

Introducing Las Vegas

Las Vegas is the city of sin and illusion, the town that Bugsy built, and it's like nothing you've seen before—a facade of a facade with some neon on it. And you're here! And you—don't gamble! Egads!

But don't despair. Las Vegas is many, many things—Sin City, Disneyland for Adults, A Stopover on a Drive Through the West, Convention Central—and just because you aren't all that interested in the main attraction doesn't mean you can't have a whale of a good time. Sure, Vegas would still prefer that you lighten your pockets the traditional way, and so you will still find casinos and slot machines nearly everywhere you go. But with our guidance, not only will you be able to avoid a great deal of exposure to the one-armed bandit, you will also find plenty to otherwise fill your time.

As a non-gambler, your biggest problem will be finding a hotel where the emphasis isn't on gambling. There are a few of these, most of them chain hotels without casinos, although the posh Four Seasons also remains unsullied by craps. But even the official casino hotels have come around to the idea that gambling may not be everyone's first reason for coming to Vegas, with two of them (Mandalay Bay's THEhotel and the Venetian's Venezia tower) built specifically as alternatives to casino hotels, though still attached to casino hotels. And so visitors now have swell pools, lush spas, and some of the best restaurants in the country—and if all that doesn't spell vacation, well, then you've also got access to some marvelous hiking in Red Rock Canyon, water fun on Lake Mead, stunning desert visits in Valley of the Fire State Park, and the engineering and architectural marvels at Hoover Dam. And back in town, there are shows—some hokey, and some on the level of the best in the world. There are even a couple real museums, with actual masterpieces.

But there are some things to bear in mind while navigating Vegas and avoiding the temptation of the dice or the cards or the slot machines. First of all, the casinos aren't easy to avoid. They generally stand between you and, well, anything you want. When staying inside a hotel, a casino can sometimes be between you and the entire outside world. In chapter 3, we will let you know how obtrusive the

casino in question (if there is one) is and how much of a hindrance it can be. Anyone traveling with children should take special note of those descriptions; kids aren't allowed in casinos, though if the only way through the facility is through the gambling area, obviously that rule is relaxed. But kids are expected to stick to walkways between machines, and many a child who has stopped (and who can blame them?) because their attention was caught by noise or flashing lights have found themselves descended upon by security, who hustle them right along. If this sounds like the opposite of fun, you might want to avoid a casino hotel.

Second, the days of Vegas bargains are, for the most part, gone. Sure, hotel prices can dip quite low (provided that you travel during the off season or want a room Sun–Thurs nights), but the cost of everything else is high. The best restaurants are the expensive ones, with prices hitting nearly New York City levels. The better museums charge a bundle. Spa treatments? Ouch. And the best shows charge outrageous ticket prices.

But then again, you are on vacation. Or maybe you are in town for a convention. Either way, you deserve some foie gras. Or a little massage. See Cirque du Soleil and marvel. Then go outside and look at the lights of Las Vegas. Ever seen anything like it? Of course not. Remember, that's really why you are here.

1 Favorite Vegas Experiences

- **Taking a Stroll on the Strip:** Sure, it's a skyline made up entirely of the skylines of other cities, but where else can you see a glowing pyramid, a gleaming giant brass lion, a mini version of New York City, a volcano, the sights of Paris and Venice, and more, all in one day? The Strip, known officially as Las Vegas Boulevard South, is where it's at—and by “it” we mean “huge enormous hotels, most with a theme,” and by “theme” we mean “copies, sometimes faithful, of some of the great sights of the world, plus some other stuff just for Vegas.”

So walk down the Strip during the day and giggle. And then do it again at night, when the lights turn it all into something magical. Get in your car and cruise, for maximum effect.

- **Checking Out the Inside of the Hotels:** Remember the part about the theme? Well, in some cases, it's continued inside—and how! Rome, Venice, Paris, just to name a few—all lovingly and cartoonishly evoked within. And even though the trend has been less about theme and more about grand elegance, said

grandness is on such a scale of ridiculousness that the gawking opportunities are still plentiful.

- **Free Shows and Attractions:** To further lure you, many of the hotels provide free entertainment, of varying degrees of worth. The best, and not to be missed, are the fountains of Bellagio, which rise and fall in choreographed rhythms to tunes from Sinatra to opera during the day and part of the night. The Mirage's volcano "explodes" (spews light and fire). Treasure Island's pirates battle scantily clad "sirens" in a really stupid show. And the MGM Grand lets you get up close to a lion or two. Plus there are lounges with free music, live or otherwise, at just about every hotel.
- **The Dolphin Habitat at The Mirage:** Dolphins in the desert? Don't worry, these Atlantic bottlenose dolphins have one of the finest (admittedly manufactured) habitats in the world, and they get cosseted and coddled and stimulated by some marvelous handlers. Watching them frolic—leap, flop, and even toss balls around—is an utter delight. It's the best attraction in Vegas.
- **Eating Out:** No longer the joke of the foodie scene, Vegas has attracted many of the most prominent chefs in the country, from Food Network favorites such as Puck and Emeril, to Jean-Georges, Julian Serrano, and more, including Joël Robuchon, considered one of the finest chefs alive. You may well have one of the meals of your life here.
- **Binging at Buffets:** Of course, buffets are often quantity over quality, but nothing says "vacation" to us like unlimited mounds of shrimp and an endless flow of prime rib.
- **Cirque du Soleil:** It's a costly ticket, but it's also world-class entertainment. Cirque has six shows as we write this, with more on the way. The magical *Mystère* (at Treasure Island), the almost-cinematic *KÀ* (at the MGM Grand), and the other-worldly *O* (at Bellagio)—where the troupe's trademark acrobatics and surreal theatrics take place on, above, around, and in water—are the best, while you can skip *Zumanity* and Criss Angel. Then there is the new Beatles-themed *LOVE*, which is either a must-see or a bit overpriced and redundant or even a travesty, depending on how sacred you hold the Beatles.
- **Red Rock Canyon and Valley of the Fire State Park:** When visiting this Wonder of the Artificial World, it's important to remind yourself of the Natural World, and what better way to do it than with awe-inspiring desert rock formations? No

money-grubbing businessperson caused these to be built, and they will be standing long after Vegas.

- **Shopping:** The above doesn't mean we don't have our materialistic side, and while Vegas has little in terms of unique shops, it does have pretty much every store you could want. Thoughts shopping at a Gap is nothing special, shopping at a Gap set in a Roman coliseum or a mock Venice is.
- **Liberace Museum:** While much fuss—some of it even justified—has been made about Vegas's additions to the cultural scene, you probably should not miss the most Vegas of Vegas attractions, the Liberace Museum. Who needs masterworks when you've got rhinestones?

2 Best Hotel Bets

- **Best for Business Travelers:** If you have a good expense account, head over to the **Four Seasons**, 3960 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 877/632-5000; www.fourseasons.com), and let them soothe and pamper you. Otherwise, you can join the other business travelers who have made the **Las Vegas Hilton**, 3000 Paradise Rd. (☎ 888/732-7117; www.lv Hilton.com), their stop for many years, or you can stretch out in the comfort of the mini-apartments found at the **Residence Inn**, 3225 Paradise Rd. (☎ 800/331-3131; www.marriott.com).
- **Best for Families:** The **Four Seasons** (see above for contact info) is the only hotel in town that truly rolls out the red carpet for Junior (they will provide cribs, toys, and treats, and even baby-proof a room), plus guests have access to Mandalay Bay's ultra-kid-friendly pool area. If you want lower prices and little or no exposure to the Strip, try the **Desert Rose Resort**, 5051 Duke Ellington Way (☎ 888/732-8099; www.shellhospitality.com), just a couple blocks away, with a free breakfast buffet, a good pool, and basketball and volleyball courts; and they allow pets.
- **Best Luxury Resorts:** It's a toss-up between the **Four Seasons** (see above for contact info) and **Ritz-Carlton, Lake Las Vegas** (1610 Lake Las Vegas Pkwy., Henderson, NV; ☎ 800/241-3333; www.ritzcarlton.com), with the more moderately priced **Green Valley Ranch Resort** also getting a nod (2300 Paseo Verde Dr., Henderson, NV; ☎ 866/782-9487; www.greenvalleyranchresort.com) and the most costly **Red Rock Resort** (10973 W. Charleston Rd.; ☎ 866/767-7773;

www.redrockstation.com) taking a well-deserved spot on the list. The Four Seasons sits atop Mandalay Bay but seems like a world away, whereas the Ritz-Carlton really is (it's about 30 min. away, in Henderson)—so much so (and now we are referring to gestalt, not geography) that once you arrive, it's very hard to leave. Green Valley Ranch is a winning combo of Ritz-Carlton posh and W Hotel hip. Red Rock sits next to the otherworldly scenery of the eponymous canyon, so you do get away from it all, without sacrificing a lick of luxury. If you want Strip proximity and brand-name comfort, the Four Seasons is for you. If you want a genuine luxury resort experience, then it's the Ritz. If you want a bargain as well, try Green Valley Ranch. If you want to see what Britney's up to, try Red Rock.

- **Best Swimming Pool:** The winner is the 11 acres of water fun (including a beach pool with regular waves, plus a long lazy river) at **Mandalay Bay**, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 877/632-7800; www.mandalaybay.com). But second is a tossup between the jungle fantasy at **The Mirage**, 3400 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 800/374-9000; www.mirage.com), and the one at **The Flamingo Las Vegas**, 3555 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 800/732-2111; www.flamingolv.com). Both are full of slides and waterfalls, plus lots of lush foliage.
- **Best Spa:** The designers of **Mandara Spa** at **Planet Hollywood** (formerly the Aladdin), 3667 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 866/935-3647 www.aladdincasino.com), were sent to Morocco for inspiration, and the result is the most beautiful spa in Vegas. We hope the new Planet Hollywood owners keep their mitts off it, as they swear they will. The greatest number of services can be found at the highly regarded (and highly expensive) **Canyon Ranch Spa** at **The Venetian**, 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 877/220-2688; www.venetian.com), which also has the best health club.
- **Best Rooms:** **THEhotel at Mandalay Bay**, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 877/632-7800; www.thehotelatmandalaybay.com), with full one-bedroom suites with impressive bathrooms, beats out **The Venetian** (see above for address; ☎ 877/883-6423), whose rooms include sunken living rooms. **Wynn Las Vegas** has the best non-suite rooms, all spacious clean-lined comfort (3131 Las Vegas Blvd. S.; ☎ 888/320-9966; www.wynnlasvegas.com).
- **Best Beds:** **Ritz-Carlton**, **Lake Las Vegas**, and **Green Valley Ranch Resort** (see contact info above) both have plush beds, high-thread-count sheets, and down comforters; and it all comes together in a cocoon you will be hard-pressed to leave.

Palms Casino Resort, 4321 W. Flamingo Rd. (☎ 866/942-7777; www.palms.com), has a similar philosophy toward nighttime comfort.

- **Best Bathrooms:** **THEhotel at Mandalay Bay** (see contact info above) heads a pack of hotels (which includes Mandalay Bay, the Ritz, the Four Seasons, Green Valley Ranch, Bellagio, Wynn Las Vegas, and The Venetian) with marble tubs and large glass-and-marble showers, but THEhotel adds a flat-screen plasma TV and a chin-deep soaking tub.
- **Best Hotel Dining:** On one hand, it's hard to beat the lineup at **Bellagio; Picasso, Le Cirque, Circo, Prime Steakhouse**—these represent some important names in the restaurant world. But **Mandalay Bay's** wattage—**Fleur de Lys, Aureole, Border Grill**, even the amusing **Red Square**—may thrill us even more. And we do appreciate **Wynn Las Vegas'** hard line when it comes to those fancy-name chefs; they are required to actually work on the premises. The results—Bartolotta and Alex chief among them—demonstrate why this matters.

3 Best Dining Bets

- **Best Buffet:** You get what you pay for, so in the expensive category, try the incredible assortment offered at **Wynn Las Vegas** (see above for contact info) or Bellagio's **Buffet** (☎ 888/987-6667), or the buffet at the French-regional-themed **Le Village Buffet** (☎ 702/946-7000) at **Paris**. In the moderate category, try local favorite **Rio's Carnival World Buffet** (☎ 702/252-7777). And at the low end, head Downtown, where **Main Street Station's Garden Court** (☎ 702/387-1896) offers a well-priced and quite good buffet.
- **Best for Families:** Buffets work well for feeding bottomless-pit teenagers, but **Monte Carlo Pub & Brewery** (☎ 702/730-7777) has mounds of family-friendly food (Buffalo wings, pizza, ribs, large salads) for even better prices. **Cypress Street Marketplace** in Caesars Palace (☎ 702/731-7110) has such a wide variety of food booths (salads to fat Chicago hot dogs, to wraps, to Vietnamese noodle bowls) that there should be something there for even the most varied family tastes.
- **Best for a Romantic Dinner:** It's hard to beat the view found at **Alizé** (☎ 702/951-7000)—at the top of the Palms, with no other tall buildings around to obscure the twinkling city lights from three walls of windows. It's a wow.

- **Best Place to Impress a Date:** Take 'em to **Joël Robuchon at the Mansion** (☎ 702/891-7925). If the works of culinary art—prepared by a master chef and considered some of the best French food in the world—don't do the trick, the bill (a small fortune, but worth it) surely will.
- **Best Authentic Italian:** So simple, so sublime. Take fish flown straight from the Mediterranean, and then grill it. A little olive oil, a little fresh sautéed tomato. Say “grazie” to **Bartolotta** (☎ 888/352-3463).
- **Best for Sexy Food and Dining:** We mean this in a grown-up way, not in a tummy-bearing, sin-is-in way. The playful, teasing concoctions at the luscious **Fleur de Lys** (☎ 877/632-7800) make other attempts at fine dining in town look feeble. Food here is sensual in all ways.
- **Best Wine List:** Mandalay Bay's **Aureole** (☎ 877/632-7800) is renowned for its “wine angels,” the catsuit-clad gals who rise to the top of a four-story tower of wine bottles to retrieve a patron's selection. It's a gimmick that may be misleading; they have a wonderful selection, as well as handheld computers that guide you through the selections.
- **Best Steak:** Fighting words for many. Not for us, though. We think it's at **Charlie Palmer Steak**, in the Four Seasons (☎ 702/632-5120). But others think it can be found in **Austins Steakhouse** (☎ 702/631-1033).
- **Best Bistro:** Thomas “Best Chef in America” Keller has a Vegas outlet; **Bouchon** in The Venetian (☎ 702/414-6200) surpasses the original in Napa. Not a misstep on the menu.
- **Best Decor:** Genuine works from the master on the wall (and the most lovely casual floral arrangements possible) at **Picasso** (☎ 877/234-6358) or the over-the-top-of-the-Iron-Curtain satirical fun of Mandalay Bay's **Red Square** (☎ 702/632-7407).