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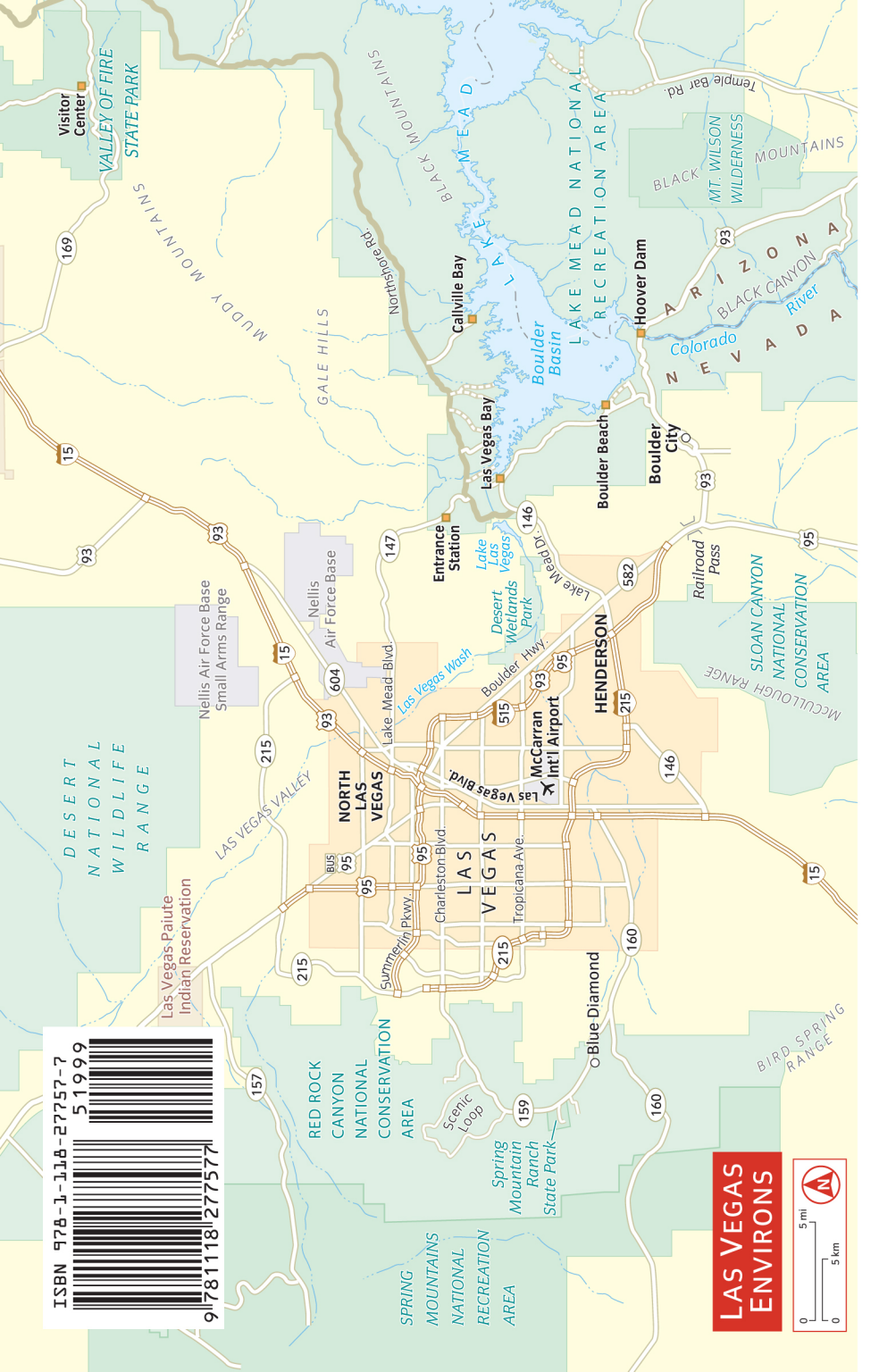
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Las Vegas 2013

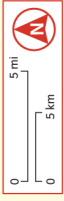
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Bob Sehlinger

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LAS VEGAS ENVIRONS



THE
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TO Las Vegas

2013

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THE
unofficial GUIDE®
TO Las Vegas

2013

BOB SEHLINGER

with CAM USHER, MAX JACOBSON,
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE PEOPLE OF LAS VEGAS love their city and spare no effort to assist a writer trying to dig beneath the facade of flashing neon. It is important to them to communicate that Las Vegas is a city with depth, diversity, and substance. “Don’t just write about our casinos,” they demand; “take the time to get to know us.”

We made every effort to do just that, enabled each step of the way by some of the most sincere and energetic folks a writer could hope to encounter. Thanks to gambling pro Anthony Curtis for his tips on the best places to play, and to Cam Usher for her work capturing the essence of Las Vegas hotels. Xania V. Woodman, nightlife editor at *seven* magazine, handled the nightlife scene.

Restaurant critic Max Jacobson ate his way through dozens of new restaurants. Jim McDonald of the Las Vegas Police Department shared his experiences and offered valuable suggestions for staying out of trouble. Larry Olmsted evaluated Las Vegas golf courses, Chris McBeath created our spa chapter, and forest ranger Debbie Savage assisted us in developing material on wilderness recreation. Thanks also to Fred Hazleton, who reviewed shows and inspected hotels.

Much gratitude to Steve Jones, Annie Long, Molly Merkle, Holly Cross, Darcie Vance, and Ann Cassar, the pros who turned all this effort into a book.

INTRODUCTION

ON *a PLANE to LAS VEGAS*

I NEVER WANTED TO GO TO LAS VEGAS. I'm not much of a gambler and have always thought of Las Vegas as a city dedicated to separating folks from their money. As it happens, however, I have some involvement with industries that hold conventions and trade shows there. For some years I was able to persuade others to go in my place. Eventually, of course, it came my turn to go, and I found myself aboard a Delta jumbo jet on my first trip to Las Vegas.

Listening to the banter of those around me, I became aware that my fellow passengers were divided into two distinct camps. Some obviously thought themselves on a nonstop flight to Nirvana and could not have been happier. Too excited to remain seated, they danced up and down the aisles, clapping one another on the back in anticipation. The other passengers, by contrast, grouched and grumbled, swore under their breath, and wore expressions suggesting a steady diet of lemons. These people, as despondent as Al Capone en route to a tax audit, lamented their bad luck and cursed those who had made a trip to such a place necessary.

To my surprise, I thoroughly enjoyed Las Vegas. I had a great time without gambling and have been back many times with never a bad experience. The people are friendly, the food is good, the hotels are among the nicest in the country, it's an easy town to find your way around, and there is plenty to do (24 hours a day, if you are so inclined).

It's hard to say why so many folks have such strong feelings about Las Vegas (even those who have never been there). Among our research team, we had people willing to put their kids in boarding school for a chance to go, while others begged off to have root-canal surgery or prune their begonias. A third group wanted to go very badly but maintained the pretense of total indifference. They reminded me of people who own five TVs yet profess never to watch television; they clearly had not mustered the courage to come out of the closet.

What I discovered during my first and subsequent visits is that the nongambling public doesn't know very much about Las Vegas. Many people cannot see beyond the gambling, cannot see that there could possibly be anything of value in Las Vegas for nongamblers or those only marginally interested in gambling.

When you ask these people to describe their ideal vacation, they wax eloquent about lazy days relaxing in the sun, playing golf, enjoying the luxury of resort hotels, eating in fine restaurants, sightseeing, shopping, and going to the theater. Outdoor types speak no less enthusiastically about fishing, boating, hiking, and, in winter, skiing. As it happens, Las Vegas offers all of this. Gambling is just the tip of the iceberg in Las Vegas, but it's all many people can see.

Las Vegas is, of course, about gambling, but there's so much more. Vegas has sunny, mild weather two-thirds of the year, some of the finest hotels and restaurants in the world, the most diversified celebrity and production-show entertainment to be found, unique shopping, internationally renowned golf courses, and numerous attractions. For the outdoor enthusiast, Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, Lake Mead National Recreation Area, and Toiyabe National Forest offer some of the most exotic and beautiful wilderness resources in North America.

This guide is designed for those who *want* to go to Las Vegas and for those who *have* to go to Las Vegas. If you are a recreational gambler and/or an enthusiastic vacationer, we will show you ways to have more fun, make the most of your time, and spend less money. If you are one of the skeptics, unwilling spouses or companions of gamblers, business travelers, or people who think they would rather be someplace else, we will help you discover the seven-eighths of the Las Vegas iceberg that is hidden.

—Bob Sehlinger



LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD

IN 1946, BUGSY SIEGEL OPENED the Flamingo Hotel, kicking off the metamorphosis that changed three miles of mostly barren desert into what is now the Las Vegas Strip. The original Flamingo was an eye-popper in its day and established a baseline that all subsequent casinos had to at least match, if not improve upon.

As new hotels appeared in the neon Valhalla, each contributed something different, and occasionally something better, raising the bar incrementally. Two properties, the Desert Inn and Caesars Palace, advanced the standard significantly, but because they catered to an exclusive clientele, their competitors chose not to follow suit.

Then, in 1989, came the Mirage, a large hotel-casino offering the spectacle of Caesars and the refinement of the Desert Inn (almost) but,

more importantly, targeting not the carriage trade but rather the average tourist. The Mirage was equal parts tourist attraction, hotel, and casino, and each part was executed with imagination and flair. Not many Vegas tourists could afford the Mirage's expensive guest rooms, but the place was nonetheless a must-see for every visitor.

The **IMPACT** *of the* **MIRAGE**

THE MIRAGE'S SUCCESS demonstrated that gamblers, contrary to prevailing opinion, actually paid attention to their gaming environment and, if given a choice, preferred an interesting, dynamic, and attractive setting to the cramped, noisy, monochromatic boiler room that was then the casino norm. Beyond a doubt, the Mirage was in a class by itself. Observers waited impatiently to see if any competitor would challenge the Mirage, but most believed the standard was impossibly high.

The answer was not long in coming. A veritable explosion of new developments was rushed from the drawing board to the construction zone. First was the Excalibur in 1990. It was big, plastic, gaudy, and certainly no direct competitor to the Mirage, but its Knights of the Round Table theme played incredibly well with the blue-collar and family markets. Next came the Class of 1993, which included the pyramid-shaped Luxor, Treasure Island (then a sister property to the Mirage), and the MGM Grand Hotel and Theme Park. Though the MGM Grand Theme Park was a bust, the hotel and casino were immediately successful. Likewise, the Luxor and Treasure Island (T. I.), with their knockout themes, rocketed up the pop chart.

In the three years before the next wave of new hotels opened in 1996, the vital signs of both the newer and older properties were monitored closely. The MGM Grand was the largest hotel-casino in the world, Excalibur was a close second, and the other new hotels offered more than 2,500 rooms each. As with the bull stock market in the late 1990s, there was endless speculation and debate about how long the building boom could last. But the preliminary data seemed to indicate that the new properties were responsible for increasing the aggregate market. Room occupancy rates remained high.

SURVIVAL *of the* **OLDER CASINOS**

THOUGH MORE VISITORS WERE COMING to Las Vegas, the lion's share of the business was going to the newer, high-profile hotels. Older properties, including some of the Strip's most established casinos, found themselves increasingly in the margins. So too, downtown Las Vegas was in a tailspin, with gaming revenues down, or flat, year after year. The new marching orders, avoided or ignored for so long, were

crystal clear: if you want to play in the big league, you have to upgrade. And upgrading meant approximating the Mirage standard.

The response from downtown Las Vegas was to combine the Fremont Street casinos into a mega-gaming venue, a new Glitter Gulch, tied together by a pedestrian plaza under the canopy of the Fremont Street Experience electric light show. Back on the Strip, older properties, including Bally's, the Desert Inn, the Flamingo, the Tropicana, the Sahara, the Boardwalk, Circus Circus, and the Riviera, scrambled to upgrade. The venerable Caesars Palace alone managed to stay ahead of the game, making improvements each year to maintain its position at or near the top of the Strip food chain.



HONEY, I BLEW UP *the* CASINO!

IN 1991, BOB STUPAK'S QUIRKY Vegas World was demolished to make way in 1996 for the Stratosphere Hotel and Casino, which has the tallest observation tower in the United States. The fireworks had just begun. Farther south on the Strip, the Monte Carlo hit the scene, a joint venture between then Circus Circus Enterprises and Mirage Resorts. In 1997, New York–New York opened its doors. With more than 100,000 visitors a day during its first weeks of operation, New York–New York quickly dispelled the notion that the Strip was overbuilt. In typical Las Vegas go-for-broke style, the Dunes, the Sands, El Rancho, the Boardwalk, the Hacienda, the old Aladdin, the New Frontier, and the Stardust were blown up to make room for a new wave of gargantuan gambling palaces.

The boom proceeded at warp speed, with a construction frenzy that through 2001 added a whopping 28,000 new rooms to Las Vegas's inventory (now totaling roughly 149,000). Bellagio (opened in 1998) draws its inspiration from Italy's Lake Como, adding 4,000 rooms to the MGM Resorts International (MRI) galaxy and catering to the upscale market. Across the street is 2,900-room Paris Las Vegas with its own 50-story Eiffel Tower. Just south is Planet Hollywood (formerly the Aladdin), a 2,600-room complex with a Hollywood theme. On the site of the old Sands is the Venetian. An all-suite property with 3,000 suites in its first building phase and 1,013 in its second, the Venetian features a shopping complex in a Venice-canal setting complete with gondola rides. A sister hotel, the Palazzo, with 3,000-plus suites, joined the Venetian complex in 2008. At the southern end of the Strip on the old Hacienda property, the 3,300-room Mandalay Bay opened in 1999. Steve Wynn opened Wynn Las Vegas in 2005 with 2,700 rooms and premiered a second hotel, Wynn Encore, in 2008, both on the site of the fabled Desert Inn.

More and more new casinos were built around town in an effort to cater to the local population and visitors who don't want to battle

the traffic of the Strip. In 2006, the Red Rock Resort opened with 400 rooms overlooking Red Rock Canyon. Also to the west of the Strip is JW Marriott, a 550-room spa and golf resort in the Summerlin area of Las Vegas that was built in 1999.

The locals' response to Red Rock Resort demonstrated that the then-growing population of Las Vegas appreciated upscale casinos, too. M Resort, on the Strip about 12 miles south of Mandalay Bay, opened in 2009 to serve the affluent residents of the south Las Vegas valley. Similarly, Aliante Station opened in the same year to serve the suburbs of north Las Vegas.

The **GREAT MERGERS** *and* **ACQUISITIONS**

THEN THERE ARE THE MERGERS and acquisitions. In 2000, Steve Wynn, the visionary behind the Mirage (and the Las Vegas transformation it started), sold the Mirage, Bellagio, T. I., Golden Nugget, and half of Monte Carlo to MGM Grand for \$6.4 billion. Wynn, meanwhile, purchased the Desert Inn, where he built a 2,700-room nonthemed resort called Wynn Las Vegas, stating ironically that “themes are a thing of the past.” Wynn always seems to be a step ahead of the pack and might be correct about themes. Still, it’s like Dr. Spock saying that children are a thing of the past.

The Mandalay Resort Group, which owned Luxor, Mandalay Bay, Excalibur, Circus Circus, and half of the Monte Carlo, was acquired in June of 2004 by MGM Grand for a whopping \$6 billion, forming MGM Mirage (now MGM Resorts International) with control of 36,000 Strip hotel rooms. Only months earlier, Hilton’s casino subsidiary, Park Place Entertainment, bought Caesars Palace and O’Shea’s, adding them to a lineup that already included the Las Vegas Hilton, Bally’s, Paris, and the Flamingo. In 2004, Park Place changed its name to Caesars Entertainment to reflect the prestige of its flagship property. In an even bigger (not to mention surprising) deal, Harrah’s bought Caesars Entertainment in a \$9.4 billion deal, thus becoming the largest casino-gambling company in the world. Subsequently, Harrah’s also acquired the Rio, Imperial Palace, Planet Hollywood, and the Barbary Coast (renamed Bill’s Gamblin’ Hall and Saloon). In 2010, Harrah’s changed its corporate name back to Caesars Entertainment.

GLUTTONS ARE MORE **LIKELY** *to CHOKE to DEATH*

THIS FOLKSY SAYING DESCRIBES the unbridled development of the Las Vegas Strip built precariously (some would say recklessly) on a

rapidly deteriorating street-and-highway infrastructure. And it's only going to get worse.

For many years there have been sizable undeveloped parcels of land along the Strip, most conspicuously between Circus Circus and the Stratosphere. In the middle of the Strip, small retailers and second-string hotels squatted on some of the planet's most valuable real estate. No more. In a development frenzy that makes the 1990s hotel crop look like home gardening, the land has been gobbled up and giant construction cranes have redefined the Strip's skyline. High-rise mania hit Las Vegas with a vengeance. Believe it or not, this city is running out of room to develop horizontally, so it's turning vertical. Nearly 80 high-rise condominium, time-share, and condo-hotel towers have been announced in the past few years, encompassing more than 30,000 units.

The projects are not just huge hotels as in the past, but veritable self-contained cities rising above every existing resort and containing hotels (yes, plural), residential condos, restaurants, entertainment, shopping, parks, and even their own road networks. CityCenter, an MRI \$9.2-billion development, was the largest construction project in the United States.

Plans for all of the combined resort and residential developments call for on-site supermarkets, pharmacies, and other services that the residents and guests will need. This is fortunate indeed because almost nothing is being done to the infrastructure to accommodate the many thousands of additional people who will live, work, and play along the Strip. We've seen model units of the condos for sale in these developments and can report that they're quite lovely, which is good, because their denizens are likely to be held hostage by surrounding traffic arteries that are already completely overwhelmed.

Sooner or later, the Strip is going to choke to death. Already the Strip is the most sclerotic traffic artery imaginable, making 45-minute slogs of a half-mile trip. Some hope of relief came in 2004 in the form of a monorail, which runs along the east side of the Strip and loops over to the Las Vegas Convention Center, then on to the Sahara. Problem is, the stations are so far removed from the Strip that only about half the riders necessary to break even are using the monorail.

OZ STUMBLES

SINCE 2008, HOTELS HAVE DEALT WITH decreased visitation and depressed room rates, experienced significant losses in gaming revenue, halted or postponed construction, secured sections, or shut down entirely. In 2011, the legendary Sahara, struggling with an increasingly isolated north Strip location, closed, but its management company announced plans to reopen in 2014 as the SLS Las Vegas luxury resort. Binion's Horseshoe on Fremont Street has temporarily shuttered the hotel's 365-room tower, but the casino remains open. However, the light at the end of the tunnel is brighter these days, as the tourism

industry is slowly exhibiting more positive numbers. Gaming revenues are up 5.1% at Strip casinos, 2011's aggregate of 38.9 million visitors is up 4.3%, and average daily room rates and hotel occupancy have increased to their highest level since 2007. A significant uptick in international visitors, business travel, and convention bookings contributed to these increases.

Several corporations demonstrating confidence in the destination have forged ahead in a persistently uncertain economy. Dolce Resorts purchased the unoccupied Ritz Carlton and reopened it as the Ravella Resort, while revitalizing the adjoining Monte Lago Casino. The neighboring Loews Hotel was rebranded as the Westin Lake Las Vegas Resort & Spa. Several Strip hotels took advantage of the recent downtime to refurbish existing inventory and have spent major bucks to upgrade their accommodations. The trend is away from the ornate, and a more masculine look prevails; the *de rigueur* color palette highlights red, black, and brown. Properties offering rooms with a new look are the Bellagio, Boulder Station, Flamingo, MGM Grand, Rio, Tropicana, and the Wynn. To date about 15,000 guest rooms have undergone a remodel. Caesars Palace has finished the long-delayed interior of the 660-room Octavius Tower, and Caesars Entertainment has commenced construction of The Linq, a retail, restaurant, and entertainment district located along a shortcut between the Flamingo and the Imperial Palace. The focal point will be a giant observation wheel. SkyVue, a second entertainment complex with an observation wheel, is being erected across from Mandalay Bay. Both venues are scheduled to open in the summer of 2013. Eight downtown hotels have also remodeled, reopened, or reinvented themselves.

Airlines have continued to slash capacity and the number of flights to Las Vegas, although McCarran recently introduced Terminal 3 for international flights and larger aircraft covering long-haul routes. The price of gasoline heavily impacts the drive-in market and regional visitation. Five dollars per gallon seems to be the breaking point for many drivers, although the difference in cost from Los Angeles would be about \$18 each way. The higher cost of airline fuel will increase the price of airline tickets, primarily affecting the leisure traveler. Locally, the Las Vegas Monorail is still in trouble with shrinking ridership, and the projected airport leg is on hold. Entire buildings of Strip-adjacent high-rise luxury condos have been revamped as apartments and, until the economy rebounds more, no uber-resorts are on the horizon. Small boutique nongaming hotels are the wave of the future.

When MGM Resorts International's glamorous CityCenter urban complex with 6,000 rooms was introduced with a flourish in 2009, along with the Cosmopolitan's 2,995 suites a year later, 8,995 more accommodations were added in a down market and Las Vegas's citywide room inventory reached a jaw-dropping 148,935 units. However, bottom-line profits for several Las Vegas hotel corporations come not from local properties but from their Asian casinos and the establishment of their brands as nongaming retreats in Dubai, China,

Abu Dhabi, and Vietnam. To stem the flood of currency away from Nevada, the state is considering the legalization of Internet gaming.

While the convention market is rebounding, the business has changed with the new popularity of regional meetings overcoming corporate and nonprofit associations' previous ardor for annual mega-conventions. Even with the increased prices and hassles of air travel and the reluctance of organizations to provide more funding for business trips, this market segment is intensifying. While conventioners will spend more on hotel rooms, they demonstrate lower propensity to gamble and have curbed their enthusiastic splurging for entertainment, cocktails, and luxury dining.

Some moderately priced properties have entered the youth and senior hostel market, while a few major resorts have become pet-friendly, adding a per-night surcharge for canines. Seeking additional earnings, many hotels levy unpopular resort fees, ranging from \$5 to \$40 per night, for items such as local phone calls, Wi-Fi and Internet access, and fitness center access, that previously had been complimentary. Ever on the bandwagon, others advertise themselves as "fee-free." Another source of income is personalized guest reservations to guarantee a view, kings or double-doubles, early check-in, or extended check-out. Hotels with showrooms have identified entertainment sales as an untapped revenue stream, offering more afternoon acts, show passes (admission to multiple shows within a limited time frame), backstage tours, and meet-and-greets with performers, in addition to dinner-show-nightclub packages. Often rivaling the casino as a profit center, nightclubs have become highly visible, sometimes earning more per square foot than gaming. The largest lounges cover more than 55,000 square feet, and limited operating hours mean lower operating expenses. March through October, entry-fee beach clubs (some optional) and pool parties with concerts abound, and nightclubs have expanded poolside, adding water diversions to their inventory of pleasures. A high percentage of youthful visitors scrimp on rooms and meals and spend on pricy entry fees and expensive cocktails. Food courts have proliferated, while gourmet restaurants are closing. Another trend is the small plate—less food for slightly less money, and bar-hopping is a new direction in consumer packaging.

WHAT IT MEANS *to* YOU

INTERESTINGLY, IF YOU CRUISE the Strip or downtown, everything looks pretty normal. The better shows still play to packed audiences, long queues at hotel registration desks continue to frustrate, and the casinos seem to be bustling. All of the above, however, is attributable to hotels and casinos heavily discounting, especially when it comes to rooms. Condo developers trying to generate cash flow compound the discounting by dumping empty and unsold units into the city's hotel room inventory. A quick gallop around a hotel search engine will turn

up dozens of lodging options in properties that were supposed to be residences. Though Las Vegas occupancy rates were on an uptick as we went to press, the same could not be said of room rates, and it looks like the heavy discounting will continue unabated until late spring of 2013 at the earliest. What kind of discounts are we talking about? In April of 2012—one of the nicest months to visit Las Vegas—\$350 to \$450 rooms at the Bellagio and Wynn Encore were going for \$169 per night. Hilton Vacation Club (time-share) condos were offered at \$89 per night. More luxurious digs at Trump International were available for \$95 per night. A number of hotels such as Mandalay Bay not only discounted rooms but also threw in free show tickets and other sweeteners. The Mirage promoted \$85-per-night rooms packaged with a \$40 dining credit and admission for four to its Secret Garden attraction. To find deals coupled with sweeteners check your favorite search engine for “name of hotel and promotions”—for example, “Caesars Palace and promotions” or “Luxor and promotions.” You get the idea.

Because the larger and newer hotels have more appeal and drawing power, they can always put people in beds by discounting. Older hotels, such as the Riviera, Imperial Palace, and Circus Circus, among others, are forced to discount much more deeply to fill their rooms. This is especially true of properties such as the Riviera, which counts heavily on meeting attendees. Likewise, more isolated hotels are forced to offer deeper discounts. Silverton and Southpoint, both located south of Las Vegas off Interstate 15, usually represent exceptional value.

The Las Vegas entertainment scene was the last to succumb to the storms of recession. Remarkably, in 2009, the average price of undiscounted tickets for long-running shows topped \$80 for the first time. 2011 and 2012, on the other hand, were another story with a succession of ticket-price reductions, twofers, dollars-off coupons in visitor mags and on the Internet, and the bundling of shows with hotel stays at bargain rates. There are still two dozen or so shows where admission tops \$100, but for the first time some of these shows have become available at the local half-price ticket discounters. If you’ve ever wanted to see a Cirque du Soleil show on the cheap, now’s the time. Nothing’s guaranteed, however, and half-price tickets to premium productions may be scarce on weekends. Tickets must be purchased in person at one of the discounter locations on the same day as the performance. Higher-price VIP seating, once relegated to topless revues and celebrity headliner shows, is now ubiquitous but rarely worth the steep tariff. With attendance lagging as it is, you’ll usually get a good seat buying general admission. Leave the VIP seats to myopic old coots who can’t tell a nipple from a fried egg absent a telescope. If shows are too expensive, discounts notwithstanding, live music in casino lounges abounds, continuing a six-decade tradition as Las Vegas’s best entertainment value.

 **unofficial TIP**
A few high-quality afternoon productions offer a bargain alternative to the mortgage-the-farm-priced shows playing the major showrooms.

The recession has forced many restaurants, both in and out of casinos, to close. For the most part, restaurant prices haven't come down, although some of the better restaurants now offer a fixed-price "tasting" menu at a very reasonable price to lure you in. It can be a good deal and perhaps a time-limited opportunity to try a restaurant you couldn't ordinarily afford. Just be mindful of what you order in addition to the fixed-price meal—that's where you can lose. Most of the signs of stress we're observing on the dining scene come in the form of a proliferation of two-for-one deals, discount coupons, free appetizers, and the like. As with hotels and casinos, restaurants know that the first step is to get you through the door, so that's where they're putting their energy.

The **QUIET CONTENDER**

A FEW YEARS BACK, the big buzz was Las Vegas as a family destination. Insiders understood, however, that all the talk was just that. At most, the family thing was a public relations exercise to make Las Vegas appear more wholesome. It was tacitly understood that the big dogs would never allow theme parks and other family-oriented attractions to actually compete with the casinos for a visitor's time. Lost in the backwash of this hollow debate, however, was the exponential burgeoning of theme shopping. Shopping is something that reached critical mass almost unnoticed and that keeps visitors out of the casinos. At present, the case can be made that shopping is almost as potent an attraction in Las Vegas as gambling. On the Strip are four huge themed shopping venues (Forum Shops, Grand Canal Shops, Crystals, and Miracle Mile Shops) and a comparatively white-bread mall, but one that's buttressed with every big-name department store in North America. Not to be left in the wake, downtown offers the Las Vegas Premium Outlets complex, which features 150 stores, all flogging upmarket brands. For the first time, there is something powerful enough to suck the players right out of the casinos, and it arrived on the scene as stealthily as a Trojan horse.

The impact of the economic downturn is most starkly evident among Las Vegas retailers. Where casinos appear busy, shops are anything but. Irrespective of venue, from the tony Forum Shops to hotel sundry stores, sale signs are everywhere. Sales, mind you, are relative, and even at half off, the \$1,500 sport coat at Bellagio is going to cost a not-inconsiderable \$750.

A **TALE of TWO CITIES**

FOR AT LEAST 40 YEARS Las Vegas has been referred to as "Disneyland for Adults." At the time this tongue-in-cheek appellation was gaining currency Las Vegas was anything but. Disneyland was systematically planned, highly polished, absolutely regimented, and totally plastic. Las Vegas, by contrast, grew like a weed, was raw, unrefined, and

freewheeling, and was as real as a one-way ticket home on Greyhound with an empty wallet. Disneyland was a sanitized version of fantasy and history, Las Vegas the last vestige of the western frontier.

When we began covering Las Vegas about 25 years ago, the casinos were predominantly independent. Each had a distinct identity free of the corporate veneer that blankets Las Vegas today. Personality, or the lack thereof, was defining. As with cakes at a church fund-raiser, what was on the inside was what mattered. Now it's the icing that counts, or, expressed differently, the icon (Statue of Liberty, Sphinx, pirate ship, Eiffel Tower . . . you choose) that sits in the casino's front yard. Inside, the product is largely the same. Four casino megacorporations now run most of Las Vegas. On the Strip it's worse. Two companies—Caesars Entertainment and MGM Resorts International (MRI)—own every casino except the Tropicana, Riviera, Venetian, Stratosphere, Cosmopolitan, and Wynn Resorts. Standards for restaurants, hotel rooms, entertainment, theme, and just about everything else offer all the predictability of a nice chain hotel. The maverick casinos and their rough-and-tumble owners are all but gone, and with them the gritty, boom-or-bust soul of this gambling town. Making a clichéd joke a fulfilled prophecy—Las Vegas has in fact become Disneyland.

If you'd like a taste of the old Las Vegas, now's the time. Tomorrow, or soon after, it will largely be gone. While you can, walk Glitter Gulch; enjoy a shrimp cocktail at the Golden Gate; see *Jubilee!*, the quintessential Las Vegas Parisian revue; or play craps beneath the stained-glass canopy at the Tropicana. Linger over the porterhouse special at the Redwood Bar and Grill at the California, or the duck flambé anise at Hugo's Cellar at the Four Queens. Make no mistake, this is not slumming; each example represents the best of Las Vegas in both a current and historical sense. And if you wait too long? Well, enjoy the new Las Vegas: systematically planned, highly polished, absolutely regimented, and totally plastic.

As most of you know, we also publish guides to Disneyland and Walt Disney World and have never for a moment doubted the overall quality of the Disney product. Comparing the new Las Vegas with Disneyland is a long way from a condemnation. Though we liked the sultry, wide-open, sinful feel of the old Vegas, we can't argue that corporate Las Vegas has built an Oz that no maverick dreamer could have envisioned. Whether the old Las Vegas or the new Las Vegas is better, we'll leave you to judge.

LETTERS, COMMENTS, AND QUESTIONS FROM READERS

WE EXPECT TO LEARN FROM OUR MISTAKES, as well as from the input of our readers, and to improve with each edition. Many of those who use the *Unofficial Guides* write to us to ask questions, make comments, or share their own discoveries and lessons learned in Las Vegas. We appreciate all such input, both positive and critical, and encourage our readers to continue writing. Readers' comments and observations will

be frequently incorporated in revised editions of the *Unofficial Guide* and will contribute immeasurably to its improvement.

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If you write us, rest assured that we won't release your name and address to any mailing-list companies, direct-mail advertisers, or other third parties. Unless you tell us otherwise, we'll assume that you're OK with being quoted in the *Unofficial Guide*. Be sure to put your return address on both your letter and the envelope—sometimes envelopes and letters get separated. And because our work takes us out of the office for long periods of time, note that our response may be delayed.

Reader Survey

At the back of this guide, you will find a short questionnaire that you can use to express opinions concerning your Las Vegas visit. Clip the questionnaire along the dotted line and mail it to the above address.

HOW INFORMATION IS ORGANIZED: BY SUBJECT AND BY GEOGRAPHIC AREAS

TO GIVE YOU FAST ACCESS to information about the *best* of Las Vegas, we've organized material in several formats.

HOTELS Because most people visiting Las Vegas stay in one hotel for the duration of their vacation or business trip, we have summarized our coverage of hotels in charts, maps, ratings, and rankings that allow you to quickly focus your decision-making process. We do not ramble on for page after page describing lobbies and rooms which, in the final analysis, sound (and look) much the same. Instead, we concentrate our coverage on the specific variables that differentiate one hotel from another: location, size, room quality, services, amenities, and cost.

RESTAURANTS We give you a lot of detail when it comes to restaurants. Because you will probably eat a dozen or more restaurant meals during your stay, and because not even you can predict what kind of fare you might be in the mood for on, say, Saturday night, we provide detailed profiles of the very best restaurants Las Vegas has to offer.

ENTERTAINMENT AND NIGHTLIFE Visitors frequently try several different shows or clubs during their stay. Because shows and nightspots, like restaurants, are usually selected spontaneously after arriving in Las Vegas, we believe detailed descriptions are warranted. All continuously running stage shows, as well as celebrity showrooms, are profiled and reviewed in the entertainment section of this guide. The best nightspots

and lounges in Las Vegas are profiled alphabetically under nightlife in the same section.

GEOGRAPHIC AREAS Though it's easy to get around in Las Vegas, you may not have a car or the inclination to venture far from your hotel. To help you locate the best restaurants, shows, nightspots, and attractions convenient to where you are staying, we have divided the city into geographic areas:

- South Strip and Environs
- West of Strip
- East of Strip
- Mid-Strip and Environs
- Downtown Las Vegas
- North Strip and Environs
- Southeast Las Vegas–Henderson

All profiles of hotels, restaurants, and nightspots include area names. For example, if you are staying at Bill's Gamblin' Hall and Saloon and are interested in Italian restaurants within walking distance, scanning the restaurant profiles for restaurants in the Mid-Strip area will provide you with the most convenient choices.

COMFORT ZONES For each hotel-casino we have created a profile that describes the casino's patrons and gives you some sense of how it might feel to spend time there. The purpose of the comfort-zone section is to help you find the hotel-casino at which you will feel most welcome and at home. These comfort-zone descriptions begin on page 80 in Part One, Accommodations and Casinos.

LAS VEGAS: *An Overview*

GATHERING INFORMATION

LAS VEGAS HAS THE BEST SELECTION of complimentary visitor guides of any American tourist destination we know. Available at the front desk or concierge table at almost every hotel, the guides provide a wealth of useful information on gaming, gambling lessons, shows, lounge entertainment, sports, buffets, meal deals, tours and sightseeing, transportation, shopping, and special events. Additionally, most of the guides contain coupons for discounts on dining, shows, attractions, and tours.

Recommended publications include *Las Vegas Magazine* (lasvegasmagazine.com), affiliated with the *Las Vegas Sun* newspaper, *Vegas2Go*, and *Where Magazine of Las Vegas* (wheremagazine.com). All three have much of the same information discussed above, plus feature articles. The best magazine for keeping abreast of nightlife, concerts, and happenings is *Las Vegas Weekly* (lasvegasweekly.com). Although all of the freebie Las Vegas visitor magazines contain valuable information, they are rah-rah rags, and their primary objective is to promote. So don't expect any critical reviews of shows, restaurants, attractions, or anything else for that matter.

The *Las Vegas Advisor* is a 12-page monthly newsletter containing some of the most useful consumer information available on gaming,

dining, and entertainment, as well as deals on rooms, drinks, shows, and meals. With no advertising or promotional content, the newsletter serves its readers with objective, prescriptive, no-nonsense advice, presented with a sense of humor. The *Advisor* also operates a dynamic website at **lvahotels.com**. At a subscription rate of \$50 a year, the *Las Vegas Advisor* is the best investment you can make if you plan to spend four or more days in Las Vegas each year. If you are a one-time visitor but wish to avail yourself of all this wisdom, single copies of the *Las Vegas Advisor* can be purchased for \$5 at the *Las Vegas Advisor* website with the other subscription options or at the Gambler's Book Club at 5473 South Eastern Avenue (☎ 702-382-7555 or 800-522-1777) or visit **gamblersbook.com**. For additional information:

Las Vegas Advisor/Huntington Press
3665 South Procyon Avenue
Las Vegas, NV 89103
☎ 702-252-0655 or 800-244-2224
lvahotels.com

Las Vegas and the Internet

The explosive growth of Las Vegas is not only physical but also virtual. The following are the best places to go on the Web to launch yourself into Las Vegas cyberspace:

The site of the *Las Vegas Advisor*, **lvahotels.com**, is a great source of information on recent and future developments, hotels, dining, entertainment, and gambling. The site features everything you need to plan your trip, as well as informative blogs and podcasts. It also has a function for finding hotel deals called “Book a Room” (located in the center of the home page under “Features”). You can sort the results by price. A forum with user questions, maps, and other visitor information is also available.

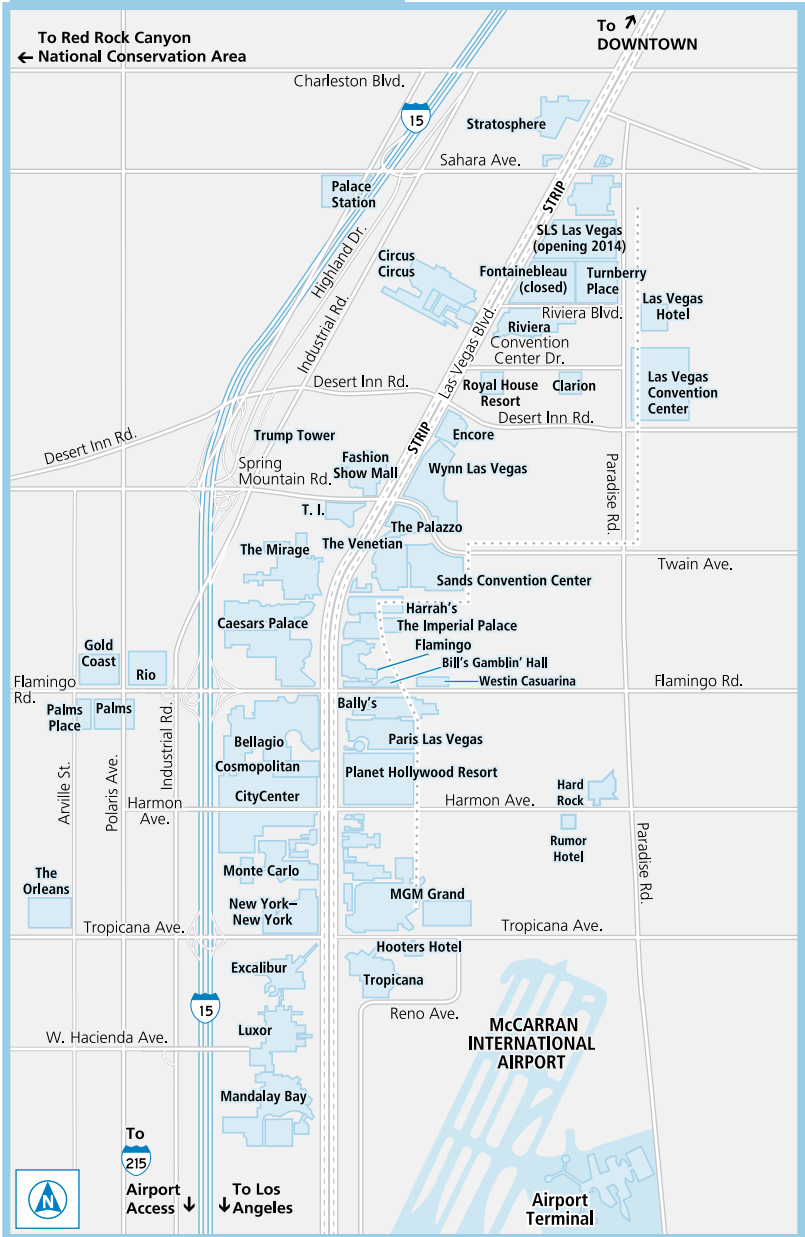
The official website of the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority is **visitlasvegas.com**. This site has hundreds of links to hotels, casinos, the airport, and area transportation, plus information on the convention center, sightseeing, and dining. To get started, roll over the categories (stay, play, special offers, etc.) at the top of the page.

One of the most comprehensive Las Vegas websites is **lasvegas.com**. Another big Las Vegas travel website, with an excellent listing of hotels and their dining and entertainment options, is **vegas.com**. Try *What's On* magazine's **whats-on.com** for shows and *Las Vegas Weekly's* **lasvegasweekly.com** for nightlife. Another good site for entertainment information is *Las Vegas Magazine's* **lasvegasmagazine.com**.

The best sites for finding discounts on hotels are **lvahotels.com**, the most reliable source for the best rates (see pages 67–69), and **kayak.com**, which allows you to compare room rates offered by a wide range of discounters.

Hotels make deals available to select markets and populations through the use of discount codes. For example, a deal targeted to San

Las Vegas Strip Area



Diego, California, will be publicized in that area and a special code will be provided to obtain the discount when booking a reservation. However, for most codes, anyone who has the code can use it, even if they are not in the area or market being targeted. A good resource for finding these codes is Smarter Vegas at smartervegas.com, where promotional codes for the city's best hotels are routinely available. Similar sites are Vegas View at vegasview.com, Las Vegas Hotel Promotions at vegas-hotels-online.com, and Early Vegas at earlyvegas.com. Also see Broadway Box described below.

Find promotional tickets for Las Vegas shows, including celebrity headliners, at lasvegasshows.com. Note that not all tickets offered on the site are discounted. Both hotel and show discounts are available at Broadway Box at broadwaybox.com. Broadway Box is a Web community that shares discount codes. There are no membership fees or other costs, and no tickets are sold on the site.

Look for coupons for restaurant discounts at citycoups.com. Simply print the coupons for restaurants you're considering. Discount codes for rental cars are available at mousesavers.com. Though the site is dedicated to saving money at Walt Disney World and Disneyland, the rental car codes listed can be used anywhere.

WHEN TO GO TO LAS VEGAS

THE BEST TIME TO GO TO LAS VEGAS is in the spring or fall, when the weather is pleasant. If you plan to spend most of your time indoors, it doesn't matter what time of year you choose. If you intend to golf, play tennis, run, hike, bike, or boat, try to go in March, April, early May, October, November, or early December.

Because spring and fall are the nicest times of year, they are also the most popular. The best time for special deals is December (after the National Finals Rodeo in early December and excluding the week between Christmas and New Year's), January, and during the scorching summer months.

 **unofficial TIP**
The winter months in Las Vegas provide an unbeatable combination of good value and choice of activities.

Weather in December, January, and February can vary incredibly. While high winds, cold, rain, and snow are not unheard

of, chances are better that temperatures will be mild and the sun will shine. Though the weather is less dependable than in spring or fall, winter months are generally well suited to outdoor activities. We talked to people who in late February water-skied on Lake Mead in the morning and snow-skied in the afternoon at Lee Canyon. From mid-May through mid-September, however, the heat is blistering. During these months, it's best to follow the example of the gambler or the lizard—stay indoors or under a rock.

Crowd Avoidance

In general, weekends are busy and weekdays are slower. The exceptions are holiday periods and when large conventions or special events

Las Vegas Weather and Dress Chart

MONTH	POOLS O = OPEN
JANUARY average daytime temp. 57°F average evening temp. 32°F <i>Recommended attire:</i> coats and jackets are a must.	—
FEBRUARY average daytime temp. 50°F average evening temp. 37°F <i>Recommended attire:</i> dress warmly—jackets and sweaters.	—
MARCH average daytime temp. 69°F average evening temp. 42°F <i>Recommended attire:</i> sweaters for days, but a jacket at night.	O
APRIL average daytime temp. 78°F average evening temp. 50°F <i>Recommended attire:</i> still cool at night—bring a jacket.	O
MAY average daytime temp. 88°F average evening temp. 50°F <i>Recommended attire:</i> sweater for evening, but days are warm.	O
JUNE average daytime temp. 99°F average evening temp. 68°F <i>Recommended attire:</i> days are hot; evenings are moderate.	O
JULY average daytime temp. 105°F average evening temp. 75°F <i>Recommended attire:</i> bathing suits.	O
AUGUST average daytime temp. 102°F average evening temp. 73°F <i>Recommended attire:</i> dress for the heat—spend time at a pool!	O
SEPTEMBER average daytime temp. 95°F average evening temp. 65°F <i>Recommended attire:</i> days warm, sweater for evening.	O
OCTOBER average daytime temp. 81°F average evening temp. 53°F <i>Recommended attire:</i> bring a jacket or sweater for evening.	O
NOVEMBER average daytime temp. 67°F average evening temp. 40°F <i>Recommended attire:</i> sweaters and jackets for days, but coats at night.	—
DECEMBER average daytime temp. 58°F average evening temp. 34°F <i>Recommended attire:</i> coats and jackets are a must—dress warmly.	—

are held. Most Las Vegas hotels have a lower guest-room rate for weekdays than for weekends. Las Vegas hosts huge conventions and special events (rodeos, prize fights) that tie up hotels, restaurants, transportation, showrooms, and traffic for a week at a time. Likewise, major sporting events such as the Super Bowl, the NCAA football bowl games, the men's NCAA basketball tournament, Triple Crown horse races, the World Series, and the NBA championship fill every hotel in town on weekends. If you prefer to schedule your visit at a time when things are a little less frantic, we provide a calendar that lists the larger citywide conventions and regularly scheduled events to help you avoid the crowds. Note that two or three medium-sized conventions meeting at the same time can affect Las Vegas as much as one big citywide event.

unofficial TIP

For a stress-free arrival at the airport, good availability of rental cars, and a quick hotel check-in, try to arrive Monday afternoon through Thursday morning (Tuesday and Wednesday are best).

Because conventions of more than 12,000 attendees can cause problems for the lone vacationer, the list of conventions and special events on pages 20–22 will help you plan your vacation dates. Included are the convention date, the number of people expected to attend, and the convention location (with hotel headquarters, if known at the time of publication). For a complete list of conventions scheduled during your visit, go to lvca.com and click on meeting planners and then convention calendar. You can enter dates and get a full list or narrow it with different key words or search terms. Although there are usually 6–12 conventions being staged in Las Vegas at any given time, the effect of any convention or trade show on hotels, shows, and restaurants is negligible citywide for conventions of 10,000 or fewer, except at the host hotel or convention venue. Note that four or five concurrent conventions averaging 3,000 attendees each can impact tourism to the same extent as one large convention.

A larger Las Vegas hotel can handle small conventions without a hiccup, and the meeting or trade show might actually be an inducement to stay there . . . or not. Staying at the Rio during the International Lingerie Show in September certainly could be interesting. The annual Star Trek Convention at the Las Vegas Hotel in August is a hoot, the October National Industrial Fastener Show at the Sands Expo and Convention Center less so. The BedBug University North America Summit at the Red Rock Casino in September and the Association of Former Special Agents for the Internal Revenue Service at the JW Marriott in October are two you might want to avoid. On the other hand, The International Perfume Bottle Convention at the Tropicana in April will probably come off smelling like a rose. Those who have difficulty thinking in the abstract might enjoy the citywide World of Concrete convention in January. You get the idea. If you stay somewhere that's hosting a convention avoid arriving on the same day as the attendees.



ARRIVING *and* GETTING ORIENTED

IF YOU DRIVE, YOU WILL HAVE TO TRAVEL through the desert to reach Las Vegas. Make sure your car is in good shape. Check your spare tire and toss a couple of gallons of water in the trunk, just in case. Once en route, pay attention to your fuel and temperature gauges. Virtually all commercial air traffic into Las Vegas uses McCarran International Airport. At McCarran, a well-designed facility with good, clear signs, you will have no problem finding your way from the gate to the baggage-claim area, though it is often a long walk. Fast baggage handling is not the airport's strongest suit, so don't be surprised if you have to wait a long time on your checked luggage.

If you do not intend to rent a car, getting from the airport to your hotel is no problem. Shuttle services are available at a cost of \$6–\$9

one-way and \$12–\$16 round-trip. Sedans and “stretch” limousines cost about \$39–\$55 one-way. For taxis, the fare is the same no matter how many passengers are traveling (maximum five). Cabs charge a \$3.30 trip fee with \$2.60 per mile thereafter. If a taxi ride originates at McCarran International Airport, an additional airport surcharge of \$1.80 per trip is added. Cab fare to Las Vegas Strip locations is \$13–\$20 one-way, plus tip. One-way taxi fares to downtown run about \$30. Fares are regulated and should not vary from company to company. Note that most cabs in southern Nevada do not accept credit cards. If you’re going to take a taxi from the airport, it’s a good idea to check out the best route on mapquest.com or googlemaps.com. Cab driver revenues have been falling since the onset of the recession, and some drivers will take a circuitous route to bump up fares. Be mindful, however, that traffic in Las Vegas is horrendous and that a route that seems circuitous may take less time than a more direct route. The most common “long-haul” route used to pad fares is traveling to Strip hotels or downtown via the airport tunnel to I-215 and I-15.

The limo service counters are in the hall just outside the baggage-claim area. Cabs are at the curb. Additional information concerning ground transportation is available at the McCarran International Airport website (mccarran.com) and at the Nevada Taxi Cab Authority’s website (<http://taxi.state.nv.us/FaresFees.htm>).

TAXI OPERATORS

Ace Cab Co. ☎ 702-736-8383	Nellis Cab Co. ☎ 702-248-1111
ANLV ☎ 702-643-1041	Union ☎ 702-736-8444
Henderson Taxi ☎ 702-384-2322	Western Cab ☎ 702-736-8000
Yellow Checker and Star Transportation ☎ 702-873-2000	

If you rent a car, you will need to catch the courtesy shuttle to the new consolidated McCarran Rent-A-Car Center located about two miles from the airport. The shuttle boards at the middle curb of the authorized vehicle lanes just outside terminal doors 10 and 11 on the ground level. The individual car-rental companies no longer operate shuttles of any kind, so all car-rental customers use the same shuttle.

If someone is picking you up, go to ground level on the opposite side of the baggage-claim building (away from the main terminal) to the baggage-claim and arrivals curb. If your ride wants to park and meet you, hook up on the ground level of the baggage-claim building where the escalators descend from the main terminal.

There are two ways to exit the airport by car. You can depart via the old route, Swenson Street, which runs north–south roughly paralleling the Strip, or you can hop

 **unofficial TIP**
Any use of cell phones while driving is now against the law in Las Vegas. Keep your phone in your pocket and avoid big fines.

continued on page 22

Conventions and Special Events Calendar

DATES	CONVENTION/EVENT	HOW MANY ATTENDING	LOCATION
2012-2013			
Sep 6-10	Gay Days Las Vegas	5,000	Rio
Sep 6-16	Glassbuild America	13,000	LVCC
Sep 7-8	Connections Convention & Trade Show	2,700	LVH
Sep 7-8	International Vision Expo West	14,000	Sands Expo Ctr.
Sep 9-14	Electronic Retailing Assoc. Annual Convention	3,000	Wynn LV
Sep 11-14	Las Vegas Souvenir & Resort Show	4,000	LVCC
Sep 11-13	SuperZoo West	9,000	Mandalay Bay
Sep 19-21	Interbike Expo	25,000	Sands Expo Ctr.
Sep 24-26	MINExpo INTERNATIONAL	37,000	LVCC
Sep 25-Oct 3	National Electrical Contractors Association Convention	7,983	Mandalay Bay
Oct 2-4	G2E: Global Gaming Expo	17,000	Sands Expo Ctr.
Oct 3-14	SAS Inc. Premier Business Leadership Series Annual Convention	4,000	Caesars Palace
Oct 8-10	National Assoc. of Convenience Stores, Inc. Annual Meeting & Expo	30,000	LVCC
Oct 11-12	Club Industry Show	4,000	LVCC
Oct 17-19	Door and Hardware Institute Annual Meeting	3,000	MGM Grand
Oct 18-20	Specialty Graphics Annual Nat'l Convention	23,000	LVCC
Oct 19-21	Live Design International	15,000	LVCC
Oct 22-24	McAfee, Inc. FOCUS 12 Security Conference	3,000	Venetian
Oct 24-28	Professional Bull Riders World Finals	TBD	UNLV Thomas & Mack Ctr.
Oct 26-27	Elite Academy Fall 2012	3,500	Aria
Oct 30-Nov 2	Automotive Aftermarket Industry Week (AAIW) / AAPEX / SEMA	115,000	LVCC & Sands Expo Ctr.
Nov 4-8	Society of Exploration Geophysicists Annual Convention	10,000	Mandalay Bay
Nov 12-14	Fabtech & AWS Welding Show	30,000	LVCC
Nov 14-17	DEMA Show	16,000	Sands Expo Ctr.
Nov 14-21	National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention	7,000	MGM Grand
Dec 2-6	47th ASHP Midyear Clinical Meeting	23,000	Mandalay Bay
Dec 5-7	National Groundwater Expo and Annual Meeting	7,500	LVCC
Dec 8-15	National Finals Rodeo	TBD	UNLV Thomas & Mack Ctr.
Jan 8-11	International CES	148,000	LVCC
Jan 17-19	Sports Licensing & Tailgate Show	15,000	LVCC
Jan 22-25	International Builders Show	62,000	LVCC
Jan 27-30	West Coast Art & Frame Show	4,500	Mirage