

Chapter 1

Discovering the Best of Las Vegas

In This Chapter

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“It’s Vegas, baby!” is the catchphrase from the independent movie hit *Swingers* — and that’s all you need to know.

Okay, maybe you need to know a little more. But if a city exists that has its heart — and all sorts of other body parts — right on its sleeve, and all its goods in the shop window (which is, by the way, subtly outlined in blazing bright neon), it’s Las Vegas. This isn’t a coy metropolis or an unassuming city. Vegas is a gaudy monstrosity of delight: a city designed solely to take your money and break your heart while making you love it and beg for more. And people do keep coming — Las Vegas is the fifth most-popular destination in the world. Don’t come here looking for culture and self-improvement, but do come here looking for a whale of a good time. You’re sure to have it.

The following are our picks for the best of Las Vegas.

Best Vegas Experiences

From hitting the big jackpot to hanging out with dolphins, here are some of the best experiences Vegas has to offer:

- ✔ **Best most-Vegas moment:** Seeing the Strip at night, when everything is coated in lights. Everything gleams, shimmers, shimmies, and beckons. It’s sinful and delicious. Even a cynic’s jaw drops and even the purest of the pure get a little bit giddy. It’s a testament to the philosophy that anything is possible, and in that there is both hope and horror.

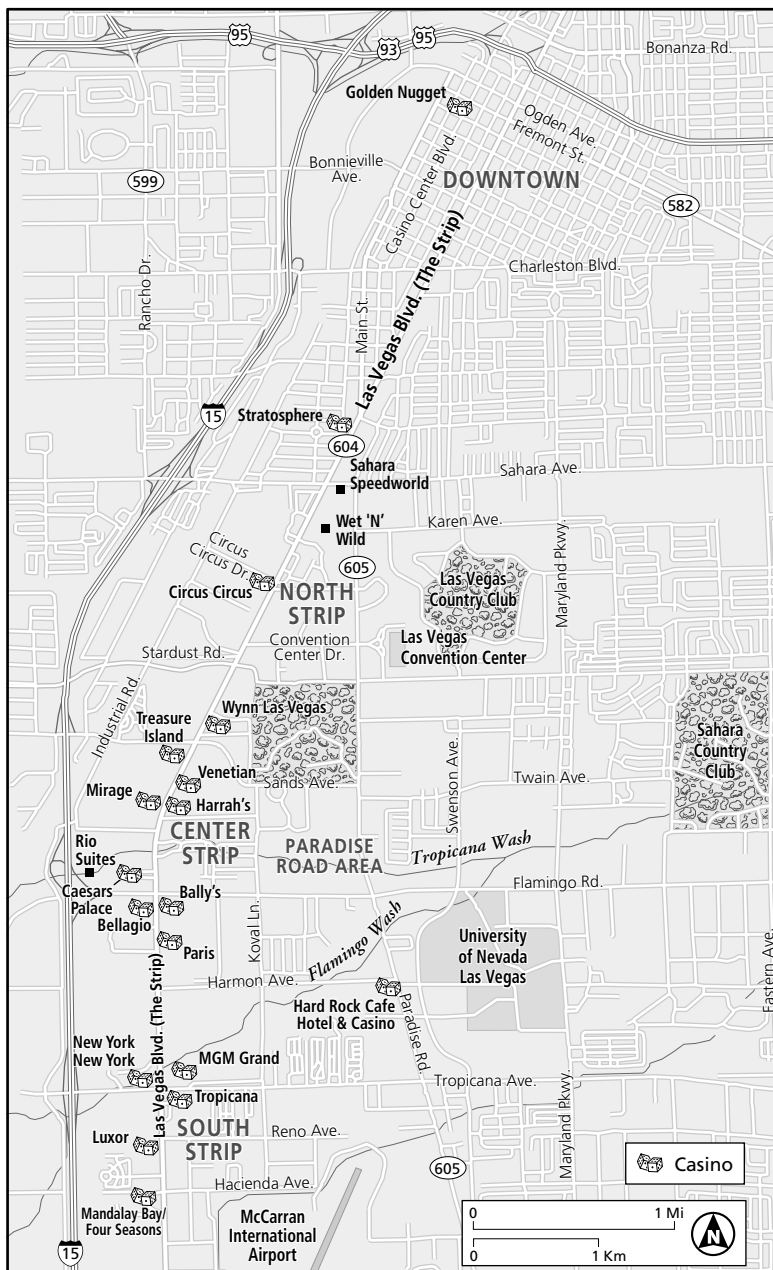
- ✔ **Best hoped-for Vegas moment:** Hitting that million-dollar jackpot, with one pull of a handle. Good luck to you.
- ✔ **Best free show:** The Bellagio Water Fountains. Sounds silly, until you see those giant spouts of water dance and leap to everything from opera arias to Sinatra. Try to not grin at least once. We dare you.
- ✔ **Best non-Vegas moment:** Hanging out with the coolest water mammals around in the Mirage's **Dolphin Habitat**. The trainers, who have the best job in the city, make them jump periodically (all natural movements they would do for fun anyway). The dolphins love it. You will, too.
- ✔ **Best cheapskate Vegas fun:** Playing penny slots. C'mon, live a little.
- ✔ **Best Vegas attraction:** There is nothing quite like the **Liberace Museum**. Bless his sequin-and-rhinestone-bedecked heart.

Best Vegas Hotels

See Chapter 9 for complete reviews of the following hotels:

- ✔ **Best drop-dead hotel:** **THEhotel**, an annex to Mandalay Bay, is a sophisticated, mature, stylish endeavor, a Manhattan boutique hotel on human growth hormones. The only hotel where all accommodations are true suites, and the only Strip hotel we really want to stay in right now.
- ✔ **Best hotel for the well-heeled:** **The Four Seasons**, naturally. They have a reputation for a reason. All is comfort, all is class. And honestly, they probably aren't any more expensive than some of the other high-end hotels on the Strip.
- ✔ **Best resort hotel:** **The Ritz-Carlton Lake Las Vegas** is actually 30 minutes, and a lifetime, away from the Strip, and it's worth it, except for the problem that once you come here, you never want to leave.
- ✔ **Best totally Vegas hotel:** It's not really as it once was, but although **Caesar's Palace** has stripped away some of its cheese, it still ranks as the archetype for all Vegas hotels. There's the theme, typified by the Roman soldiers strolling the property and the talking Roman statues in the Rome-theme shopping mall. There's the sense of luxury. There's Celine Dion. And there's the size. Some think it romantic, some think it a hoot. Just like Vegas itself.
- ✔ **Best theme hotel:** Probably a toss up between the **Luxor**, whose Egyptian theme (complete with pyramid-shaped building and a Sphinx out front) extends all the way to room décor, and **New York-New York**, where the entire NYC skyline is built into the hotel's structure and every major Manhattan landmark is a part of the hotel's public spaces.

Las Vegas at a Glance



- ✓ **Best swimming pool:** **Mandalay Bay's** water area, with a wave pool, beach, lazy river, and several other basic pools, is so fabulous they have to check room keys to keep non-guests away. We also like the tropical wonderland around the **Mirage's** amorphous pool, and there is something to be said for **Bellagio's** sophisticated classical pool layout.
- ✓ **Best bathrooms:** **THEhotel** has a sunken tub so deep the water comes up to your chin, plus a flat screen TV. The rest of it is marble and big. We were tempted to write this entire book from there.
- ✓ **Best downtown hotel:** It's a tie between the **Golden Nugget**, the overall sharpest and most together hotel, with rooms nearly identical to the **Mirage** (they used to be owned by the same company), and the cheaper, and oddly sweet, **Main Street Station**.

Best Vegas Restaurants

See Chapter 10 for complete reviews of the following restaurants:

- ✓ **Best celebrity chef restaurants:** Actually, few celebrity chefs are in the kitchen in Vegas — they just have outposts of their name brand restaurants. If that matters to you — and if money is no object — then you have to eat at **Joel Robuchon** at the Mansion (in the MGM Grand), where the master chef continues his sterling reputation. (Truth be told, Robuchon won't be in the kitchen all the time either, but many of his employees from his famous establishments are in charge, and execute their duty flawlessly.) Considerably less dear is **Picasso** (in the Bellagio) where Julian Serrano, late of San Francisco's Masa, actually holds court most nights. Otherwise, you can probably rely on the fact that someone is paying careful attention to Thomas Keller's **Bouchon** (in the Venetian) and Charlie Palmer's **Aureole**. If these chefs themselves aren't wielding the utensils, they've made darn sure someone reliable — and maybe even on their way to their own celebrity chef fame — is.
- ✓ **Best noncelebrity chef restaurants:** **Rosemary's** is run by two chefs who cut their teeth on noted restaurants in New Orleans before coming to Vegas to help open up Emeril's Seafood at the MGM Grand. **Alize** (in the Palms) is another venture from Andre (of **Andre's** in Downtown and the Monte Carlo, both also highly recommended). We've had some of our best meals in Vegas at both restaurants. The chefs may not be household names, but they ought to be.
- ✓ **Best new restaurant:** The James Beard Foundation nominated **Bartolotta** (at Wynn Las Vegas) just that, for 2006, and since we had already sampled chef Paul Bartolotta's simple but sublime Italian seafood, we heartily agreed.

- ✔ **Best budget meal:** The submarine sandwiches at **Capriotti's** are so big, not to mention so delicious, that three people could probably feel well fed off one large sandwich — which costs around \$9.
- ✔ **Best buffet:** The days of cheap Vegas buffets are over — if you want food that's more than just fuel, at least. If you don't mind spending a bit (but still probably less overall than you might at any moderately priced restaurant), spend it on the range of French regional-inspired dishes at **Paris, Le Village Buffet** (in the Paris hotel) or the less thematically oriented, but still terrific Wynn Las Vegas Buffet. Otherwise, of the more moderately priced (but still not all that pricey) buffets, **Main Street Station** has the freshest and nicest one.
- ✔ **Best red meat:** We love the prime rib at **Lawry's**, but if you want other cuts of cow, split a monster 44-ouncer (unless you think you don't need to, you greedy goose) at **Charlie Palmer Steak**. The latter a little too pricey? Locals love what they do to meat at **Austin's Steakhouse**.

Best Vegas Entertainment

See Chapters 16 and 17 for reviews of these and other nightlife options:

- ✔ **Best production shows:** We have tears in our eyes when we watch **Cirque de Soleil's O**, as they perform feats of skill and beauty in, over, across, above, and around a tank of water like no other. And for sheer audacity of mechanics, plus an actual plot, Cirque may have topped itself with KA. And we have nothing but admiration for the silliness, which actually hides a message about innocence and wonder, of **Blue Man Group**. You'll never look at marshmallows, paint, and PVC pipes the same way again.
- ✔ **Best magic show:** You can't throw a rock without hitting a magic act in Vegas, but the close-up work **Lance Burton** does in the first 15 minutes of his show is some of the best done by anyone in the world. The rest of the show, featuring the finest support act in town, comic-juggler Michael Goudeau, is pretty great, too.
- ✔ **Best smart guys:** **Penn & Teller** ostensibly do magic, but it's basically an excuse for hip, intelligent, social commentary. Vegas doesn't deserve them. Probably no one does. Go and show your appreciation.
- ✔ **Best classic Vegas revue:** The nipple-tastic, topless **Jubilee!** is everything you could want in a Vegas revue: pointless sketches about Samson and Delilah and the sinking of the Titanic, lip-syncing, topless show girls, and giant Bob Mackie headdresses. It's absurd and the best of an endangered species.