. Admission to Old Nevada, per car (up to six people), costs \$7 weekdays and \$10 weekends and holidays. Hours vary during summer and winter, so call ahead, but it is generally open from 10:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

**Bonnie Springs Ranch** (☎ **702-875-4191**) is right next door to Old Nevada, with additional activities, including a small and highly dated zoo, and a less politically distressing aviary on the premises.

Riding stables offer guided trail rides into the mountain area on a continuous basis throughout the day (from 9 a.m.–3:15 p.m. in winter, until 5:45 p.m. in summer). Children must be at least 6 years old to ride. Cost is \$25 per hour. Scenic 20-minute stagecoach rides offered on weekends and holidays cost \$5 for adults and \$3 for children under 12.