

The gambler's paradise is a century old and repositioning upwards

Words Philip Watson



SIN CITY, GLITTER GULCH, The Entertainment Capital of the World, America's Playground – call it what you will, but one thing's for sure: Las Vegas is the most flagrantly fun city in the world right now. Once better known for its slot machines, organised crime, legalised prostitution and rat pack hellraisers, Lost Wages has cleaned up its act and repositioned itself as a boomtown of upmarket hotels, gourmet restaurants, exclusive shops and world-class art galleries.

Aficionados and old hands see through the sanitation of the Strip, of course. They know that in the shadow of the new, ultra-modern, £2.2 billion Wynn Las Vegas hotel and the "100 Years of Fabulous Las Vegas" centenary celebration banners are a riot of sleazy bars, strip joints, escort services and motels renting rooms by the hour.

Yet that heady combination of high gloss and instant gratification has always been the point and the pull of Las Vegas. It's best to cultivate a heightened sense of the ironic and the absurd if you are to get the most out of this neon-lit oasis in the Nevada desert. Take Las Vegas seriously and you're lost.

So here, in the spirit of the good times, both old and new, we present a smart guide to the coolest, swishest and kitschiest hot spots in today's Las Vegas.

Desert inns

Ocean's Eleven star George Clooney recently announced plans to add a "touch of class and old-style glamour" to Vegas by investing in a new boutique hotel in the city, and London-based private club Soho House is scheduled to expand its fashionable hotel brand to Las Vegas in the near future. There has also been a flurry of investment in glitzy hotel spas, with the Bellagio recently more than doubling the size of its facility and Mandalay Bay launching a spa in its new all-suites tower, which is named THEhotel.

But there is really only one significant new hotel kid on the block – the Wynn Las Vegas (3131 Las Vegas Boulevard South; +1 702 770 7000; www.wynnlasvegas.com; doubles from €167). The sleek, 50-storey curve of copper-coloured glass is the first mega-resort to open in the city since 2000 and is the brainchild of Mr Las Vegas himself, the legendary "Donald Trump of the West", Steve Wynn.

Building on the success he has enjoyed with such over-the-top properties as the Mirage, Treasure Island and Bellagio, Wynn opened his hotel, comprising 2,700 rooms and suites, in May. The development boasts eight "fine dining" restaurants, a golf course

designed by Tom Fazio, an onsite Ferrari and Maserati dealership, and even its own 30-storey mountain. Wynn has said that he's aiming for "refinement" and that "it's not a hotel, it's art". Only in Vegas.

Hautel cuisine

It started a few years back when Wolfgang Puck opened an offshoot of Spago, his fashionable Beverly Hills restaurant, in the Forum shopping mall in Caesars Palace. Since then, almost every celebrity chef and hip restaurateur in the US has opened an eaterie in one of the city's hotels.

The most prized table is at Julian Serrano's Picasso at the Bellagio (+1 702 693 7223). It not only boasts 11 genuine Picassos and has a carpet and furniture designed by the artist's son Claude, but also serves superb signature dishes, such as poached oysters with caviar and pigeon risotto.

Another Bellagio hot spot is Le Cirque (+1 702 693 8100), sister restaurant to the famed New York gourmet temple. Meanwhile, at Mandalay Bay, Charlie Palmer's Aureole (+1 702 632 7401) is the star attraction – a restaurant feted for both its innovative modern American cuisine and what many believe is the best wine list in the US (in fact, 12 of the world's 107

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Las Vegas's top venues for fine dining and culture

master sommeliers work in Las Vegas hotels). Popular also is the outpost of modern Japanese restaurant Nobu (+1 702 693 5090), set in a cool space designed by interiors star David Rockwell and sited in, of all places, the Hard Rock Hotel.

Even acclaimed Michelin-starred French chefs have started to see the neon light and opened stunning new restaurants. Alain Ducasse's Mix (+1 702 632 9500) is an opulent mecca of haute cuisine, located 64 floors above the Strip at the top of THEhotel at Mandalay Bay. Joël Robuchon recently launched his first Stateside venture with a pair of intimate restaurants – Robuchon at the Mansion (+1 702 891 7777) and L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon (no reservations) in the mammoth MGM Grand.

Beer and beats

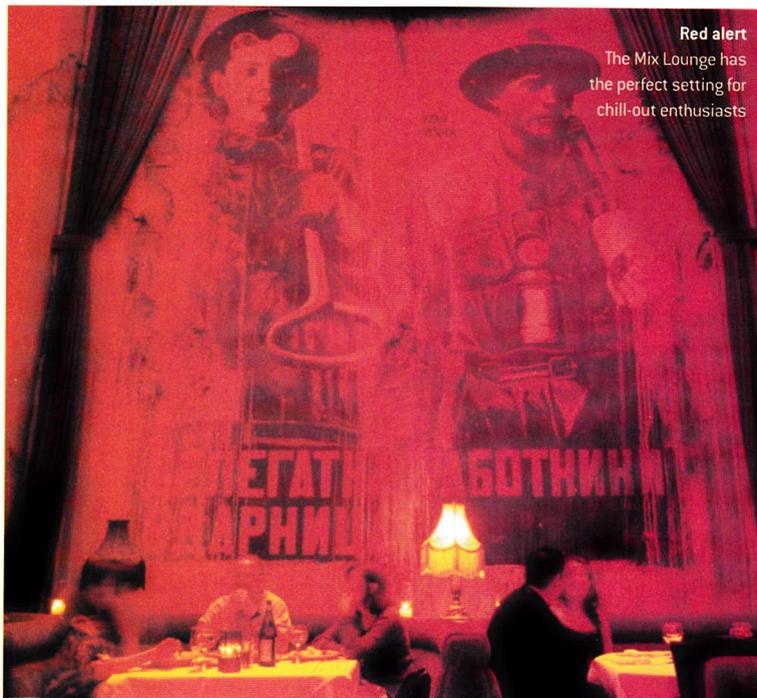
Vegas's restaurant revolution has been matched by a new wave of hipper, more sophisticated bars and nightclubs. Best of the city's "ultra lounges" are the Voodoo lounge on the 51st floor of the Rio, which has one of the best views of the city; Caramel in the Bellagio, where speciality drinks are served in chocolate and caramel-coated martini glasses; Red Square at Mandalay Bay, which offers more than 100 types of vodka and keeps drinks cold on a bar made of ice; and the black leather-clad bar at THEhotel's Mix Lounge (see above).

Clubbers head to Rum Jungle at Mandalay Bay, where fire and waterfall walls and volcanic mountains of rum await; ICE Las Vegas, the largest freestanding nightclub in the city, with its giant sound system and big name international DJs; and the new Pure at Caesars Palace, which has an outdoor terrace and a silvery-white main dance floor surrounded by oversized beds.

Shoppus non stoppus

It's the motto of the Forum shopping arcade at Caesars Palace, considered the best in town, and it sums up Las Vegas's bullish retail philosophy: you want it, we've got it.

All the hotels along the Strip have indoor shopping malls, but the Forum (where an artificial sun rises and sets on the hour), the Venetian's Grand Canal Shoppes (yes, that's ye auld Italian "shoppes") and Via Bellagio at the Bellagio are the most upmarket. It's here that you'll find such blue-chip designer outlets as Tiffany, Dior, Gucci, Armani, Prada, Chanel and Versace – unsurprisingly, perhaps, these stores make



Red alert
The Mix Lounge has the perfect setting for chill-out enthusiasts

more profit per square foot in Vegas than in any of the world's capitals.

Master of Arts

Las Vegas may seem the least likely place for viewing masterpieces by artists such as Cézanne, Gauguin and Renoir, but somehow, in a city where anything goes, it works.

The Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art is the place to catch the big names (the current exhibition, *The Impressionist Landscape from Corot to Van Gogh*, runs to January 2005). But the Rem Koolhaas-designed Guggenheim Hermitage Museum, the first joint venture between the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg and New York's Solomon R Guggenheim Foundation, is often better for culture of a more thrilling nature (*The Majesty of the Tsars: Treasures from the Kremlin Museum* is also on show until January next year).

In addition, a funky new art scene is emerging in the city's reassuringly seedy old downtown. Contemporary galleries and studio complexes, such as the Arts Factory (101-109 E Charleston Blvd), and the nearby Godt-Cleary Projects (1217 S Main St) and Dust Gallery (1221 S Main St), have sprung up in disused shops and industrial buildings, bringing culture to the masses.

BIG BUSINESS!

- > Las Vegas is the fastest-growing city in North America – its 1.8 million population is expanding so quickly that the town's *Yellow Pages* has to be updated every six months
- > Vegas is the world's biggest city tourism industry – it has 130,000 hotel rooms, which is more than New York and Los Angeles combined
- > It has the world's largest hotel, the 5,034-room MGM-Grand (19 of the 20 largest hotels in the world are in Vegas)
- > A record 37 million people visited Vegas in 2004
- > Residents of Las Vegas pay no personal income tax
- > Las Vegas casinos last year accounted for €5.1 billion in gross gaming revenue
- > In 2003 the average gambling budget per trip was €403 per visitor
- > Eighty-seven per cent of visitors say they gamble during their stay, and the average time is 3.9 hours per day
- > The biggest ever slot machine payout is €33.3 million
- > For further information, go to www.visitlasvegas.com

