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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 (not least because Luxor execs have done their best to make the place more "chic" by obliterating the interior traces of Egypt in a 30-story pyramid). ⌚ **20 min.** **3900 Las Vegas Blvd. S.** ☎ **888/777-0188 or 702/262-4000.** 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 ditched the larger-than-life Merlin that used to overlook the realm. ⌚ **20 min.** **3850 Las Vegas Blvd. S.** ☎ **800/937-7777 or 702/597-7700.** www.excalibur.com.

3 MGM Grand. The biggest of the big, the MGM Grand's emerald exterior (left over from its original incarnation as an homage to MGM's most beloved *Wizard of Oz*) is garish



A marvel of modern design, CityCenter cost over \$9 billion.

in the daytime, glowing at night, and enormous at all times. The biggest hotel in the U.S., it certainly is the greenest. A stately 100,000-pound (45,359kg) 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. ⌚ **25 min.** **3799 Las Vegas Blvd. S.** ☎ **800/929-1111 or 702/891-7777.** www.mgmgrand.com.

4 ★★ 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



It's less Egyptian than it used to be, but you can still lose yourself in the Luxor's impossibly large atrium.

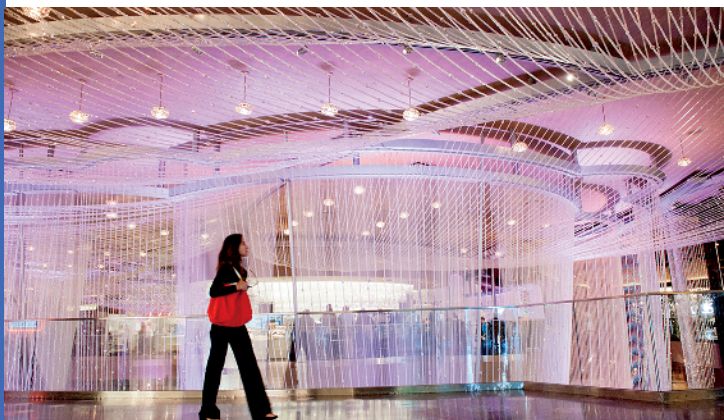
pinnacle of over-the-top fantasy Vegas. The Empire State and Chrysler buildings, a half-scale Statue of Liberty, and more are represented in brightly colored, semicartoon detail—and a roller coaster (whose cars appropriately resemble NYC taxis) swooshes through it all. Ridiculous and fantastic all at once—even if the hotel execs deserve a Bronx cheer for toning down the

theme on the inside. 🕒 20 min.
3970 Las Vegas Blvd. S. 📞 800/693-6763 or 702/740-6969. www.nynyhotelcasino.com.

5 ★ CityCenter. The big question hanging over this futuristic “urban community” of resorts, retail, and entertainment options, which debuted to great fanfare in December 2009, is whether it will ever recoup the zillion-dollar investment it took to open it. Still, that money bought some pretty nifty modern architecture, a sustainable environment (it has the highest casino LEED certification in Vegas), and one of the largest public art installations in the U.S. Stroll past artworks by such notables as Maya Lin and Henry Moore and marvel at the sheer scale of this steel-and-glass wonder. 🕒 25 min. Las Vegas Blvd. S. & Harmon Ave. www.citycenter.com. See p 137 for details on CityCenter's hotels & p 69 for details on shopping.

6 ★★ Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas. If you want to know what the future Las Vegas will look like, this is where you need to pay attention. The audacious, deliriously over-the-top decor eschews traditional Vegas themes (no lions or tigers or roller coasters, oh my!) and

The Cosmopolitan Las Vegas embraces Sin City's love of over-the-top glitz.





The Eiffel Tower replica at Paris Las Vegas is half as tall as the original but still impressive.

goes for a bold luxury that emphasizes art and modern design. From the three-story chandelier in the casino to the LCD-TV covered support columns in the lobby, from the 6-foot-tall (1.8m) high-heel-pump art pieces on the second floor to the “hidden” pizzeria that has no signage, the Cosmopolitan creates an atmosphere that is both wholly original and completely true to what Sin City is all about. ⌚ 20 min. 3700 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ☎ 877/551-7778 or 702/698-7000. www.cosmopolitanoflasvegas.com.

7 ★ **Paris Las Vegas.** More reproductions of famous landmarks (including a half-scale Eiffel Tower and 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. It is one of the few Strip resorts that still embraces its theme to the max and is no less chic for it. *Vive la France!* ⌚ 15 min. 3655 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ☎ 888/BONJOUR (266-5687) or 702/946-7000. www.parislv.com.

Sidewalk creperies are everywhere in Paris, so continue your ooo-la-la mood and grab a traditional snack, with either a sweet or savory filling, at **8** **La Creperie.** *Inside Paris Las Vegas.* ☎ 702/946-7000. \$. See **7**.

9 ★★★ **Bellagio Water Fountains.** The best free show in Vegas. Giant spouts send water shooting (as high as 500 ft./152m 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 action in the 2001 remake of *Ocean's Eleven*. ⌚ 30 min., to allow for 2 different shows. In front of the Bellagio, see **10**. Shows every half-hour starting early afternoon, every 15 min. 8pm–midnight, weather permitting.

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





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

10 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. 🕒 20 min. 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S. 📞 888/987-6667 or 702/693-7111. www.bellagio.com.

11 ★★ Bellagio Conservatory. A staff of more than 140 horticulturists creates Rose Parade float–worthy seasonal displays of flowers and

plants in this botanical garden on steroids. Spring, summer, and fall displays are quite lovely, but the holiday and Chinese New Year themes are especially noteworthy. Yes, that dragon is made entirely out of flowers, and yes, you will want to take pictures, so have a camera ready. 🕒 20 min. *Inside the Bellagio, see 10. Open 24 hrs.*

12 ★ 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

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



enjoy the tacky and oversize 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. 🕒 25 min. 3570 Las Vegas Blvd. S.

☎ 877/427-7243 or 702/731-7110. www.caesars.com.

13 ★ The 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 (revamped in 2008) out front doesn’t spew lava, but it does set off an entertaining display of fire, lights, and smoke every 15 minutes after dark. 🕒 15 min. 3400 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ☎ 800/627-6667 or 702/791-7111. www.mirage.com.

14 ★★ The Venetian. Arguably the best representative of the be-in-Vegas-but-pretend-you-are-elsewhere architecture craze (not least because it’s still proudly embracing its theme heritage); 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, and there are even guys in gondolier outfits. All that is missing is the smell from the canals and those pesky attack pigeons (we forgive them this trespass). And unlike similar storybook lands at New York–New York and Paris, you can actually wander this Italian cityscape. 🕒 25 min. 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ☎ 888/2-VENICE



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

(283-6423) or 702/414-1000. www.venetian.com.

15 ★ 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! 🕒 20 min. 3400 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ☎ 800/627-6667 or 702/791-7111. www.wynnlasvegas.com.

16 Wynn 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, as well as sublime desserts. *See p 98 for full details on the restaurant.*

The Best in Two Days





Vegas 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 be exhausted and what remain are mostly strip malls. The treasures found inside, however, should more than make up for the bland exteriors. **START: National Atomic Testing Museum (755 E. Flamingo Rd.). It's best to drive here from your hotel; you can park in the free lot outside the museum.**



The Stratosphere offers pricey but breathtaking views of the city, especially at night.

1 ★★ National 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, aboveground blasts at the nearby Atomic Testing Site were once a tourist attraction in the way hotel implosions 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 employees) are chock-full of information, so quiz them at will.

 1 hr. 755 E. Flamingo Rd.  702/794-5161. www.atomictestingmuseum.org. Admission \$14 adults; \$11 seniors, students & military; free for kids 6 & under. Mon–Sat 10am–5pm; Sun noon–5pm. Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day.

2 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

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





Few things in the city are more fun than visiting the residents of the Dolphin Habitat at The Mirage.

loud and busy landscape. ⌚ 45 min. *In Bellagio, 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ☎ 702/693-7871. www.bellagio.com. Reservations suggested; walk-ins taken every 15 min. Admission \$15 adults, \$12 seniors & Nevada residents, \$10 teachers & students. Sun–Tues & Thurs 10am–6pm; Wed & Fri–Sat 10am–7pm. Last admission half-hour prior to closing.*

Have a sandwich or, best of all, a delectable dessert at the award-winning **3** **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.

4 ★★★ **kids Siegfried & Roy's Dolphin Habitat & Secret Garden.** 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. ☎ 702/791-7188. www.miragehabitat.com. Admission \$17 adults, \$12 kids 4–12, free for kids 3 & under if accompanied by an adult. Mon–Fri 11am–6:30pm; Sat–Sun & holidays 10am–6:30pm.*

5 ★ **kids Madame Tussaud's in The Venetian.** A branch of London's legendary wax museum, here you will find lifelike—or creepy, sometimes it's a fine line—replicas of famous folks. Unlike in other museums, you can actually touch the free-standing exhibits. Go ahead, fondle J. Lo's butt or give Brad Pitt a little smooch. ⌚ 45 min. *In The Venetian, 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ☎ 702/862-7800. www.mtvegas.com. Admission \$25 adults, \$18 seniors & students, \$15 kids 7–12, free for kids 6 & under. Discounts for booking online. Sun–Thurs 10am–9:30pm; Fri–Sat 10am–10:30pm.*

6 **Bartolotta Ristorante di Mare.** To get the full Vegas experience, you need to dine with at least one celebrity chef, and better 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. See p 88 for details on the restaurant.

7 ★★★ **kids** **Mystère.** The artistically superb productions of the world-famous Cirque du Soleil have largely 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. Tickets \$69–\$109 (plus tax). Shows Sat–Wed 7 & 9:30pm. No shows Thurs–Fri.

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

8 **Stratosphere.** The tallest building west of the Mississippi (1,149 ft./350m) offers eagle-eyed views of the desert, the mountains, and the Strip from its observation deck. It 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

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



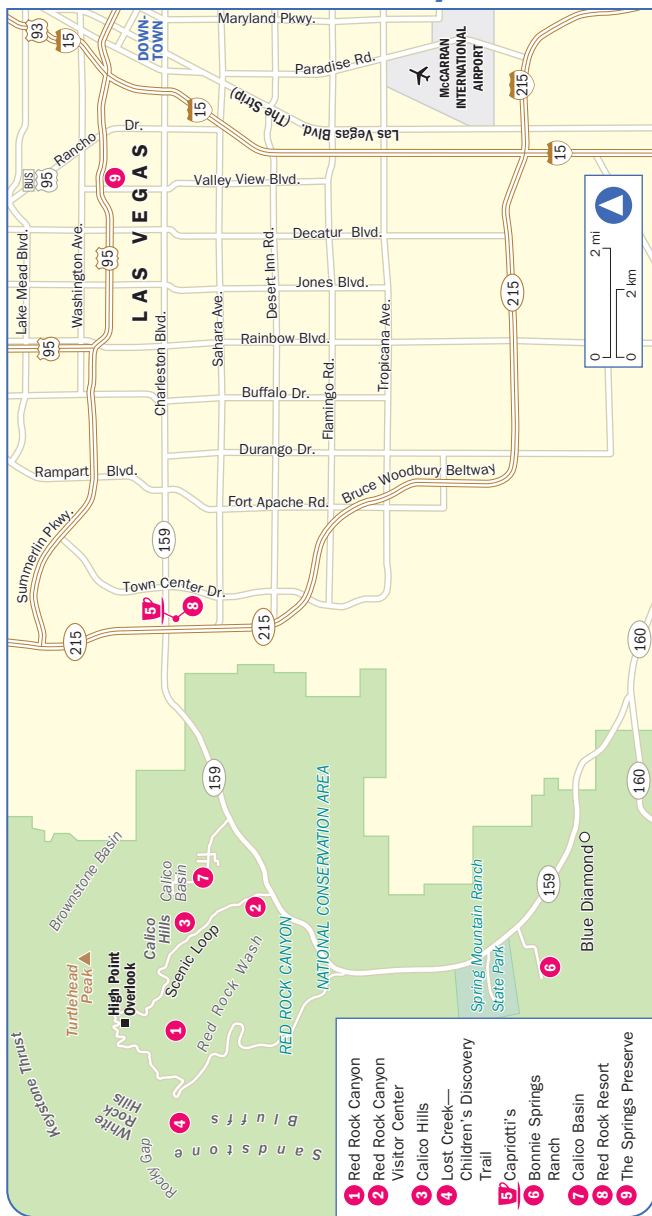
Mystère launched the onslaught of Cirque du Soleil productions in Las Vegas.

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 \$16 adults, \$12 seniors & hotel guests, \$10 kids 4–12, free for kids 3 & under. Sun–Thurs 10am–1am; Fri–Sat & holidays 10am–2am. Hours vary seasonally.

Drive to Downtown Las Vegas and park in the Golden Nugget parking garage (validation available in the casino).

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 known as Viva Vision. The screen's 12.5 million LED modules, and a 550,000-watt sound system, deliver a rotating light-and-sound show with themes like Area 51 (watch out for aliens!) and Retro Vegas, plus tributes to groups like the Rolling Stones, Queen, and the Doors. The shows don't necessarily make the best use of the technology, but they are still the best freebie in Vegas after the Bellagio fountains (p 11, **9**). ⌚ 20 min., longer if you see more than 1 show. Fremont St. (btw. Main St. & Las Vegas Blvd. S.). www.vegasexperience.com. Shows nightly every hour, dusk–midnight.

The Best in Three Days



Even the most dedicated gambler needs to get outside for some real oxygen, so today I send you off to discover some of the natural wonders surrounding Vegas and how the city came 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 (79,723 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., longer if you stop to take photos or hike. On NV 159. 📞 702/515-5350. www.nv.blm.gov/redrockcanyon. Admission \$7 for 1-day vehicle pass. Daily dawn–dusk.

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



2 **kids** **Red Rock Canyon Visitor Center.** Stop here for brochures, suggestions for hikes, and other practical advice. The center has indoor and outdoor exhibits that helpfully illustrate 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; 3 hr. to hike, depending on level of fitness. Look for route marker just under a mile (1.6km) from the visitor 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 Center.



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

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.** ☎ **702/257-3337**. \$.

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. Admission \$20 per car. Daily Nov–Apr 10:30am–5pm, May–Oct 10:30am–6pm.

7 Calico Basin. About 2 miles (3.2km) west of the turnoff into the Red Rock scenic loop is a half-mile-long (.8km) 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 wildflowers 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 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., longer if you gamble.** **11011 W. Charleston Blvd.** ☎ **866/767-7773 or 702/797-7777.** See p 134 for more information on the resort.

9 ★★ **kids** **The Springs Preserve.** Vegas was first settled around natural springs in the middle of an otherwise arid desert. Those springs have long since dried up, but they made the city possible and this 180-acre (73-hectare) facility celebrates that with a fun museum exploring the region's history, environmental displays, wetlands, gardens, and more. The interactive exhibits that put you in the center of a desert flash flood or atop Hoover Dam, keep this from being a “dry” experience. 🕒 **1 hr.** **333 S. Valley View Blvd.** ☎ **702/822-7700.** www.springspreserve.org. Admission \$19 adults, \$17 seniors & students, \$11 kids 5–17, kids 4 & under free. Daily 10am–6pm. ●