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The Best of Las Vegas

The point about [Las Vegas], which both its critics and its admirers overlook, is that it's wonderful and awful simultaneously. So one loves it and detests it at the same time.

—David Spanier, *Welcome to the
Pleasure Dome: Inside Las Vegas*

As often as you might have seen it on TV or in a movie, there is nothing that prepares you for that first sight of Las Vegas. The skyline is hyperreality, a mélange of the Statue of Liberty, a giant lion, a pyramid, and a Sphinx, and preternaturally glittering buildings. At night, it's so bright you can actually get disoriented—and suffer from a sensory overload that can reduce you to hapless tears or fits of giggles. And that's without setting foot inside a casino, where the shouts from the craps tables, the crash of coins from the slots, and the general roar combine into either the greatest adrenaline rush of your life or the ninth pit of hell.

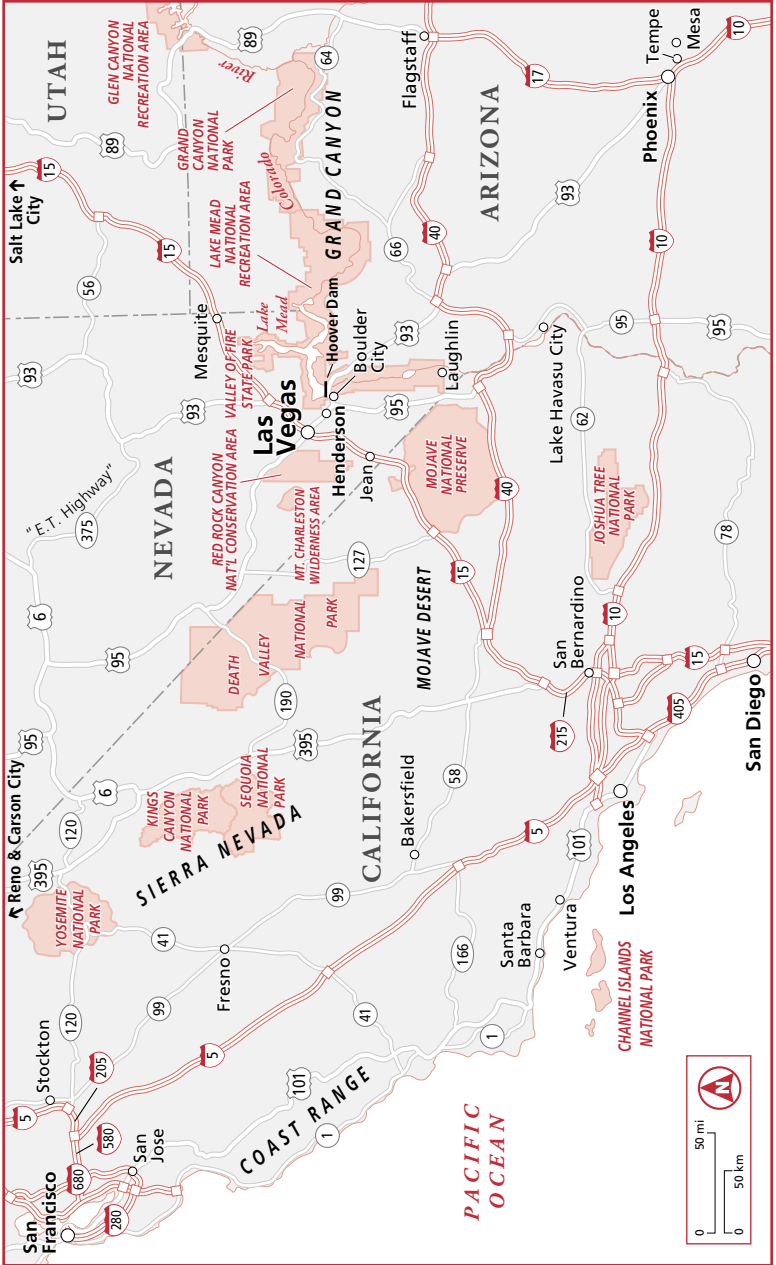
Las Vegas is a true original; there is nothing like it in America or arguably the world. In other cities, hotels are built near the major attractions. Here, the hotels *are* the major attractions. For that matter, what other city has a skyline made up almost entirely of buildings from other cities' skylines? Instead of historical codes to follow, builders in Vegas have to worry about the height of the roller coaster in their hotel.

Once you get to Vegas, you'll want to come back again, if only to make sure you didn't dream it all. It's not just the casinos with their nonstop action and sound, the almost-blinding lights, or the buildings that seek to replicate some other reality (Paris, Venice, New York, and ancient Egypt). It's not the mountains of shrimp at the buffets, the wedding chapels that will gladly unite two total strangers in holy wedlock, or the promise of free money. It's the whole package. It's the Megabucks slots. It's Frank and Dino and Sammy. It's Elvis—the Fat Years. It's volcanoes and white tigers and cocktail waitresses dressed in Roman togas. It's cheesy and sleazy and artificial and wholly, completely unique. It's wonderful. It's awful. It's wonderfully awful and awfully wonderful. Love it, loathe it, or both, no one has ambivalent feelings about Vegas.

Las Vegas can be whatever a visitor wants, and for a few days, a visitor can be whatever he or she wants. Just be prepared to leave all touchstones with reality behind. Here, you will rise at noon and gorge on endless amounts of rich food at 3am. You will watch your money grow or (more likely) shrink. You will watch a volcano explode and pirates fight sexy showgirls. And after a while, it will all seem pretty normal. This is not a cultural vacation, okay? Save the thoughts of museums and historical sights for the real New York, Egypt, Paris, and Venice. Vegas is about fun. Go have some. Go have too much. It won't be hard.

The Vegas of the Rat Pack years, classic Old Las Vegas, does not exist anymore. Even as ancient civilizations are replicated, "old" in Vegas terms is anything over a decade.

Las Vegas & Environs



Indeed, thanks to teardowns and renovations, there is virtually nothing original left on the Strip. In a way, that is both admirable and ghastly, and also part of what makes Vegas so *Vegas*. What other city can completely shed its skin in such a short amount of time?

But as much as one might mourn the loss of such landmarks as the Sands, one has to admit that time marches on, and Vegas has to keep pace. Nostalgia for the vanished does not mean you can't enjoy what turns up in its place. Even as you might sneer at the sheer gaudy tastelessness of it all, you have to admit that what's out there is undeniably remarkable.

And when it's all lit up at night . . . well, even those who have lived here for years agree there is nothing like the sight of the Strip in all its evening glory. "It still takes my breath away, even after all this time," says one longtime resident. Everything is in lights in Vegas: hotels, casinos, 7-Elevens, the airport parking garage. Stand still long enough, and they'll probably cover you in neon.

Oh, the gambling? Yep, there's plenty of that. Which is much like saying there's plenty of sand at the beach. Let's not kid ourselves: Gambling is the main attraction of Vegas. The rest—the buffets, the shows, the cartoonish buildings—is so much window dressing to lure you and your money to the city. But even a nongambler can have a perfectly fine time in Vegas, though the lure of countless slot machines has tempted even the most Puritan of souls in their day.

Unfortunately, the days of an inexpensive Las Vegas vacation are gone. The cheap buffets and meal deals still exist, as do some cut-rate rooms, but both are likely to prove the old adage about getting what you pay for. If all you're looking for is fuel and a place to catch a quick nap, they'll do just fine. Be prepared to pay if you want glamour and fine dining.

However, free drinks are still handed to anyone lurking near a slot, and even if show tickets aren't in your budget, you won't lack for entertainment. Free lounge shows abound, and the people-watching opportunities never disappoint. From the Armani-clad high rollers in the baccarat rooms to the polyester-sporting couples at the nickel slots, Vegas attracts a cross section of America.

Yes, it's noisy and chaotic. Yes, it's gotten more and more like Disneyland for adults. Yes, it's a shrine to greed and the love of filthy lucre. Yes, there is little ambience and even less "culture." Yes, someone lacking self-discipline can come to great grief.

But in its own way, Vegas is every bit as amazing as the nearby Grand Canyon, and every bit as much a must-see. It's one of the Seven Wonders of the Artificial World. And everyone should experience it at least once—you might find yourself coming back for more.

1 Frommer's Favorite Las Vegas Experiences

- A Stroll on the Strip After Dark:** You haven't really seen Las Vegas until you've seen it at night. This neon wonderland is the world's greatest sound-and-light show. Begin at Luxor and work your way down past the incredible hotels and their attractions. You'll pass the amazing New York–New York on your way, and if your strength holds out, you will end at

Circus Circus, where live acrobat acts take place overhead while you gamble. Make plenty of stops en route to take in the *Sirens* show at Treasure Island, see The Mirage volcano erupt, take a photo of the full moon over the Eiffel Tower, and, most of all, marvel at the choreographed water-fountain ballet at Bellagio.

- **Casino-Hopping on the Strip:** The interior of each lavish new hotel-casino is more outrageous and giggle-inducing than the last. Just when you think they can't possibly top themselves, they do. From Venice to ancient Egypt, from a rainforest to a pirate's lair, from King Arthur's castle to New York City, to the brand-new Wynn Las Vegas, it is still all, totally, completely, and uniquely Las Vegas.
- **An Evening in Glitter Gulch:** Set aside an evening to tour the Downtown hotels and take in the overhead light show of the **Fremont Street Experience** (p. 193). Unlike the lengthy and exhausting Strip, you can hit 17 casinos in about 5 minutes.
- **Buffets:** They may no longer be the very best of bargains, as the cheaper ones do not provide the quality of the more pricey ones, but there is something about the endless mounds of food that just screams "Vegas" to us. Our choices for the best in town are listed in the dining section later in this chapter.
- **A Creative Adventures Tour:** Char Cruze of **Creative Adventures** (☎ 702/361-5565; www.creativeadventuresltd.com) provides personalized tours unlike anything offered by a commercial tour company, full of riveting stories and incredible facts about both natural and artificial local wonders. See p. 216.
- **The Liberace Museum:** It's not the Smithsonian, but then again, the Smithsonian doesn't have rhinestones like these. Only in Vegas. See p. 195.
- **The Dolphins at The Mirage:** Actually, a most un-Vegas experience. Zone out as you watch these gorgeous mammals frolic in their cool blue pool. If you are really lucky, they'll play ball with you. See p. 200.
- **Playing Penny Slots:** Where even the most budget-conscious traveler can gamble for hours. They used to be as rare as a non-silicone-enhanced showgirl, but now they're in all the major casinos. See chapter 8.
- **Shop the Big Three Casino Arcades:** Take what Napoleon called "the greatest drawing room in Europe," replicate it, add shops, and you've got the **Grand Canal Shoppes at The Venetian** (p. 259)—it's St. Mark's Square, complete with canals and working gondolas. Then there are the **Forum Shops at Caesars Palace** (p. 257), replicating an ancient Roman streetscape, with classical piazzas and opulent fountains. Don't miss the scary audio-animatronic statues as they come to glorious, cheesy life. And not to be outdone, the **Desert Passage at Aladdin** (p. 256) re-creates the ancient trade route through Morocco, complete with a special-effects rain-storm over an indoor harbor (at least until the hotel's new owners take over).
- **Cirque du Soleil's *O*, *KA*, and *Mystère*:** You haven't really seen Cirque du Soleil until you've seen it performed in a showroom equipped with state-of-the-art sound-and-lighting systems and a seemingly infinite budget for sets, costumes, and high-tech special effects. It's an enchantment. See p. 269 and 270.
- **Your Favorite Headliners:** As soon as you arrive in town, pick up a show guide and see who's playing during your stay. For the top showrooms, see chapter 10.
- **Finding the Worst Lounge Shows:** Some feel this is the ultimate Vegas experience and dedicate many an evening to it. Be sure to watch out for Cook E. Jarr and the Crumbs. See chapter 10 for some ideas.

A Look Back at Vegas: No Tomorrow

Las Vegas is convention central. Orthodontists go there as well as architects. Computer geeks and gynecologists, TV preachers and township clerks, postal workers and pathologists. There's an abundance of good hotel rooms, cheap eats, agreeable weather. Coming and going is reasonably painless. There's golf and gambling and ogling girls—showgirls of unspeakable beauty—and, of course, the mountains, the desert, and the sky.

The National Funeral Directors Association advertised its 116th Annual Convention and International Exposition there in the trade press as "A Sure Bet." Debbie Reynolds was talking to the Spouse's Luncheon. Neil Sedaka was singing at the Annual Banquet. There was a golf outing, a new website, the installation of officers. I called the brother and the brother-in-law and said, "Let's get our funeral homes covered and go out to Vegas for the convention." Pat and Mike agreed. All of us are funeral directors. All of us were due for a break. Here's another coincidence: All of our wives are named Mary. The Marys all agreed to come along. They'd heard about the showgirls and high-stakes tables and figured Pat and Mike and I would need looking after. They'd heard about the great malls and the moving statues and the magic shows.

My publisher paid for my airfare and our room at the Hilton. "A Sure Bet" is what they reckoned, too. My book, *The Undertaking—Life Studies from the Dismal Trade*, was being featured in the Marketplace Booth at the exhibit hall. The association would be selling and I'd be signing as many copies as we could for a couple of days. So there I sat, behind a stack of books, glad-handing and autographing, surrounded by caskets and hearses, cremation urns and new computer software, flower stands and funeral flags and embalming supplies. Some things about this enterprise never change—the basic bias toward the horizontal, the general preference for black and blue, the arcane lexicons of loss and wonder. And some are changing every day. Like booksellers and pharmacists and oncologists, many of the small firms are being overtaken by the large consolidators and conglomerates. Custom gives way to convenience. The old becomes old, then new again.

Five thousand undertakers made it to Vegas—the biggest turnout since the last time here, in '74—and 2,300 sales reps and suppliers. It was bigger than Orlando or Kansas City or Chicago, or next year in Boston.

Las Vegas seems perfect for the mortuary crowd—a metaphor for the vexed, late-century American soul that seems these days to run between

2 Best Hotel Bets

- **Best for Conventioneers/Business Travelers:** The **Las Vegas Hilton**, 3000 Paradise Rd. (☎ 888/732-7117), adjacent to the Las Vegas Convention Center and the setting

for many on-premises conventions, offers extensive facilities that include a full business center. And now it's a stop on the nifty new monorail, making access to the Strip easier than

extremes of fantasy and desolation. Vegas seems just such an oasis: a neon garden of earthly delights amid a moonscape of privations, abundance amid the cacti, indulgence surrounded by thirst and hunger.

Or maybe it's that we undertakers understand these games of chance—the way life is ever asking us to ante up, the way the wager's made before the deal is dealt or dice are tossed, before we pull the lever. Some people play for nickels and dimes, some for dollars, some for keeps. But whatever we play for, we win or lose according to these stakes. We cannot, once winning is certain or losing is sure, change our bet. We cannot play for dollars, then lose in dimes or win in cash when we wager matchsticks. It's much the same with love and grief. They share the same arithmetic and currency. We ante up our hearts in love, we pay our losses off in grief. Baptisms, marriages, funerals—this life's casinos—the games we play for keeps.

Oh, we can play the odds, hedge our bets, count the cards, get a system. I think of Blaise Pascal, the 17th-century French mathematician who bet on heaven thus: "Better to believe in a God who isn't than not to believe in a God who is." Figure the math of that, the odds. Pascal's Wager is what they called it. All of us play a version of this game.

I came downstairs in the middle of the night and lost 200 bucks before it occurred to me that this is how they built this city—on folks like me, on what we'd be willing to lose. The next night my Mary won \$800 on one pull of the lever on the slots. They paid her off in crisp C-notes. We laughed and smiled. She tipped the woman who sold her the tokens. She went shopping the next day for a pair of extravagant shoes and came home, as they say, with money in her pockets.

We undertakers understand winners and losers. Our daily lives are lessons in the way love hurts, grief heals, and life—always a game of chance—goes on. In Vegas we get to play the game as if there's no tomorrow. And after a long night of winning or losing, it's good to have a desert close at hand into which we wander, like holy ones of old, to raise our songs of thanks or curse our luck to whatever God there is, or isn't.

—Thomas Lynch

Thomas Lynch is a poet and essayist and a funeral director in Milford, Michigan. *The Undertaking—Life Studies from the Dismal Trade* won the Heartland Prize and the American Book Award, and was a finalist for the National Book Award. His latest work is *Booking Passage: We Irish and Americans*.

ever. Be warned: New owners could make changes by the time you read this. See p. 117.

- **Best Luxury Resort:** There really is only one, and that's the **Ritz-Carlton, Lake Las Vegas**, 1610 Lake Las

Vegas Pkwy. (☎ 800/241-3333), perched on the edge (and over part of) Lake Las Vegas in Henderson. It's the combination of setting (gorgeous, peaceful) and experience (such service!) that wins them the prize. See

- p. 128. But you might want something that's actually in town, and for that, you must go straight to the **Four Seasons**, 3960 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 877/632-5000), because experience running luxury resorts around the world makes them the only true claimant to the throne within the Vegas city limits. See p. 77.
- **Best Resort for the Indecisive: Green Valley Ranch Resort**, 2300 Paseo Verde Pkwy. (at I-215), Henderson (☎ 866/782-9487), somehow manages to combine the comfort of a Ritz-Carlton with the style of boutique chains such as the W, and makes it all work. Have your cake and eat it too, either in the most comfortable beds in town or by one of our favorite pools. See p. 129.
 - **Best Archetypically Las Vegas Hotel:** As of press time, there weren't any. Las Vegas hotels are one and all doing such massive face-lifts that the archetype is going to be but a memory. Still, despite some major changes, including a complete exterior face-lift, **Caesars Palace**, 3570 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 877/427-7243), will probably continue to embody the excess, the romance (oh, yes) and, well, downright silliness that used to characterize Vegas—and to a certain extent still does. See p. 92.
 - **Best Non-Vegas Vegas Hotel:** Mandalay Bay's expansion, **THEhotel**, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 877/632-7000) is as elegant and sophisticated as any lodging in Manhattan. All accommodations are true suites, complete with plasma-screen TVs and deep soaking tubs. Since it's a separate tower, you are far away from the clash and clang of Vegas—at least in spirit. In reality, it's just a medium walk down a long hallway. Quite possibly our favorite hotel in the city. See p. 86.
 - **Best Swimming Pool:** Hands down, the acres of water park fun at **Mandalay Bay**, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 877/632-7000)—wave pool (even if the waves never get all that big), lazy river, beach, regular swimming pools . . . no wonder they check IDs carefully to make sure only official guests enter. Everyone wants to swim and splash here. See p. 78. If you can't, you won't be disappointed by the amorphously shaped pools with water fountains and slides, plus a rather festive atmosphere at **The Mirage**, 3400 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 800/627-6667). See p. 102. But if you've ever longed to swim at Hearst Castle, **Bellagio**, 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 888/987-6667), with six swimming pools in a neo-classical Italian garden setting (and a more hushed, chic ambience), is for you. See p. 91. Then again, the pool at the **Green Valley Ranch Resort** (p. 129), with its foliage, beach, in-water gambling, and everything else, perhaps has them both beat. But its distant location (in south Las Vegas) takes it out of the running. Only just, though.
 - **Best Spa/Health Club:** We only wish our own gym was as handsomely equipped as the one at the Canyon Ranch Spa in **The Venetian**, 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 877/883-6423; p. 95), which also has a number of other high-priced amenities on which you can blow your blackjack winnings. We are also partial to the full complement of machines at the health club at **Bellagio** (p. 91), probably the best-equipped club of all. Attendants who soothe you with iced towels and drinks, a well-stocked locker room, and comfortable lounges in which to rest up after your workout are other pluses.

- **Best Hotel Dining:** Foodies will work up a good case of gout trying all the haute-cuisine options at **Bellagio** (p. 91), which has restaurants by Todd English (Olives) and Julian Serrano (Picasso). The hotel has seven James Beard Award–winning chefs on staff. **The Venetian** (p. 95) isn't too far behind, with restaurants from Wolfgang Puck, Emeril Lagasse, and Joachim Splichal (Pinot), plus branches of the noted Lutèce. In The Venetian's new expansion is a version of Thomas Keller's bistro **Bouchon**. **Wynn Las Vegas**, 3131 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 888/320-9966) has brought in a number of name-brand chefs, including Alex Strada (Alex) and Paul Bartolotta (Bartolotta). See chapter 6 for reviews of these restaurants.
- **Best for 20-Somethings to Baby Boomers: Palms Resort & Casino**, 4321 W. Flamingo Rd. (☎ 866/942-7777), is the single most happening hotel for the hip and hip-hop sets. No wonder Britney stayed here before, during, and through the aftermath of her quickie marriage. See p. 103. The **Hard Rock Hotel & Casino**, 4455 Paradise Rd. (☎ 800/473-ROCK), bills itself as the world's "first rock 'n' roll hotel and casino" and "Vegas for a new generation." Aficionados of headbanger clubs won't mind the noise level, but we aren't sure about everyone else. See p. 116.
- **Best Interior:** For totally different reasons, it's a tie between **New York–New York Hotel & Casino**, 3790 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 800/693-6763), **The Mirage**, and **The Venetian**. The Mirage's (p. 102) tropical rainforest and massive coral-reef aquarium behind the registration desk may not provide as much relaxation as a Club Med vacation, but they're a welcome change from the general hubbub that is usual for Vegas. Speaking of hubbub, **New York–New York** (p. 84) has cornered the market on it, but its jaw-dropping interior, with its extraordinary attention to detail (re-creating virtually every significant characteristic of New York City), makes this a tough act to beat (though Big City residents may despise its realism). The Venetian's (p. 95) authentic re-creation of Venice, however, might top it.
- **Best for Families: The MGM Grand**, 3799 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 800/929-1111), is still a hit with families, despite backing away from more child-friendly details such as its original Oz theme and eliminating its amusement park. See p. 82. Then there is also the classic choice: **Circus Circus Hotel/Casino**, 2880 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 800/634-3450) with ongoing circus acts, a vast video-game arcade, a carnival midway, and a full amusement park. See p. 112. Less aged, and less hectic, **Mandalay Bay**, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. at Hacienda Avenue (☎ 877/632-7000) is a more modern choice, right for families because you can gain access to both the guest rooms and the pool area (itself fun for kids, with a beach, a wave pool, and a lazy river) without trotting through the casino. And grown-ups will find party-fun restaurants, bars, and clubs (including the House of Blues) for their own enjoyment. See p. 78. Those of you with bigger budgets might want to try the **Ritz-Carlton** (p. 128) because not only is it well out of range of Sin City's temptations, but it also offers a variety of healthy and fun activities (from hikes to fly-fishing to stargazing).
- **Best Rooms Off the Strip:** Again, we love the **Ritz-Carlton** (p. 128), with its perfect decor, spacious interior, and gorgeous bathrooms, but you'll

probably want something closer to town.

- **Best Rooms on the Strip:** We need to break this down. If one is talking suites, then **THEhotel** wins the day, with their one-bedroom could-be-a-great-apartment-in-Manhattan sophisticated wonders. Best “suites” (because no matter how they are billed, it’s really just one big room) are clearly the 700-square-foot extravaganzas at **The Venetian** (p. 95), with separate sitting and bedroom areas, full of all sorts of special details. Best “room” goes to the brand-new **Wynn Las Vegas**, where the rooms are quite big, the bathrooms not far behind, the beds are plush, the TVs (plural!) are flatscreen, the windows floor to ceiling, and the tubs are deep. The Grand Tower rooms at the **MGM Grand** (p. 82) are the best bet in the medium price range; their modern twist on 1930s curves stands out from the cookie-cutter decor found all around town. Downtown, the rooms at the **Golden Nugget**, 129 E. Fremont St. (☎ 800/634-3454), are by far the best. See p. 123.
- **Best Bathrooms:** This honor goes to **THEhotel at Mandalay Bay** (p. 86), where the good-size marble bathrooms feature a large glass shower, a separate water closet, and a soaking tub so deep the water comes up to your chin. If only they’d angled the plasma-screen TV a bit better—it’s hard to see from the tub, though it’s fine for the shower. It’s a wonder anyone ever leaves to go to the casino, either. But not far behind is **Wynn Las Vegas**, which offers a similar layout, including that plasma TV and the deep, long tub, plus lemon-grass-scented amenities and silky robes to cradle you afterward.
- **Best Noncasino Hotel: Four Seasons** (p. 77) used to win this category, but

now it’s a tie with **THEhotel**. It can’t be a coincidence that both are found around **Mandalay Bay**. Once you’ve experienced the Four Seasons’ quiet good taste, superior service and pampering, and the serenity of their non-casino property, or the sophistication and elegance of **THEhotel**, it’s hard to go back to traditional Vegas hotels. But best of all, should you want the best of both worlds, you need only pass through one door to have access to **Mandalay Bay** (p. 78) and all its traditional Vegas hotel accouterments, including that missing casino. Coming in a close second is the **Venezia** at **The Venetian**; same idea as **THEhotel** (a separate yet equal entity, the non-casino part of the casino hotel), though we prefer the decor and gestalt of the latter.

- **Best Casinos:** Our favorite places to gamble are anywhere we might win. But we also like the casinos in **The Mirage** (lively, beautiful, and not overwhelming; p. 102), **New York–New York** (because of the aforementioned attention to detail—it almost makes losing fun; p. 84), and **Main Street Station**, 200 N. Main St. (☎ 800/465-0711), because it’s about the most smoke-free casino in town, and because it’s pretty. See p. 127.
- **Best Downtown Hotel:** It’s a tie. The upscale **Golden Nugget** (p. 123) is exceptionally appealing in every aspect. And **Main Street Station** (p. 127), which has done a terrific job of renovating an older space, now evokes early-20th-century San Francisco, with great Victorian details everywhere, solidly good restaurants, and surprisingly nice rooms for an inexpensive price.
- **Best Views:** From the high-floor rooms at the **Stratosphere Casino Hotel & Tower**, 2000 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 800/99-TOWER), you can see

clear to the next county (p. 112), while the Strip-side rooms at **Four Seasons** (p. 77) give you the entire Las Vegas Boulevard panorama from

the southernmost end. Higher-up floors at the **Las Vegas Hilton** (p. 117) show you that same panorama from a different perspective.

3 Best Dining Bets

A number of celebrity chefs are cooking in Vegas, awakening us to the opinion that Vegas's rep for lackluster restaurants is no longer deserved. Reviews for all of the restaurants listed below can be found in chapter 6.

- **Best Restaurant to Blow Your Money On:** You could lighten your wallet at the craps table—and why not?—or you could spend that same amount, and take a lot longer doing so, exalting in the culinary work being done at Alex Strada's (☎ 702/770-9966) and Paul Bartolotta's (☎ 702/770-9966) eponymous places in Wynn Las Vegas, and Hubert Keller's *Fleur de Lys* (☎ 877/632-9200) at Mandalay Place. Meals come dear at all three places, but each is turning out works of edible art, from three different inspired sources of creation. To us, this is what Vegas indulgence is all about, and the memories make us much happier than our losses at the table.
- **Best All Around:** Given our druthers, we are hard-pressed to choose between *Alizé* (☎ 702/951-7000; p. 146), at the top of the Palms, where nearly flawless dishes often compete with the sparkling view for sheer delight, and *Rosemary's Restaurant* (☎ 702/869-2251; p. 170), a 20-minute drive off the Strip and worth twice as much effort, for some Southern-influenced cooking. Each of these may well put the work of those many high-profile chefs, so prominently featured all over town, to shame. Lastly, though, speaking of high-profile chefs, we have just sworn allegiance to Thomas

Keller's *Bouchon* (☎ 702/414-6200; p. 154), in *The Venetian's* expansion, *Venezia*. Keller may be the best chef in America, and while this is simply his take on classic bistro food, you should never underestimate the joys of simple food precisely prepared. We also never ever turn down a chance to eat what Julian Serrano is making over at *Picasso* (☎ 702/693-7223; p. 152).

- **Best Inexpensive Meal:** The beautiful, fresh, monster submarine sandwiches at *Capriotti's* (☎ 702/474-0229; p. 160). They roast their own beef and turkey on the premises and assemble it (or cold cuts, or even vegetables) into delicious well-stuffed submarine sandwiches, ranging in size from 9 to 20 inches, and none of them over \$10. We never leave town without one . . . or two.
- **Best Buffet:** On the Strip, it's the *Paris, Le Village Buffet* (☎ 888/266-5687), where the stations break from standard form by adhering to regional French food specialties (from places such as Provence, Alsace, and Burgundy) and the results are much better than average. Though not cheap, this is a reasonable substitute for an even more costly fancy meal. See p. 182. If you want something a little more traditional buffet—as in, one not devoted to one particular cuisine—*Wynn Las Vegas* (☎ 702/770-3340) is terrific all the way, even through the usual buffet weakness, dessert. See p. 182. The *Palms Festival Market Buffet* (☎ 702/942-7777) offers the best of the more budget-oriented options, with an

array of Middle Eastern goodies and some eccentric additions to the ubiquitous carving stations. See p. 184. Downtown, the **Main Street Station Garden Court**, 200 N. Main St. (☎ 702/387-1896), has an incredible buffet: all live-action stations (where the food is made in front of you, sometimes to order); wood-fired brick-oven pizzas; fresh, lovely salsas and guacamole in the Mexican section; and better-than-average desserts. See p. 186.

- **Best Sunday Champagne Brunch:** Head for Bally's, at Mid-Strip, where the lavish **Sterling Sunday Brunch** (☎ 702/967-7999) features tables dressed with linen and silver. The buffet itself has everything from caviar and lobster to sushi and sashimi, plus fancy entrees that include the likes of roast duckling with black-currant and blueberry sauce. See p. 181.
- **Best Group Budget Meal Deal:** **Capriotti's** (p. 160) again—a large sandwich can feed two with leftovers, for about \$5 each. Or split a bowl of soup at the **Grand Wok and Sushi Bar** (☎ 702/891-7777), in the MGM. This pan-Asian restaurant offers a variety of soups in such generous portions that four people can make a decent meal out of one serving. See p. 141.
- **Best Bistro:** We ate nearly the entire menu at **Bouchon** (☎ 702/414-6200; p. 154), from Thomas Keller, in The Venetian, and didn't find a misstep, just what you might expect from one of the most critically lauded chefs in the country. But don't overlook **Mon Ami Gabi** (☎ 702/944-4224), in the Paris Las Vegas hotel. Offering lovely, reasonably priced bistro fare (steak and *pommes frites*, onion soup), it's also a charming spot. See p. 158.
- **Best Restaurant Interiors:** The designers ran amok in the restaurants of **Mandalay Bay**. At **Aureole** (☎ 877/632-1766), a four-story wine tower requires that a pretty young thing be hauled up in a harness a la *Peter Pan* to fetch your chosen vintage. See p. 135. The post-Communist party decor at **Red Square** (☎ 702/632-7407; p. 139) is topped only by the fire-and-water walls at neighboring **rumjungle** (☎ 702/632-7408; p. 295). And then there is the futuristic fantasy of **Mix** (☎ 877-632-1766), on top of THEhotel, where stunning sky-high views of the Strip compete with a giant beaded curtain made of hand-blown glass balls, to say nothing of silver "pods" in lieu of booths.
- **Best Spot for a Romantic Dinner:** **Alizé**, at the top of the Palms, has windows on three sides of the dining room, with no other buildings around for many blocks. You get an unobstructed view of all of Vegas, the desert, and the mountains from every part of the restaurant, not just the window seats. Seriously, aren't you in the mood already? See p. 146.
- **Best Spot for a Celebration:** Let's face it, no one parties like the Red Party, so head to **Red Square**, in Mandalay Bay, where you can have caviar and vodka in the ultimate capitalist revenge. See p. 139. If you have deep pockets, get a table atop the stairwell at Mix, and watch the Strip twinkle below.
- **Best Free Show at Dinner:** **Daniel Boulard Brasserie** (☎ 702/770-9966) at Wynn Las Vegas provides front-and-center seating of the strange yet compelling Lake of Dreams show. And then there is the vista offered by the restaurants in Bellagio (**Picasso**, **Le Cirque**, **Olives**, and **Circo**), which are grouped to

take advantage of the view of the dancing water fountains. See chapter 6 for reviews of all of the Bellagio restaurants.

- **Best Wine List:** It's a competitive market in Vegas for such a title, and with sommeliers switching around, it's hard to guarantee any wine list will retain its quality. Still, you can't go wrong at Mandalay Bay's **Aureole** (☎ 877/632-1766), which has the largest collection of Austrian wines outside of that country, among other surprises. See p. 135.
- **Best Beer List:** **Rosemary's Restaurant** (☎ 702/869-2251) offers "beer

pairings" suggestions with most of its menu options, and includes some curious and fun brands, including fruity Belgian numbers. See p. 170.

- **Best View:** **Mix** and **Alizé** (p. 146) win with their floor-to-ceiling window views, but there is something to be said for seeing all of Vegas from the revolving **Top of the World** (☎ 702/380-7711), 106 stories off the ground in the Stratosphere Casino Hotel & Tower. See p. 153.
- **Best Eclectic:** Many celebrity-chef or other high-profile restaurants in Vegas are disappointments because said chef isn't in the kitchen. But

Best Restaurant Booze

We could have said "best wine cellars," but that felt too exclusive—what if you don't want to swish and swirl, but do shots? The point is, Vegas is increasingly an oenophile's delight, but other parts of the alcohol spectrum have not been neglected in the process. Some of the following is silly, meant as show-off, one-for-the-record books, as much as anything else, but even in those cases, there is a serious wine person behind the glitz, doing very good work.

Alizé has the largest "large format" collection, as in larger than a standard 750 bottle, so think magnum, double magnum, and so on. **Wynn Las Vegas** has on site a 90,000-bottle central storage for their wine—that's in addition to storage in individual restaurants. The four-story wine cellar at **Aureole**, from which choices are plucked by comely lasses hauled up and down by harnesses, is surely the most dramatic in town. Nifty little electronic gadgets containing all the choices, with recommendations for pairing just a flick of a button away, only add to the fun. **Bartolotta** has an all-Italian wine list—an extremely daring move in wine circles.

A master sommelier can be found at **Picasso**, and a third at **Delmonico Steakhouse**. And one more works magic at **Alex**, while still another, while now Alex's front of house manager, was originally sommelier at **Chef Strada's Renoir** restaurant, where he came up with the welcome idea of offering a specially priced 1-ounce pairing of Chateau D'Yquem with foie gras.

The Grand Award of Excellence, from *Wine Spectator* magazine, was created especially for **Valentino** restaurant—the one in Los Angeles admittedly, but obviously there must be sibling benefits. **Rosemary's** caters not to a tourist crowd, but a connoisseur crowd, and their list reflects it. But just for fun, they also offer beer pairings!

Charlie Palmer's **Aureole** (☎ 877/632-1766), in Mandalay Bay, hits all the right gourmet notes with its clever, sophisticated cuisine.

- **Best Italian:** You won't find anything more authentic outside of Italy than at **Bartolotta**, at Wynn Las Vegas. Given that the chef has his fish flown in daily from the Mediterranean, this also wins "best seafood." See p. 147. For Tuscan cuisine at slightly less dear prices, **Circo** (☎ 702/693-8150), in Bellagio, is terrific. See p. 155.
- **Best Deli:** Wars are fought over less, so all you New Yorkers can square off between **Stage Deli** (☎ 702/893-4045), in Caesars, or **Carnegie Deli** (☎ 702/791-7310), in The Mirage. The rest of us will find out mouths too packed with pastrami to weigh in. See p. 159.
- **Best New Orleans Cuisine:** Emeril's **Delmonico Steakhouse** (☎ 702/631-1000), in The Venetian, brings the celebrity chef's "Bam!" cuisine to the

other side of the Mississippi, and we are glad, while we are perhaps even gladder that Commander's Palace has an outlet in Aladdin. See p. 149 for Delmonico Steakhouse.

- **Best Red Meat: Lawry's The Prime Rib**, 4043 Howard Hughes Pkwy. (☎ 702/893-2223; p. 163), has such good prime rib it's hard to imagine ever having any better. If you want cuts other than prime rib, **Charlie Palmer's** (☎ 702/632-5120; p. 136), in the Four Seasons, has some of the best steaks in town, though the more budget-conscious might want to either split the enormous cuts or try the justly popular **Austins Steakhouse** (☎ 702/631-1033; p. 170).

And since we have strayed from the subject of wine to other parts of the liquor world, Isla has an impressive tequila collection. Then there is Shibuya, in the MGM Grand, which has the largest sake list of any restaurant in the country.

4 Best of Vegas After Dark

- **Best Production Show:** Total deadlock tie between **Cirque du Soliel's KA and O**. The latter is more "traditional"—if you can call a human circus that uses a giant tank of water as a stage "traditional," but it is in that it has only a loose semblance of narrative, whereas *KA* (yet another revolutionary piece of stage craft, though we will let you be surprised as to how that plays out) actually has a plot. Both are dazzling and, given the extremely high production values, feel worth the extremely high ticket price. (*KA* ☎ 877/880-0880 and *O* ☎ 888/488-7111 or 702/693-7722; see p. 169 and p. 170.)
- **Best Old-Time Vegas Production:** You know: big huge stage sets, pointless production numbers, showgirls,

nipples on parade, Bob Mackie head-dresses. Ah, *Jubilee!*; this world would be dreary without you (☎ 800/237-7469 or 702/739-4567). See p. 273.

- **Best Smart Show:** This town isn't good enough for either **Blue Man Group** or **Penn & Teller** (Penn & Teller ☎ 888/746-7784 or 702/739-4567). See p. 268 and p. 277.
- **Best Local Hang:** They don't keep the same late hours as they once did, but you will still find performer friends and other in-the-know types gathering at **Jazzed Cafe & Vinoteca** (☎ 702/233-2859), eating Kirk's authentic Italian fare and comparing notes on the artist's life in Vegas. The more hard-core types (including, on certain nights, Blue Men sans

Winning Websites

Start your online journey to Sin City at www.vegas4visitors.com. This small, family-run endeavor is packed full with information, unbiased reviews, contact info, maps, photos, and links to hotels, restaurants, and more.

If you want to pick the brains of the local populace—and who better to ask about life in Las Vegas—head over to www.lasvegasweekly.com. You'll find out where locals go for fun, and you can browse through reviews of bars, cafes, nightclubs, restaurants, and amusement parks.

For the most comprehensive Vegas dining resource on the Web, go to www.nightonthetown.com. The site arranges its plethora of restaurants by cuisine and location so you can find what you want, where you want it.

If you like your information with a side order of humor, head over to www.cheapovegas.com. This fun site offers lots of sassy reviews and unbiased opinions, especially on the Las Vegas casino hotels. There's also a small section on getting freebies while you're in town.

And, finally, for a plethora of information, including trip reports and reviews written by Vegas visitors and locals, try www.A2Zlasvegas.com. The site also features ratings for hotels, restaurants, and shows based on their appropriateness for kids, making this a good site for families.

makeup, doing weird percussion things) will be gathering way after hours at the **Double Down Saloon** (☎ 702/791-5775). See p. 283 and p. 288.

- **Best Ultra-Lounge:** That's just Vegas-speak for "fancy-pants hotel bar," but most of them are pretty nice, if trying too hard to be all-that. Still, we like the vibe at **Risque** (☎ 702/946-7000), and we love the lush, sexy look of **Lure**. See p. 289.
- **Best Reason to Wait in Line:** Truth be told, we never think there is a good enough reason, but **Ghost Bar** (☎ 702/942-7778) is a fantastic hotel bar, especially because of its outstanding view, perched high above the Strip. Meanwhile, there's a good reason **Rain** (☎ 702/940-7246) keeps packing them in—it's plus ne

ultra for dance clubs, but the new **Body English's** (☎ 702/693-5000) style is terribly appealing to us. See chapter 10.

- **Best Burlesque:** Tough call, given the competition, but **40 Deuce** (☎ 702/632-7000) was the first establishment (back in Los Angeles) to cash in on the return of the high-class hoochie girl, and still does it the best. See p. 288.
- **Best Strip Club:** Ah, you know you want to know. Tie between **Sapphire** (☎ 702/796-0000), because of its size (so big, it goes right past intimidating into nonthreatening), and **Treasures** (☎ 702/257-3030), because we think all strip joints should insist on production numbers with stage effects, and look like old-fashioned English brothels. See p. 300.