

Chapter 1

Discovering the Best of Las Vegas

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"It's Vegas, baby!" is the catchphrase from the independent hit movie *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 one of the most popular tourist destinations 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.

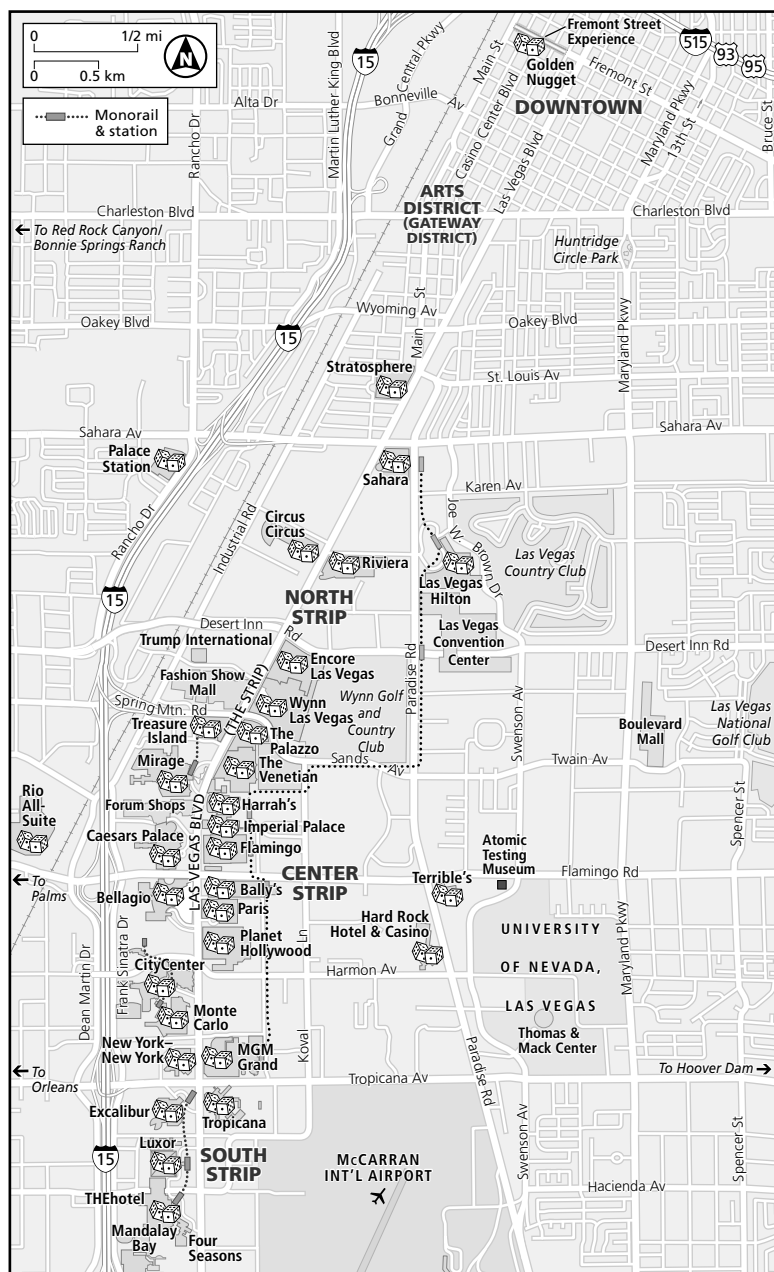
Best Vegas Experiences

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 it's coated in lights. Everything gleams, shimmers, shimmies, and beckons. The sight is 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 — there's both hope and horror in that.

10 Part I: Introducing Las Vegas

Las Vegas at a Glance



- ✔ **Best hoped-for Vegas moment:** Hitting that million-dollar jackpot with one pull of a handle. Good luck to you.
- ✔ **Best free show:** The Fountains of Bellagio. 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, have 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 Hotels

See Chapter 9 for complete reviews of the hotels that follow.

- ✔ **Best drop-dead hotel:** **Aria Las Vegas** is eye candy for the masses; a reinvention of what a Las Vegas casino hotel can (and maybe should) be. With an ostentatious, dramatic, modern design (inside and out) and more things to do than you'll have time for, it is the blueprint for the future of Sin City.
- ✔ **Best hotel for the well-heeled:** **The Four Seasons**, naturally. It has a reputation for a reason. All is comfort, all is class. And honestly, it probably isn't any more expensive than some of the other high-end hotels on the Strip.
- ✔ **Best resort hotel:** **Red Rock Resort** is on the border between the city and the wildlife of Red Rock Canyon and offers the best of both worlds.
- ✔ **Best totally Vegas hotel:** It's not really as it once was, but although **Caesars 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-themed shopping mall. There's the sense of luxury. There's Celine and Cher. And there's the size. Some think it romantic, some think it a hoot — just like Vegas itself.
- ✔ **Best theme hotel:** **New York–New York**, where the entire NYC skyline is built into the hotel's structure and major Manhattan landmarks are a part of the hotel's public spaces.
- ✔ **Best swimming pool:** **Mandalay Bay's** water area, with a wave pool, a beach, a lazy river, several other basic pools, and even an outdoor casino, is so fabulous it has to check room keys to keep nonguests away. We also like the tropical wonderland around the **Mirage's** amorphous pool; and **Caesars Palace** has its Garden of the Gods with eight (!) separate pools, each with its own atmosphere.

- ✓ **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 comparable to the Mirage, 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:** If money is no object, you have to eat at **Joël Robuchon** at the Mansion (in the MGM Grand), where the master chef continues his sterling reputation. (Truth be told, Robuchon isn't in the kitchen all the time, but many of his employees from his famous establishments are in charge, and they execute their duties 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 probably can rely on the fact that someone is paying careful attention to Emeril's **Table 10** (in the Palazzo), 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 non-celebrity-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 Monte Carlo, also highly recommended). Then there's **Raku Grill**, with its deliriously delicious robata-grill small plates. We've had some of our best meals in Vegas at these restaurants. The chefs may not be household names, but they ought to be.
- ✓ **Best new restaurant:** Speaking of celebrity chefs, Todd English has expanded his Vegas empire with the moderately priced but highly enjoyable **Todd English P.U.B.**
- ✓ **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, try the pepper-rubbed delicacies at **Strip House**. The latter a little too pricey? Locals love what they do to meat at **Austins 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 **KÀ**.
- ✔ **Best headliner show:** For two hours, you get **Garth Brooks** and his guitar, and it's one of the most transcendent musical experiences you'll ever see. You don't even have to like country music to enjoy it!
- ✔ **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.