

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 Pleasuredome: Inside Las Vegas*

As often as you might have seen it on TV or in a movie, nothing can prepare you for your first sight of Las Vegas. The skyline is hyper-reality, 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, computer-generated noise 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 else like it in the world. In other cities, hotels are built near the major attractions. Here, the hotels *are* the major attractions. What other city has a skyline made up of buildings from other cities’ skylines?

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, 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 Frank and Dino and Sammy. It’s Elvis—the Fat Years. It’s Britney and Paris behaving scandalously at nightclubs. It’s volcanoes and magic shows and cocktail waitresses dressed in short-short Roman togas. It’s cheesy, sleazy, and artificial and wholly, completely unique. It’s wonderful. It’s awful. It’s wonderfully awful and awfully wonderful.

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 fountains dance and pirates fight sexy showgirls. 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 does not exist anymore. Even as ancient civilizations are replicated, “old,” in Vegas terms, is anything over a decade. Indeed, thanks to tear-downs and renovations, there is virtually nothing original left on the Strip. In a way, that is both admirable and ghastly, and it’s 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 gaudy tastelessness of it all, you have to admit that what’s out there is 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. Everything is in lights in Vegas: hotels, casinos, 7-Elevens, the airport's parking garage. Stand still long enough, and they'll probably cover *you* in neon.

Oh, the gambling? Yep, there's plenty of that. Let's not kid ourselves: Gambling is the main attraction of Vegas. The rest—the celebrity-chef restaurants, 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 puritanical of souls in their day.

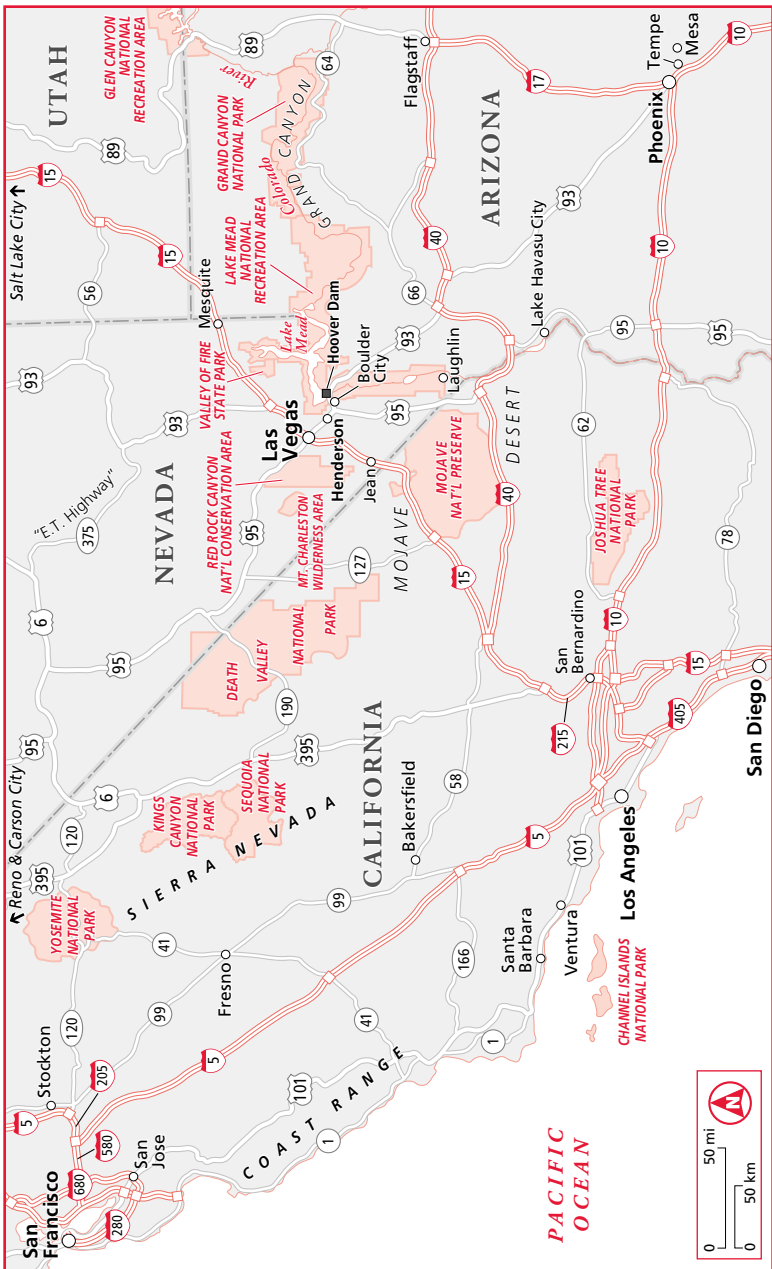
Unfortunately, the days of an inexpensive Las Vegas vacation are gone. The cheap buffets and meal deals still exist, as do some cut-rate rooms, but both are likely to prove the old adage about getting what you pay for. Be prepared to pay if you want glamour and fine dining.

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 lounges, some with singers or go-go dancers, 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 humanity.

Yes, it's noisy and chaotic. Yes, it's really just 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.

1 FROMMER'S FAVORITE LAS VEGAS EXPERIENCES

- **Strolling 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 past the incredible hotels and their attractions. You'll pass the gotta-see-it-to-believe-it New York–New York on your way, and if your strength holds out, you will end at Circus Circus, where live acrobatic 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 marvel at the choreographed water-fountain ballet at Bellagio.
- **Casino-Hopping on the Strip:** The interior of each lavish 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 Paris, from New York City to the ultraluxurious Wynn Las Vegas, it is all, completely and uniquely, Las Vegas.
- **Spending 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. 177). Unlike the lengthy and exhausting Strip, here you can hit a dozen casinos in about 5 minutes.
- **Bingeing at Buffets:** Many are no longer the very best of bargains, but there is



A Funeral Director's Look Back at Vegas: No Tomorrow

Las Vegas is convention central. Orthodontists go there, as do architects, computer geeks, gynecologists, TV preachers, township clerks, postal workers, and pathologists. There's an abundance of good hotel rooms, cheap eats, and agreeable weather. Coming and going is reasonably painless. There are golf and gambling and ogling of 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 at 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 copies 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.

Las Vegas seems perfect for the mortuary crowd—a metaphor for the vexed, late-century American soul that seems these days to run between extremes of fantasy and desolation. Vegas seems just such an oasis: a neon garden of

something about the endless mounds of food that just scream "Vegas" to us. Our choices for the best in town are listed in the dining section, later in this chapter.

- **Taking a Creative Adventures Tour:** Char Cruze, of **Creative Adventures** (☎ 702/893-2051; www.creativeadventuresltd.net), 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. 194.

- **Marveling at the Liberace Museum:** It's not the Smithsonian, but then again, the Smithsonian doesn't have

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 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*.

- rhinestones like these. Only in Vegas. See p. 179.
- **Visiting the Dolphins at The Mirage:** This is a most un-Vegas experience. Watch these gorgeous mammals frolic in their cool blue pool. If you're really lucky, they'll play ball with you. See p. 183.
- **Playing Penny Slots:** Even the most budget-conscious traveler can gamble for hours. Penny slots used to be as rare as a non-silicone-enhanced showgirl, but now they're in all the major casinos. See chapter 8.

- **Shopping 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. 234)—it’s St. Mark’s Square, complete with canals and working gondolas. It’s now connected to its sister property, **The Palazzo**, where it is not themed, but is still quite impressive, with envy-inducing designer stores. Then there are **The Forum Shops at Caesars Palace** (p. 232), which replicate 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 while **Miracle Mile at Planet Hollywood** (p. 234) is now sort of a glitzy generic mall, the variety of shops makes it one of the better hotel shopping experiences.
- **Being Amazed by Cirque du Soleil’s *O*, *KÀ*, 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 chapter 10.

- **Seeing 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. Be sure to watch out for **Mr. Cook E. Jarr**. See chapter 10 for some ideas.
- **Red Rock Canyon and Valley of Fire State Park:** No money-grubbing businessperson caused these awe-inspiring desert rock formations to be built, and they will be standing long after Vegas.

2 BEST HOTEL BETS

- **Best for Conventioneers/Business Travelers:** The **Las Vegas Hilton**, 3000 Paradise Rd. (☎ 888/732-7117; www.lvhilton.com), adjacent to the Las Vegas Convention Center and the setting for many conventions, offers extensive facilities that include a full business center. And now it’s a stop on the monorail, making access to the Strip easier than ever. See p. 106.
- **Best Luxury Resorts:** The **Ritz-Carlton, Lake Las Vegas**, 1610 Lake Las Vegas Pkwy., Henderson (☎ 800/241-3333; www.ritzcarlton.com), perched on the edge (and over part) of Lake Las Vegas, in Henderson, wins the prize for its combination of setting (gorgeous, peaceful) and experience (such service!). See p. 114. But you might want something that’s actually in town, and for that, you must go to the **Four Seasons**,

3960 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 877/632-5000; www.fourseasons.com), because experience running luxury resorts around the world makes them the only true claimant to the throne within Vegas. See p. 65.

- **Best Resort for the Indecisive:** So you want a proper resort getaway, but you don’t want to be too far from Vegas action. **Red Rock Resort**, 11011 W. Charleston Rd. (☎ 866/767-7773; www.redrocklasvegas.com), is a smashing newer facility that has it all: luxe rooms, an excellent pool area, good and relatively inexpensive food, fab decor, and a breathtaking view of the red rocks of the canyon. Many a well-heeled celeb has kept a low profile by the pool. See p. 116.
- **Best Archotypically Las Vegas Hotel:** To be honest, these days there aren’t any.

- Las Vegas hotels are one and all doing such massive face-lifts that the archetype is mostly a memory. Still, despite some major changes, **Caesars Palace**, 3570 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 877/427-7243; www.caesars.com), will probably continue to embody the excess, the romance and, well, downright silliness that used to characterize Vegas—and to a certain extent still does. See p. 82.
- **Best Non-Vegas Vegas Hotel:** Mandalay Bay's **THEhotel**, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 877/632-7800; www.thehotelatmandalaybay.com), is as elegant and sophisticated as any lodging in Manhattan. All accommodations are true suites, complete with flatscreen TVs and deep soaking tubs. Because 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. 74.
 - **Best Swimming Pools:** There are acres of water park fun at **Mandalay Bay**, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 877/632-7800; www.mandalaybay.com)—wave pool, lazy river, beach, regular swimming pools, even its own open-air casino . . . no wonder they check IDs carefully to make sure only official guests enter. Everyone wants to swim and splash here. See p. 66. 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; www.mirage.com). See p. 90. But if you've ever longed to swim at Hearst Castle, **Bellagio**, 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 888/987-6667; www.bellagio.com), with six swimming pools in a neoclassical Italian garden setting (and a more hushed, chic ambience), is for you. See p. 80. Then again, the pool at **Green Valley Ranch Resort**, 2300 Paseo Verde Pkwy. (at I-215), Henderson (☎ 866/782-9487; www.greenvalleyranchresort.com), with its foliage, beach, and everything else, may have them both beat. But its distant location (in Henderson) takes it out of the running. But only just. See p. 115.
 - **Best Spas/Health Clubs:** We only wish our own gym were as handsomely equipped as the one at the Canyon Ranch Spa in **The Venetian**, 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 888/283-6423; www.venetian.com), which also has a number of other high-priced amenities on which you can blow your blackjack winnings. See p. 85. We are also partial to the full complement of machines at the health club at **Bellagio**, 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 888/987-6667; www.bellagio.com), probably the best-equipped club of all. Attentive attendants, a well-stocked locker room, and comfortable lounges in which to rest up after your workout are other pluses. For a straight spa experience, the **Spa at Encore**, 3121 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 888/320-7125; www.encorelasvegas.com), is a 70,000-square-foot oasis for the mind, body, and spirit, from its gorgeous Moroccan-infused design themes to its full menu of pampering delights. See p. 95.
 - **Best Hotel Dining:** Foodies can't miss the chance to eat French food from the hands of a true master, at **Joël Robuchon** and **L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon** (the latter is a more casual and somewhat cheaper experience, but just as lauded; ☎ 702/891-7925), in the MGM Grand. If, of course, you don't mind taking out a small bank loan to fund that gastronomic venture. Otherwise, you can work up a good case of gout trying all the haute-cuisine options at Bellagio, which has restaurants by Todd English (**Olives**; ☎ 866/259-7111) and Julian Serrano (**Picasso**; ☎ 866/259-7111). The hotel has seven

James Beard Award-winning chefs on staff. Wynn Las Vegas has brought in a number of name-brand chefs, including Alex Strada (**Alex**; ☎ 888/352-3463) and Paul Bartolotta (**Bartolotta Ristorante di Mare**; ☎ 888/352-3463). The Venetian isn't too far behind, with restaurants from Emeril Lagasse (**Delmonico Steakhouse**; ☎ 702/414-3737), and Joachim Splichal (**Pinot Brasserie**; ☎ 702/414-8888), Mario Batali (**B&B Ristorante**; ☎ 702/266-9977), plus a version of Thomas Keller's bistro **Bouchon** (☎ 702/414-6200). See chapter 6.

- **Best for 20-Somethings to Baby Boomers: Palms Casino Resort**, 4321 W. Flamingo Rd. (☎ 866/942-7777; www.palms.com), is the single most happening hotel for the hip and hip-hop sets. See p. 91. The **Hard Rock Hotel & Casino**, 4455 Paradise Rd. (☎ 800/473-7625; www.hardrockhotel.com), bills itself as the world's "first rock 'n' roll hotel and casino" and "Vegas for a new generation." See p. 101.
- **Best Interiors:** Fancier hotels have come along since **The Mirage**, 3400 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 800/627-6667; www.mirage.com), changed the face of Vegas, but it is still hard to top the visual splendor of the original Strip megaresort. The Mirage's (p. 90) 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 hubbub that is usual for Vegas.
- **Best for Families:** The classic choice is **Circus Circus Hotel & Casino**, 2880 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 877/434-9175; www.circuscircus.com), with ongoing circus acts, a vast video-game arcade, a carnival midway, and a full amusement park. See p. 100. Less aged, and less hectic, **Mandalay Bay**, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 877/632-7800; www.mandalaybay.com), 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. See p. 66. Those of you with bigger budgets might want to try the **Ritz-Carlton, Lake Las Vegas**, 1610 Lake Las Vegas Pkwy., Henderson (☎ 800/241-3333; www.ritzcarlton.com), 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). See p. 114.
- **Best Rooms off the Strip:** Again, we love the **Ritz-Carlton, Lake Las Vegas** (see immediately above), with its perfect decor, spacious interior, and gorgeous bathrooms, but you'll probably want something closer to town. Still not in the thick of things, but not quite as far away is **Red Rock Resort**, 11011 W. Charleston Rd. (☎ 866/767-7773; www.redrocklasvegas.com), where the smashing rooms include lush bathrooms and beds that are like sleeping in a bowl of whipped cream—both offering places to relax while watching big flatscreen TVs. See p. 116.
- **Best Rooms on the Strip:** We need to break this down. If one is talking actual suites, then **THEhotel**, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 877/632-7800; www.thehotelatmandalaybay.com), wins the day, with its one-bedroom, could-be-a-great-apartment-in-Manhattan sophisticated wonders. See p. 74. Best "suites" (because no matter how the hotel bills them, these accommodations are really just one big room) are clearly the 700-square-foot extravaganzas at **The Venetian**, 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 888/283-6423; www.venetian.com), and **The Palazzo**, 3325 Las Vegas Blvd.

S. (☎ 877/883-6423; www.palazzolasvegas.com), with separate sitting and bedroom areas, full of all sorts of special details. See p. 84. Best “room” goes to the **Wynn Las Vegas**, 3131 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 888/320-9966; www.wynnlasvegas.com), and its sister hotel **Encore**, 3121 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 888/320-7125; www.encorelasvegas.com), where the rooms are quite big, the bathrooms not far behind, the beds are plush, the TVs (plural!) are flatscreen, and the tubs are deep. See p. 95 and 96. The upgraded “Go” rooms at the **Flamingo**, 3555 Las Vegas Blvd S. (☎ 800/732-2111; www.flamingolasvegas.com), pay homage to its venerable past with vintage photos and hot pink accents—plus various luxuries and other style touches that make them ring-a-ding! See p. 87.

- **Best Rooms Downtown:** The rooms at the **Golden Nugget**, 129 E. Fremont St. (☎ 800/846-5336; www.goldennugget.com), are getting some much-needed love that should return them to the top of the heap (p. 110), but don't forget about the lovely **Main Street Station**, 200 N. Main St. (☎ 800/465-0711; www.mainstreetcasino.com), with lots to offer both in the rooms and beyond. It has done a terrific job of renovating an older space, boasting solidly good restaurants and surprisingly nice rooms for an inexpensive price (p. 113).
- **Best Bathrooms:** This honor goes to **THEhotel**, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 877/632-7800; www.thehotelatmandalaybay.com), where each good-size marble bathroom features a large glass shower, a separate water closet, a flatscreen TV, and a soaking tub so deep that the water comes up to your chin. It's a wonder anyone ever leaves to go to the casino. See p. 74 Not far behind is **Wynn Las Vegas**, 3131 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 888/320-9966; www.wynnlasvegas.com), which offers a similar layout,

including a plasma TV and deep, long tub, plus lemongrass-scented amenities and silky robes to cradle you afterward. See p. 96.

- **Best Non-Casino Hotel: Four Seasons**, 3960 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 877/632-5000; www.fourseasons.com; p. 65), used to win this category, but now it's a tie with **THEhotel**, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 877/632-7800; www.thehotelatmandalaybay.com; p. 74). 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 noncasino property, or the sophistication and elegance of THEhotel, it's hard to go back to traditional Vegas hotels. But should you want the best of both worlds, you need only pass through one door to have access to Mandalay Bay and all its traditional Vegas hotel accouterments, including that missing casino. Coming in a close second is the **Venezia**, 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 888/283-6423; www.venetian.com; p. 85) at The Venetian; same idea as THEhotel (a separate yet equal entity, the noncasino part of the casino hotel), though we prefer the decor and gestalt of THEhotel.
- **Best Casinos:** Our favorite places to gamble are anywhere we might win. But we also like the casinos in **Caesars Palace** (as close to “classic Vegas” as you're going to find on the Strip, while refreshingly up-to-date; p. 82), **New York–New York** (some of the Gotham detail has gone away, but it's still silly in a good way—it almost makes losing fun; p. 72); and **Planet Hollywood** (p. 73), probably the liveliest, most modern gambling space in town.
- **Best Views:** From the high-floor rooms at the **Stratosphere Las Vegas Hotel & Casino**, 2000 Las Vegas Blvd. S.

(☎ 800/998-6937; www.stratosphere hotel.com), you can see clear to the next county (p. 99), while the top floors in the **Wynn Las Vegas**, 3131 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 888/320-9966; www.wynnlasvegas.com), and **The Palazzo**, 3325 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 866/263-3001; www.palazzolasvegas.com), sit in

the tallest buildings on the main part of the Strip. See p. 84. If you are lucky, your room at **Red Rock Resort**, 11011 W. Charleston Rd. (☎ 866/767-7773; www.redrocklasvegas.com), will overlook those very same red rocks, though at some distance. See p. 116.

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.

- **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 **Joël Robuchon** (☎ 702/891-7925; p. 126), in the MGM Grand, where you will have a once-in-a-lifetime meal. Somewhat less in the stratosphere, but still plenty costly, are **Alex** (☎ 888/352-3463; p. 147) and **Paul Bartolotta's** (☎ 888/352-3463; p. 147) eponymous places in Wynn Las Vegas, and Hubert Keller's **Fleur de Lys** (☎ 702/632-7200; p. 126) at Mandalay Place, not to mention **L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon** (☎ 702/891-7925; p. 127), the master chef's less-formal venue that won the James Beard Award for Best New Restaurant 2007. Meals come dear at all five places, but each is turning out works of edible art, from four 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. 134), at the top of the Palms, where nearly flawless dishes often compete with the

sparkling view for sheer delight, and **Rosemary's Restaurant**, 8125 W. Sahara Ave. (☎ 702/869-2251; p. 158), 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. Speaking of high-profile chefs, we have just sworn allegiance to Thomas Keller's **Bouchon** (☎ 702/414-6200; p. 141), in Venezia, at The Venetian. 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** (☎ 866/259-7111; p. 138), at Bellagio.

- **Best Inexpensive Meal:** **Capriotti's**, 322 W. Sahara Ave. (☎ 702/474-0229; p. 152), serves monster submarine sandwiches. They roast their own beef and turkey on the premises and assemble it (or cold cuts, or even vegetables) into delicious well-stuffed sandwiches, ranging in size from 9 to 20 inches, and most of them under \$10. We never leave town without one or two.
- **Best Buffet:** On the Strip, it's **Le Village Buffet** (in Paris Las Vegas, ☎ 888/266-5687; p. 169), 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. If you want a little more traditional buffet—as in, one not devoted to one particular cuisine—**Wynn Las Vegas** (in Wynn Las Vegas; ☎ 702/770-3463) is terrific all the way, even through the usual buffet weakness, dessert. See p. 170. Downtown, the **Main Street Station Garden Court** (in Main Street Station; ☎ 702/387-1896) has an incredible buffet, with 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. 172.

- **Best Group Budget Meal Deal:** **Capriotti's**, 322 W. Sahara Ave. (☎ 702/474-0229; p. 152), again—a large sandwich can feed two with leftovers, for about \$5 each.
- **Best Bistro:** We ate nearly the entire menu at Thomas Keller's **Bouchon**, in The Venetian (☎ 702/414-6200; p. 141), 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 Paris Las Vegas. Offering lovely, reasonably priced bistro fare (steak and *pommes frites*, onion soup), it's also a charming spot. See p. 144.
- **Best Restaurant/Nightclub 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 to fetch your chosen vintage. See p. 124. The cheeky, peek-a-boo stripper/brothel look of **Strip House** (☎ 702/737-5200; p. 128) is a fun change of pace to the

usually staid steakhouse genre. Speaking of change, that's what happens to the walls and decor of **Switch** (☎ 702/248-3463; p. 150), with a different atmosphere every 20 minutes. And then there is the futuristic fantasy of **Mix** (☎ 702/632-9500), on top of THE-hotel, where stunning 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. See p. 127.

- **Best Spot for a Romantic Dinner:** **Alizé** (☎ 702/951-7000), 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. Aren't you in the mood already? See p. 134.
- **Best Spot for a Celebration:** Let's face it, no one parties like the Red Party, so head to **Red Square** (☎ 702/632-7407) in Mandalay Bay, where you can have caviar and vodka in the ultimate capitalist revenge. See p. 128.
- **Best Free Show at Dinner:** At Wynn Las Vegas, **Daniel Boulud Brasserie** (☎ 888/352-3463) provides front-and-center seating for the strange-yet-compelling Lake of Dreams show. And then there is the vista offered by the restaurants in Bellagio—**Picasso** (☎ 866/259-7111), **Le Cirque** (☎ 866/259-7111), **Olives** (☎ 866/259-7111), and **Circo** (☎ 702/693-8150)—which are grouped to take advantage of the view of the dancing water fountains. See chapter 6 for reviews of all 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 that 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. 124.
- **Best Beer List: Rosemary's Restaurant**, 8125 W. Sahara Ave. (☎ 702/869-2251), offers “beer pairing” suggestions with most of its menu options, and includes some curious and fun brands, including fruity Belgian numbers. See p. 158.
 - **Best Views: Mix** (☎ 877/632-1766; p. 127), on top of THEhotel, and **Alizé** (☎ 702/951-7000; p. 134), at the top of the Palms, 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. 140.
 - **Best Italian:** You won't find anything more authentic outside of Italy than at **Bartolotta Ristorante di Mare** (☎ 888/352-3463), 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.
 - **Best Deli:** Wars are fought over less, so all you New Yorkers can square off on

behalf of **Carnegie Deli**, in The Mirage (☎ 702/791-7310), while Los Angeles residents fight for the branch of their beloved **Canter's Deli** (☎ 702/894-7111), in Treasure Island. The rest of us will find our mouths too packed with pastrami to weigh in. See p. 146.

- **Best New Orleans Cuisine:** Emeril's **Delmonico Steakhouse** (☎ 702/414-3737), in The Venetian, brings the celebrity chef's “Bam!” cuisine to the other side of the Mississippi, and we are glad. See p. 135.
- **Best Red Meat: Lawry's The Prime Rib**, 4043 Howard Hughes Pkwy. (☎ 702/893-2223; p. 154), has such good prime rib, it's hard to imagine ever having any better. If you want cuts other than prime rib, **Strip House** (☎ 702/737-5200; p. 128) 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 **Austin's Steakhouse**, in Texas Station, 2101 Texas Star Lane (☎ 702/631-1033; p. 158).

4 BEST OF VEGAS AFTER DARK

- **Best Production Show:** It's a total deadlock between **Cirque du Soleil's KÀ** and **O** (☎ 866/774-7117 for *KÀ*, and ☎ 888/488-7111 for *O*; p. 246 and 248). The latter is more “traditional”—if you can call a human circus that uses a giant tank of water as a stage “traditional”—in that it has only a loose semblance of narrative, whereas *KÀ* actually has a plot. Both are dazzling and, given the extremely high production values, seem worth the extremely high ticket prices.
- **Best Old-Time Vegas Production:** You know: big, huge stage sets, pointless production numbers, showgirls, nipples

on parade, Bob Mackie headdresses. Ah, *Jubilee!*, this world would be dreary without you (☎ 800/237-7469). See p. 250

- **Best Smart Show:** This town isn't good enough for either **Blue Man Group** (☎ 866/641-7469; p. 245) or **Penn & Teller** (☎ 888/746-7784; p. 253).
- **Best Local Hang:** Hard-core types (including punks; off-duty strippers; off-duty waitstaff; and, on certain nights, Blue Man men, sans makeup, doing weird percussion things) gather way after hours at the **Double Down Saloon**, 4640 Paradise Rd. (☎ 702/791-5775). See p. 259.

- **Best Night Club:** If by “best” you mean “most popular,” and by “most popular” you mean “people are willing to start standing in line hours before they open and pay \$30 a pop, and that’s before alcohol, just to get a foot in the door,” then **PURE**, in Caesars Palace (☎ 702/731-7110), beats out the competition by a long shot. See p. 267.
- **Best Ultralounge:** 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 **Tabú**, at MGM Grand (☎ 702/891-7183). See p. 269.
- **Best Reason to Wait in Line:** We never think there is a good enough reason, but **ghostbar**, in the Palms (☎ 702/942-6832; p. 260), is a fantastic hotel bar, especially because of its outstanding view, perched high above the Strip. Meanwhile, there’s a good reason **Rain Nightclub**, 4321 W. Flamingo Rd. (☎ 702/942-6832; p. 268), keeps packing them in—it’s *plus ne ultra* for dance clubs. The aptly named **XS**, 3121 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 702/770-0097; p. 269), is over-the-top glam in a good way, with a luxurious, gold-plated interior that opens up to a massive outdoor patio and pool.
- **Best Strip Club:** You know you want to know. We give the honors to **Treasures**, 2801 Westwood Dr. (☎ 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. 273