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Losing It in Las Vegas

Sin City will rob you of your time, your money, and your waistline (but not your desire to vacation here again)

LAS VEGAS NOW RECEIVES THREE TIMES AS MANY VISITORS PER YEAR AS Mecca and Vatican City *put together*. Pilgrims of a, well, different sort, these conventioners, vacationers, gamblers and gawkers come here not to be saved but—let's be blunt—to sin. Or at least to engage in behavior that previous generations would have found slightly immoral at best.

What sort of behavior? There's the wanton **gluttony** of Vegas, with its chocolate fountains, meals that cost more than one's rent, endless buffets groaning under the weight of their fat content.

Lust is as big a money-maker, with a third of the casinos on the Strip supporting some sort of T&A show, and cocktail waitresses squeezed into costumes that wouldn't have been seen outside a bordello in, say, the 1930s and '40s.

Sloth is celebrated with architecture and attractions that are proudly plagiarized from other cities, huge mountains of cash that substitute for genuine creativity or (in many cases) good taste, and with kitsch that runs rampant in every fake pyramid and Eiffel Tower.

And then there's **greed**, the driving engine of the city; that happy sin that puts the spring into crap players' wrists and circumvents the super ego, allowing players to forget their mortgages as they wager their earnings away.

It is, in short, a place to dip your toe into that undercurrent of nihilism, of derring-do, of the unadulterated sensuality that courses through most of our veins but perhaps hasn't been given free rein since our teenage, or maybe even, toddler years.

And yet it's all great fun. The sins of Sin City are what 40 million mostly ethical, upstanding travelers pursue each year. They come to this never-never land of fantasy piled upon fantasy to let off steam, stop watching the clock (just try to find one in Vegas!), forget their inner lives, and simply act in ways that give them pleasure. In short, to do the things these upstanding citizens might be shy about doing publicly at home (there's a reason the slogan "What Happens in Vegas, Stays in Vegas" has been so popular). It can be a hell of a lot of fun to visit Vegas.

As an added bonus, Las Vegas, which means "The Meadows" in Spanish, is also set in one of the most starkly beautiful areas of the United States, an oasis (the springs here formed those meadows) in the heart of the Mojave Desert. As such, it is a superb hopping-off point for excursions into the arid region, whether you decide on a day of hiking in nearby Red Rock Canyon or Valley of Fire National Park, or make a car or copter trip all the way to that exquisite, unearthly, hole in

the ground, the Grand Canyon. For information on all of the exceptional day trips one can take from Vegas, turn to the “Get Out of Town” chapter (p. 285).

I'll do my best in this chapter to sort through a book's worth of options, selecting those attractions that, in my view, are sure to turn your vacation from standard into a first-rate bacchanal.

“Vegas is everything that's right about America. You can do whatever you want, 24 hours a day. They've effectively legalized everything here.”

—Drew Carey

SIGHTS YOU'VE GOTTA SEE, THINGS YOU'VE GOTTA DO

Novelist Chuck Palahniuk once wrote that “Las Vegas looks the way you'd imagine heaven must look at night.” I can only assume he was describing a stroll down **The Strip** (p. 118) after the sun had set. During the day, this famous stretch of roadway, flanked by monolithic hotels and tacky souvenir shops, shows its cracks and seams, looking somewhat like Wayne Newton must look before he's donned his tux and shellacked his face. But at night, it's all a glittering, glowing spectacle, each silly/splendid monument lit up and framed just so against the black desert sky. A stroll or a slow drive down the Strip at night is, to my mind, the absolute can't-miss activity on a Vegas vacation.

During that stroll, it's imperative to stop for one of the **Fountain Shows at the Bellagio** (p. 124). Absolutely mesmerizing, the precision jets arc through the air like laser beams, shooting up waves of water as tall as the massive building the fountain fronts. Set to dozens of different tunes, the show is constantly changing, so you may want to make several stops here over the course of your visit. Be sure also to head to **The Venetian** (p. 123), the most beautifully realized and just plain beautiful, of the faked environments on the Strip (with **Caesars Palace** [p. 122] and **Luxor** [p. 120] running a close second and third).

Las Vegas boasts one of the most talented populations in the United States, so you'll want to see a live performance of some sort while you're here. If you can afford it, go with a **Cirque du Soleil** show (my favorites are **O** [p. 192] and **Mystère** [p. 191]). Surreal circuses, with awe-inspiring stage effects, costumes, and performances, they've redefined entertainment in Vegas. Or go see one of the Vegas headliners. Once you do, you'll understand why **Mac King** (p. 188), **Rita Rudner** (p. 186), **Lance Burton** (p. 195), **Toni Braxton** (p. 185) and **Anthony Cools** (p. 185) have their names above the marquee (the same can be said for pricier performers too, especially Barry Manilow and Wayne Newton).

You should also challenge yourself to step out of your everyday life while in Vegas and try something new. This might mean entrusting yourself with \$100 to lose at **blackjack** (I recommend it as it's one of the more social games and has the best odds for players); or, for a real rush, trying **Indoor Skydiving** (p. 150).

THE FINEST MUSEUMS

Vegas doesn't have to be all mindless entertainment. At the world-class **Atomic Testing Museum** (p. 130), you'll learn everything you ever wanted to know about the bomb . . . but were *really* too afraid to ask. The physics behind nuclear energy, the innovations that came out of the testing, how the government is using the site today, and much more make up the engrossing, often interactive exhibits at this Smithsonian Institution affiliate museum.

Though small and pricey, the exhibits displayed at the **Guggenheim Hermitage Museum** (p. 126) are also top quality, the works often obtained either from the broader retrospectives that the Guggenheim is showing at its larger museums; or from the famed Hermitage Museum itself (this is the only museum in the U.S. to have this kind of affiliation with the Hermitage). Best of all, are the hourly exhibit tours conducted by highly knowledgeable art historians; they're free with the cost of admission.

Competition in the world of high culture comes from the **Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art** (p. 127) and the **Wynn Collection of Fine Arts** (p. 127). Not all of their exhibits are worth the price of admission, but both have had excellent track records in the past 2 years, bringing the works of such masters as Vermeer, Van Gogh, and Calder into this desert oasis.

Not to be ignored in the museum category is that temple of kitsch, the **Liberace Museum** (p. 131). Even if you have little interest in the man himself, you'll want to see this over-the-top collection of wacky cars, historic pianos, and clothing so exuberantly sparkly and gaudy, it will bring a glow to your kitsch-loving heart.

UNCOMMON LODGINGS

You don't have to stay on the Strip to enjoy Vegas. One of the most comfortable ways to vacation here is to rent your own little house, which will likely boast flat-screen TVs, a private pool, a pool table, and a fully equipped kitchen—all standard features of Vegas vacation rentals, and all for the cost of a hotel room! Read up on this alternative to hotels on p. 17.

For those who simply want a clean place to sleep—so they can gamble away all the money they save—**The Orleans** (p. 60), **Sam's Town** (p. 55), **The Gold Coast** (p. 60), and **Palace Station** (p. 60) offer beautifully furnished, oversized rooms in hotels that boast large casinos, multiple restaurants, bowling alleys and other forms of entertainment, yet often cost half of what you'd pay on the Strip.

And then there are the Strip hotels themselves, whether you decide on a slant-sided room at the **Luxor** (p. 32), a froufrou-laden French Empire-style room at **Paris Las Vegas** (p. 38), or cheap, but ultra comfy digs—once you get through the crowded, tacky casino—at **Circus Circus** (p. 41).

All of these options—and more (see chapter 3)—should bring you a comfortable bed at night, and a wealth of entertainment options during the day.

DINING FOR ALL TASTES

Though you'll have traveled only to Vegas, your stomach can travel the world, odd as that may sound, at the many excellent ethnic restaurants that dot the city. For the Thai meal of a lifetime, head to **Lotus of Siam** (p. 101) and let the waiter

order for you. (The owner heads to Thailand many times a year to bring back unusual spices and ingredients, so the meals you get here are unlike anything you’re likely to have tried in your hometown Thai joint.) Or head to the restaurant where Vegas’ large Mexican population goes when it has a special event to celebrate. At **Lindo Michoacan** (p. 100), the meal is always a party, and the mole sauce is to die for. Festive food, plus lots of beer, is the focus at the delightful **Hofbräuhaus** (p. 104), a perfect replica of that famous Munich beer garden. Innovative sushi is the thing at **Sushi Fever** (p. 112), and you’ll find just as high a level of creativity where Spanish tapas are concerned at **Firefly** (p. 108).

Of course you’ll want to try a buffet while you’re here (it’s the thing to do) and for that you have a multiplicity of options. You could indulge your sweet tooth with freshly made cotton candy and all sorts of luscious fruits dipped in chocolate at the **Buffet at TI** (p. 84); go French, tasting foods from all of the different regions of that country, at **Le Village Buffet** (in Paris Las Vegas, p. 83); or confine yourself to just sushi—loads and loads and loads of sushi—at **Makino** (p. 96).

For something a bit more elegant and upscale, taste the Gallic delights at **Bouchon** (p. 86); or far off the Strip at **Marché Bacchus** (p. 86), where your candlelit table will overlook a picturesque lake. Or pay homage to the genius who started the whole celeb chef thing in Vegas: Wolfgang Puck. Have one of his wood-fired pizzas at **The Wolfgang Puck Bar and Grill** (p. 76) and see what you’ve been missing all these years at your neighborhood slice shop.

THE FINEST “OTHER” EXPERIENCES

Get off the tourist treadmill and take part in one of the activities performed by actual Las Vegans each day. Go **discuss philosophy** in a casino (p. 169) or **learn how to become a dealer** (p. 165) or even a stripper at a **Stripper 101 class** (p. 168). **Meet a showgirl** and take a backstage tour of the long-running show *Jubilee!* (p. 171), or **go behind the scenes at the Star Trek Experience** (p. 172) to discover how all the effects are created. Take a **cooking class from a top Vegas chef** (p. 166), or spend a day experiencing what it would have been like to work at the nearby **Atomic Testing Site** (p. 179) on an insider’s tour. Hang out with magicians at a **magical karaoke night** (p. 178) or quaff **Martinis with the Mayor** (p. 175). These and many more activities discussed in chapter 7 allow visitors to see sides of the city that visitors usually miss, gain a new skill, and meet actual residents.