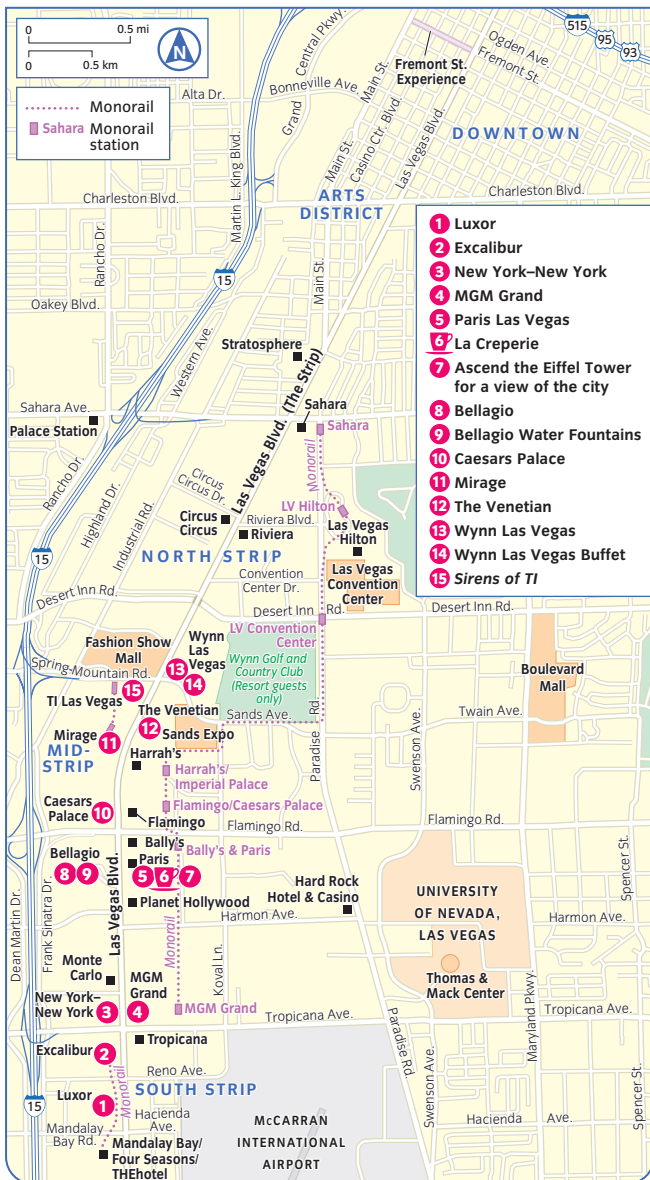


1

# The Best **Full-Day** **Tours**



# The Best in One Day



Previous Page: Caesars Palace, a prime example of the Las Vegas theme hotel.

**If all you know of Las Vegas is the Strip, that's okay—that's really all you need to know.** This stretch of Las Vegas Boulevard South is the heart of the city—sometimes it's mistaken for the city itself. That's an understandable error, because here is what Vegas is all about: mammoth hotel casinos, glittering with electricity both real and metaphorical. See nothing else and you will see Las Vegas.

**START: The main entrance to the Luxor.**

**1 ★ Luxor.** With its glass pyramid-shaped main building (designed by noted architect Veldon Simpson), complete with a 315,000-watt light beam emanating from its peak, this hotel is an appropriate introduction to all things Vegas. There's a touch of historical accuracy (say howdy to those replicas of the Sphinx and Cleopatra's Needle), there's more than a bit of braggadocio (that light beam is allegedly visible from space), and it's all a bit weirdly wrong. (Did I mention the 30-story pyramid is made of glass?) ⌚ **20 min.** **3900 Las Vegas Blvd. S.** ☎ **888/777-0188 or 702/262-4000.** [www.luxor.com](http://www.luxor.com).

**2 Excalibur.** Though its interior's King Arthur mythology has been toned down over the years, this castle-shaped resort is still one of the largest in Vegas, and continues to give a sense of what the city was like

at its kitsch-and-cash height. Note the battlements, the drawbridge, and even a moat, though the spoilsports have ditched the larger-than-life Merlin that used to overlook the realm. ⌚ **5 min.** **3850 Las Vegas Blvd. S.** ☎ **800/937-7777 or 702/597-7700.** [www.excalibur.com](http://www.excalibur.com).

**3 ★★ New York–New York.** Take the Big Apple's skyline, squash it down and turn it into a hotel exterior, and presto—you have this pinnacle of over-the-top fantasy Vegas. The Empire State and Chrysler buildings, a half-scale Statue of Liberty, and more are represented in brightly colored, semicartoon detail—and a roller coaster (whose cars appropriately resemble NYC taxis) swooshes through it all. Ridiculous and fantastic all at once. ⌚ **20 min.** **3970 Las Vegas Blvd. S.** ☎ **800/693-6763 or 702/740-6969.** [www.nynynhotelcasino.com](http://www.nynynhotelcasino.com).

*Excalibur is the city's tacky but entertaining take on the Arthurian legend.*





*An immense bronze lion, the largest statue in the United States, guards the entrance to the equally mammoth MGM Grand hotel.*

**4 MGM Grand.** The biggest of the big, the MGM Grand's emerald interior (left over from its original incarnation as an homage to MGM's most beloved *Wizard of Oz*) is garish in the daytime, glowing at night, and enormous at all times. Possibly the biggest hotel in the U.S. (figures vary), it certainly is the greenest. A stately 100,000-pound bronze lion guards the entrance beneath high-tech video screens. Once upon a time, this was the pinnacle of the ill-conceived—and hastily discarded—"Vegas is for families" campaign, but today it caters to more adult-oriented tastes. ⌚ 15 min. 3799 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ☎ 800/929-1111 or 702/891-7777. [www.mgmgrand.com](http://www.mgmgrand.com).

**5 Paris Las Vegas.** More reproductions of famous landmarks (including a two-thirds replica of the Arc de Triomphe), though without

much regard to actual geographical location, as the Hôtel de Ville is crammed on top of the Louvre. The \$785-million resort at least has something of a proper French pedigree; Catherine Deneuve lit it up for the first time when the hotel opened in 1999. ⌚ 15 min. 3655 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ☎ 888/BONJOUR (266-5687) or 702/946-7000. [www.parislv.com](http://www.parislv.com).

Sidewalk creperies are everywhere in Paris, so continue your ooo-la-la mood and grab a traditional snack, with either sweet or savory filling, at **6 La Creperie.** *Inside Paris Las Vegas*; see bullet **5**. ☎ 702/946-7000. \$.

**7 Ascend the Eiffel Tower for a view of the city.** It's half the size of the original (540 ft. tall/165m, to be specific), and probably has about that same percentage of the romance. But the view from the top of the Bellagio

*The view from the top of Paris Las Vegas's re-creation of the Eiffel Tower is superb.*







*The dancing fountains that front the Bellagio are the best free attraction in Las Vegas.*

fountains and the Strip in general is pretty swell. Plus the guides here give you all kinds of details about the structure, the kind of re-creation that Vegas used to boast more of, both in the bragging sense and in the possessing sense. Be warned that on windy days, the tower may be shut down for safety reasons. ⌚ 30 min., unless you hang out longer. In *Paris Las Vegas*; see bullet 5. Admission Mon–Thurs \$9 adults, \$7 seniors over 65 & children 6–12; Fri–Sun \$12 adults, \$10 seniors & children 6–12. Daily 9:30am–12:30am, weather permitting.

8 **Bellagio.** The turning point for modern-day Vegas, this elegant cross between hotel as attraction and hotel on steroids set back original owner/visionary Steve Wynn about \$1 billion. As you stroll by, admire the ever-so-slightly classy strip mall version of a charming Italian village strung along an 8-acre (3.2-hectare) invocation of Lake Como. ⌚ 15 min. 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ☎ 888/987-6667 or 702/693-7111. [www.bellagio.com](http://www.bellagio.com).

9 ★★★ **Bellagio Water Fountains.** The best free show in Vegas. Giant spouts send water, shooting (as high as 250 ft./76m in the air), dancing, swaying, and even twirling to music ranging from Sinatra to symphonic. A sophisticated lighting array adds a dash of color to the proceedings. You may think it sounds a bit silly, but catch a show and see if you can stop with just one; for a cinematic preview, check out the fountains' action in the 2001 remake of *Ocean's Eleven*. ⌚ 30 min., to allow for two different shows. In front of the Bellagio; see bullet 8. Shows every half-hour starting early afternoon; every 15 min. 7pm–midnight, weather permitting.

10 ★ **Caesars Palace.** Vegas's original, simultaneously goofy and romantic hotel—and one of the oldest venues (it opened in 1966) still extant on the Strip. It's expanded so much that the Rat Pack wouldn't recognize it, but you should still enjoy the tacky and over-sized replicas of Greco-Roman statuary that decorate the front. Watch for the four-sided Bhrama shrine, an

8,000-pound (3,629kg) replica of the venerated Thai Buddhist good-luck landmark, on the north lawn.

🕒 15 min. 3570 Las Vegas Blvd. S.

☎ 877/427-7243 or 702/731-7110.

[www.caesars.com](http://www.caesars.com).

**11 ★ Mirage.** The hotel that, in 1989, kicked off the “more is more” modern Vegas era. This gleaming gold structure cost \$630 million (a record when it was built) and set the pattern for pretty much every hotel that followed, down to its mirrored facade and Y shape, to say nothing of the attention-getting outdoor free attractions. The volcano out front doesn’t spew lava, but it does set off fire, lights, and smoke every 15 minutes after dark. 🕒 10 min. 3400 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ☎ 800/627-6667 or 702/791-7111. [www.mirage.com](http://www.mirage.com).

*The jaw-dropping lobby of the Venetian is loaded with marble and exquisitely detailed frescoes.*



*The Mirage kicked off the modern hotel era in Las Vegas and still holds its own today.*

**12 ★ The Venetian.** Another excellent continuation of the be-in-Vegas-but-pretend-you-are-elsewhere architecture craze; in this case, a rather admirable (and \$1.5-billion) simulation of Venice. There’s part of the Doge’s palace, there’s the Campanile, there’s St. Mark’s Square, there are even guys in gondolier outfits. All that is missing is the smell from the canals and those pesky attack pigeons. And unlike similar storybook lands at New York–New York and Paris, you can actually wander this Italian cityscape. 🕒 20 min. 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ☎ 888/2-VENICE (283-6423) or 702/414-1000. [www.venetian.com](http://www.venetian.com).

**13 ★ Wynn Las Vegas.** A nearly \$3-billion, 60-story effort from Steve Wynn, the man who transformed Las Vegas forever. Disappointingly, you can’t see that much from the outside; unlike Wynn’s previous efforts,

the eye-catching accouterments—in this case, a 150-foot-tall (46m) man-made mountain—can be properly viewed only from inside. Spoilsport!

🕒 15 min. 3400 Las Vegas Blvd. S.

☎ 800/627-6667 or 702/791-7111.

[www.wynnlasvegas.com](http://www.wynnlasvegas.com).

**14 Wynn Las Vegas Buffet.** For the most part, buffets are no longer the bastion of budget Vegas (itself a thing of the past), but they're still cheaper than dining at one of the city's fabled high-end, celebrity-chef restaurants (and a Vegas tradition, to boot). The buffet at Wynn is a fancy affair, with options running from tandoori chicken to Southern specialties, complete with an active pastry chef on duty—how else to explain a dessert option of floating islands (a sublime meringue-and-cream confection)? *See p 98 for full details on the restaurant.*

**15 Sirens of TI.** A free live-action show on the Strip is pretty irresistible, and if the kid-friendly stunts that used to be the focus of the entertainment departed this attraction when Treasure Island changed from G-rated to R, adults won't mind switching from rooting for



*The Sirens of TI walk the planks outside TI Las Vegas every night.*

the buccaneers to leering at the lingerie-clad lovelies who are now the “villains” of this show. 🕒 20 min.

*In front of TI Las Vegas, 3300 Las Vegas Blvd. S.* ☎ 702/894-7111.

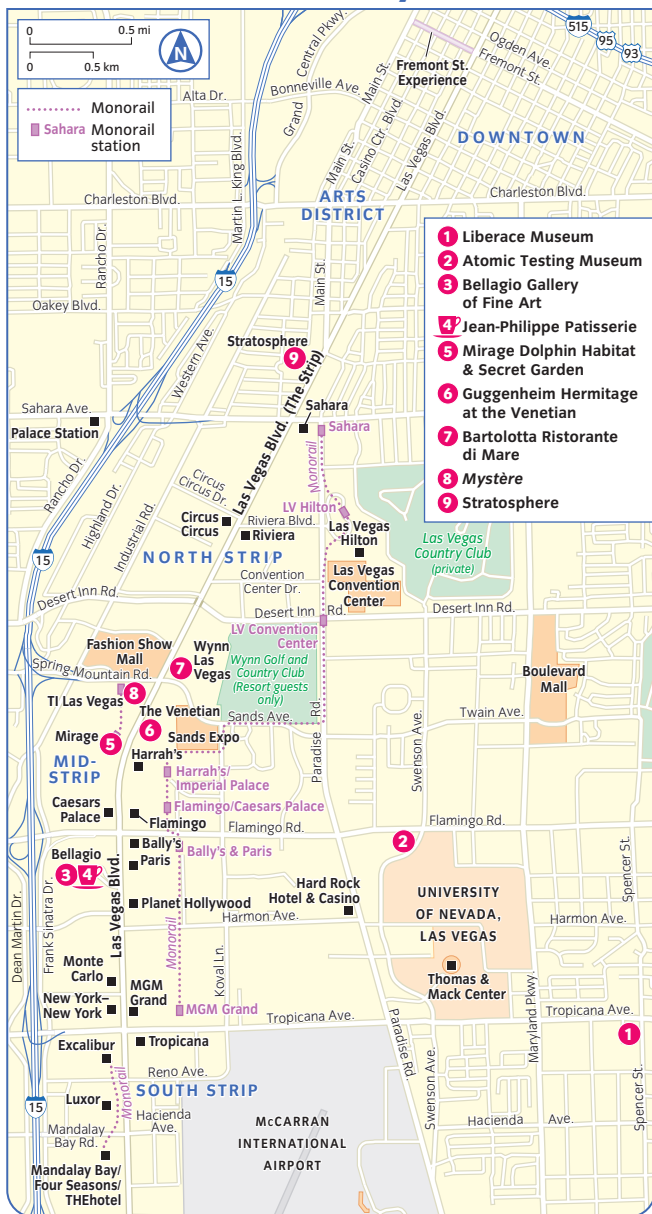
[www.treasureisland.com](http://www.treasureisland.com). Shows nightly at 5:30, 7, 8:30 & 10pm.

## Getting Something for Nothing

Vegas used to be the land of freebies—or at least, stuff so cheap it seemed free. Those days are an increasingly dim memory, but many hotels still offer free attractions designed to lure you into their casinos, where they can separate you from even more of your cash. The best of the loss-leaders on the Strip include the **Bellagio Conservatory** (p 53, bullet 3), the **Bellagio Water Fountains** (p 11, bullet 9), the **volcano** at the Mirage (bullet 11), the **Atrium** (p 55, bullet 1) at Wynn Las Vegas, and the **fountain shows** at the Forum Shops (p 49, bullet 4 & p 5, bullet 5).

One off-Strip number that's worth your while is the **Masquerade in the Sky** show in the Rio (p 133), where carnival-themed floats fly overhead as Mardi Gras-by-way-of-Rio costumed extras toss beads to the cheering crowds. It runs daily at 3, 4, 5, 6:30, 7:30, 8:30, and 9:30pm.

# The Best in Two Days





**V**egas doesn't have a lot of "cuhl-cha," but it does have four compelling and wildly different museums, each with its own charms—two are located on casino property! Today, I'll also give you a glimpse of life off the Strip, which might reinforce why most visitors rarely leave Las Vegas Boulevard South; except for a few architectural bright spots, design imagination seems to have been exhausted and what remain are mostly strip malls. The treasures found inside, however, should more than make up for the bland exteriors. **START: Liberace Museum (1775 E. Tropicana Ave.). It's best to drive here from your hotel; you can park in the free lot outside the museum.**



*The Liberace Museum houses its namesake's flamboyant costumes, cars, and other memorabilia.*

### 1 ★★ Liberace Museum.

Only outsized personalities can leave their imprint on Vegas, and Wladziu Valentino Liberace (1919–87) certainly did that, bless his jewel-encrusted heart. This campy gem helps define “fabulous,” and it does it with sequin-twinkle. Pass through the entrance, dominated by a giant pink piano, and get ready to thrill to the Maestro's dazzling collection of outfits, cars (check your hair in that mirrored Rolls-Royce), pianos (former owners include George Gershwin and Chopin), and jewelry—all lovingly preserved and displayed. Don't miss the 50-pound (23kg) rhinestone—as if you could. 🕒 1 hr. 1775 E. Tropicana Ave. (at Spencer St.). ☎ 702/798-5595. [www.liberace.org](http://www.liberace.org). Admission

\$13 adults, \$8.50 seniors over 65 & students with valid school ID, free for children 10 & under. All children must be accompanied by adult. Tues–Sat 10am–5pm; Sun noon–4pm. Closed Mon., Thanksgiving, Dec 25 & Jan 1.

### 2 ★★ Atomic Testing

**Museum.** Nevada, in addition to its other dubious contributions to the cultural history of the world, was the primary location for the testing of atomic weapons from 1951 to 1992. Indeed, above-ground blasts at the nearby Atomic Testing Site were once a tourist attraction in the way hotel implusions are today. This Smithsonian-affiliated museum soberly and carefully explores the development and implications of 40 years of nuclear weapons development. Particularly affecting is a rather intense simulation of an explosion. The docents (some of them former site

*Las Vegas once promoted nuclear test explosions as a tourist attraction; check out this part of the city's history at the Atomic Testing Museum.*





*Few things in the city are more fun than visiting the residents of the Mirage's Dolphin Habitat.*

employees) are chock-full of information, so quiz them at will. ⌚ 1 hr. 755 E. Flamingo Rd. ☎ 702/794-5161. [www.atomictestingmuseum.org](http://www.atomictestingmuseum.org). \$12 adults; \$9 seniors, military & students with ID; free for children 6 & under. Mon–Sat 9am–5pm; Sun 1–5pm.

**3 Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art.** Originally opened as a showcase for former owner Steve Wynn's personal art collection, this small gallery now hosts often critically lauded temporary exhibits, ranging from fine art to Ansel Adams retrospectives. It's pricey, but it's good to rest your eyes on something of true value and quiet impact in a town that's renowned for its loud and busy landscape. ⌚ 45 min. In Bellagio, 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ☎ 702/693-7871. [www.bgfa.biz](http://www.bgfa.biz). Reservations suggested, but walk-ins taken every 15 min. Strollers & packages are forbidden in the gallery, but there are no storage facilities. Admission \$15 adults; \$12 seniors & students with ID. Audio tour included with admission. Daily 9am–10pm.

Have a sandwich or, best of all, a delectable dessert at the award-winning **4 Jean-Philippe Patisserie**, whose signature attraction is a 27-foot-tall (8.2m) chocolate fountain that Willie Wonka would love. In Bellagio, 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ☎ 702/693-8788. \$.

**Drive to The Mirage, park your car, and walk until further notice.**

**5 ★★★ Mirage Dolphin Habitat & Secret Garden.** My favorite attraction in Vegas, partly because it's so unexpected. You can get fairly close to some good-looking white tigers and lions at **The Secret Garden**, the daytime quarters for some of Siegfried & Roy's animals (they really live on the duo's ranch). But the best thing here is the **dolphin exhibit**, where a number of the delightful mammals (all born in captivity) live in a state-of-the-art habitat, designed to their specifications. There are no shows per se, but you can watch the dolphins happily cavort with their doting trainers to your heart's content. ⌚ 1 hr. In The Mirage, 3400 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ☎ 702/791-7111. [www.miragehabitat.com](http://www.miragehabitat.com). Admission \$15 adults; \$10 children 4–10; free for children under 10 if accompanied by adult. Mon–Fri 11am–5:30pm; Sat–Sun 10am–5:30pm. Hours vary seasonally.

**6 ★★ Guggenheim Hermitage at The Venetian.** This historic co-venture between New York's Guggenheim and the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg is a complete folly for Vegas, and, thus, all the more culturally treasured. The venue hosts regular retrospectives, not infrequently of masterworks rarely (if ever) seen outside of Russia. The free audio guide is excellent, but if a

**CLOSED**

docent-led tour is scheduled, give it a whirl—they are always worthwhile. One thing to look for: The museum's ultracool metal walls allow it to hang pictures with magnets instead of using the usual techniques. ⌚ 45 min. In *The Venetian*, 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ☎ 702/414-2440. [www.guggenheimlasvegas.org](http://www.guggenheimlasvegas.org). Admission \$20 adults, \$15 seniors, \$13 students with ID, \$9.50 children 6–12, free for children under 6. Audio guide included with admission. Daily 9:30am–8:30pm.

### 7 Have dinner at the super Bartolotta Ristorante di Mare.

To get the full Vegas experience, you need to dine with at least one celebrity chef, and it's better to dine with James Beard–nominated Paul Bartolotta, who is actually likely to be in his kitchen. Plus, this beauty of a multilevel restaurant, featuring simple yet not simplistic classic Italian seafood cuisine, is a jewel box in its own right. Worth every dime. ⌚ At least 2 hr. In *Wynn Las Vegas*, 3131 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ☎ 888/352-3463 or 702/248-3463. [www.wynnlasvegas.com](http://www.wynnlasvegas.com). See p 89 for details on the restaurant.

8 ★★★ **Mystère.** The artistically superb productions of the world-famous Cirque du Soleil have largely

*Even in a restaurant mecca such as Vegas, Bartolotta Ristorante di Mare stands out thanks to its superb Italian cuisine.*



*Mystère launched the onslaught of Cirque du Soleil productions in Las Vegas.*

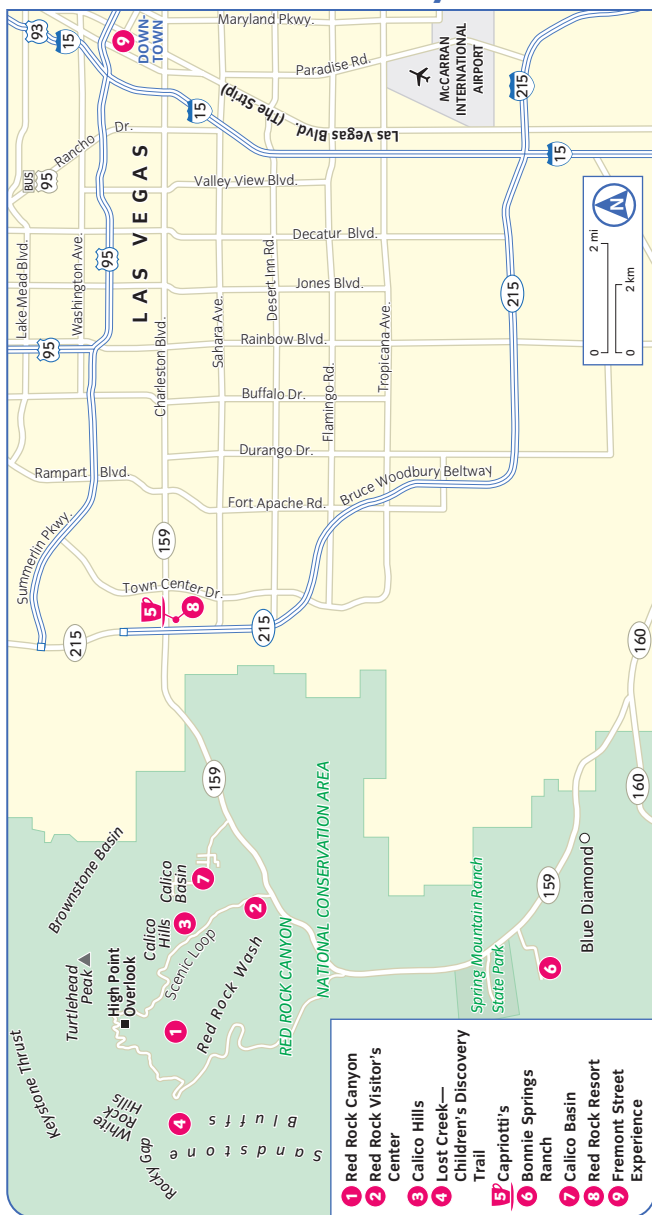
replaced the old Vegas jiggle top revues. This is the first and most representative of classic Cirque, before it went nuts (happily) with the possibilities afforded by a big budget and elaborate staging. The result is a weird and wonderful mix of choreography, acrobatics, and music. ⌚ 1½ hr. In *TI Las Vegas*, 3300 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ☎ 800/963-9634 or 702/796-9999. [www.cirquedusoleil.com](http://www.cirquedusoleil.com). Tickets \$60–\$95 (plus tax). Shows Mon–Wed & Sat 7 & 9:30pm, Sun 4:30 & 7pm. No shows Thurs–Fri.

**Take the TI shuttle back to The Mirage (or walk to the parking lot) and drive to the Stratosphere.**

9 **Stratosphere.** The tallest building west of the Mississippi (1,149 ft./350m) offers eagle's-eye views of the desert, the mountains, and the Strip from its observation deck. Access stays open until 1am, and though lines to get up here can be lengthy, you can stay as long as you like. The panorama up here can't be beat, as the lights of this ridiculous and marvelous city twinkle below and around you. If you want, you can have a drink at the deck's Top of the World bar. Check out the adjacent restaurant (the desserts aren't bad); it revolves, which is a retro hoot.

⌚ 30 min. if you stay for a drink. 2000 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ☎ 702/380-7777. Admission to observation deck: \$10 adults; \$6 seniors, hotel guests & children 4–12; free for children 3 & under. Sun–Thurs 10am–1am; Fri, Sat & holidays 10am–2am. Hours vary seasonally.

# The Best in Three Days





**E**ven the most dedicated gambler needs to get outside for some real oxygen, so today I start you off with some of the natural wonders surrounding Vegas before whisking you back to Old Vegas for a look at the city the way it used to be. This tour has a lot of wholesome, child-appropriate activities, but adults need not fear—there's also a stop at a casino hotel, in case you need a fix. **START: Drive west from the Strip on Charleston Boulevard, which becomes NV 159, until you get to the Red Rock Canyon Visitor Center.**

### 1 ★★★ **kids** Red Rock Canyon.

In startling contrast to the sparkling madness of a city that sheds its skin about once every 10 years is this geological wonder, a mere 600 million years in the making. Sandstone monoliths—yes, some of them are quite red, though others are, frankly, sand-colored—rugged canyons, cliffs, and other topographical thrills thrust up from the desert thanks to serious fault action. The **Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area** consists of 197,000 acres (79,720 hectares), accessible to the public via a 13-mile (21km) scenic driving loop and 19 hiking trails. In addition to even better photo ops and encounters with local flora and fauna, the hikes provide opportunities to view petroglyphs and pictographs. Red Rock is also one of the most popular rock-climbing destinations in the world. 🕒 *30 min., unless*

*The magnificent natural scenery of Red Rock Canyon is only 30 minutes from the Strip.*

*you stop to take photos or hike. On NV 159. ☎ 702/515-5350. [www.nv.blm.gov/redrockcanyon](http://www.nv.blm.gov/redrockcanyon). Admission: \$5 for 1-day vehicle pass. Daily 6am–7pm Oct 1–Mar 31, 6am–8pm Apr 1–Sept 30.*

2 **kids** **Red Rock Visitor's Center.** Stop here for brochures, suggestions for hikes, and other practical advice. The center has a small exhibition hall that helpfully illustrates the natural history of Red Rock. If you time it right—spring and summer—you can also visit with Mojave Max, a 65-plus-year-old desert tortoise, who is the charismatic star of the center. 🕒 *30 min. Just past the park entrance on the scenic loop. Daily 8am–4:30pm.*

3 **Calico Hills.** The parking lot at the start of the second trail along the scenic loop provides one of the two best views at the red rocks that give this area its name. 🕒 *20 min. for photographs or 3 hr. to hike, depending on level of fitness. Look for route marker just under a mile (1.6km) from the Visitor's Center.*

4 **kids** **Lost Creek—Children's Discovery Trail.** The easiest of the park's trails, with no more than a 200-foot (61m) gentle elevation, lasts only about an hour round-trip (depending on how fast you go). It's perfect for kids and anyone who doesn't want to commit to a more demanding hike. Vegetation here is a bit more lush, due in part to the year-round stream, and there are some pictographs and an agave (a plant that was once a



major source of food for local tribes) roasting pit. ⌚ 1 hr. to hike. Look for route marker, approximately 7 miles (11km) from Visitor's Center.

Take advantage of the picnic tables at the start of the Lost Creek—Children's Discovery Trail by splitting a sandwich you picked up before entering the park, at **5 Capriotti's**, the justly lauded local submarine sandwich place. Its outlet in the Red Rock Resort is on the drive in from the Strip to the park. 11011 W. Charleston Blvd., Las Vegas, NV 89135. ☎ 866/767-7773 or 702/797-7625. \$.

### 6 kids Bonnie Springs Ranch.

A deliberately hokey re-creation of an old Western town, where it's hard to tell if the weather-beaten look is authentic or the sign of a somewhat aging attraction. The regular satirical dramatic skits provide old-fashioned fun; not slick, but sweet and silly. Play cowboys with your kids as you wander past the saloon, the mill, and the old general store. Next door is a petting zoo, a maze of (scrupulously clean) wire pens with goats, rabbits, snooty llamas, elderly deer living in fat retirement, and a couple of wolves. The aviary provides glimpses of peacocks, while a riding stable offers trail rides into the mountains. ⌚ 1–2 hr. NV 159, 5 miles (8km) past Red Rock Canyon. ☎ 702/875-4191. [www.bonniesprings.com](http://www.bonniesprings.com). Admission \$20 per car. Daily Nov–April 10:30am–5pm, until 6pm the rest of the year.

7 **Calico Basin.** About 2 miles west of the turnoff into the Red Rock scenic loop is a half-mile-long boardwalk trail, an alternative way for travelers with disabilities or for those with other mobility issues to get out of the car and into the scenery. Look for wild flowers and the foundations of an old cabin. ⌚ 1 hr. Look for signs

2 miles (3.2km) west of park entrance, on north side of Charleston Blvd.

8 **Red Rock Resort.** This fancy new resort is the getaway of choice for the famous of face to hide in Vegas. It's a good spot to ease yourself back into a Vegas frame of mind with a drink, and maybe even a little gambling. ⌚ 30 min. & up, depending on whether you gamble. 11011 W. Charleston Blvd. ☎ 866/767-7773 or 702/797-7625. See p 132 for more information on the resort.

9 kids **Fremont Street Experience.** In the heart of Downtown Vegas is a pedestrian-only zone that's covered with a video screen about five football fields in length. The screen's 12.5 million LED modules, and a 500,000-watt sound system, deliver a rotating light-and-sound show. It's the best free show in Vegas after the Bellagio fountains (p 11, bullet 9). ⌚ 20 min., unless you see more than one show. Fremont Street, between Main St. & Las Vegas Blvd. S. ☎ 702/678-5777. First show at 8:30pm, then at the top of the hour through midnight. ●

*Its glory days might be in the past, but Bonnie Springs Ranch still offers lots of old-style fun, especially for families.*

