

Loving Las Vegas, from its glittering Strip to its alluring desert

By Kate Silver April 5



There's a lot to savor beyond the glittering Las Vegas Strip.
(imageBROKER/Alamy Stock Photo)

If you tell people you're going to Las Vegas for a week, the reaction tends to be either a raised eyebrow, implying that's a long time to spend there, or an overly excited and equally presumptuous "Vegas baby!" Sometimes it's easier to just tell people you're headed "out West" to avoid the backstory.

Here's mine. Las Vegas is one of my home towns, a place where, in my 20s and 30s, I very much grew up. I met some of the most amazing friends in the town that tourists — and only tourists — call "Sin City." Since moving to Chicago in 2009, I've seldom been back. But last Oct. 2, I felt an urgent need to visit.

That was the day after the shooting at the Route 91 Harvest festival, when I awoke to a stream of alerts on Facebook saying this friend and that friend had marked themselves safe in the "Violent Incident in Las Vegas, Nevada." The shooter killed 58 people and wounded 546 in the deadliest mass shooting in modern history.

Within days, I booked a plane ticket, eager to hug my people and to show my husband, Neil, whom I'd met in Chicago, the desert surroundings I suddenly missed desperately. Just a week to reexperience a big part of my life.



A gondolier moves along the waters of the Grand Canal Shoppes at the Venetian. (John Kellerman/Alamy Stock Photo)

The merch of Venice

For most of my nine years in Vegas, I worked as a journalist and guidebook writer, hopscotching between tourist Las Vegas and real Las Vegas. That means that a sight such as, say, a gondolier rowing through blue, chlorinated waters under sky-blue ceilings at the Grand Canal Shoppes at the Venetian carries some nostalgia. To get our tourist fill, we stay at the Venice-themed hotel, with its Renaissance-inspired ceiling frescoes and a near-quarry's worth of marble for the first two nights. We don't even need to leave the enormous property to eat decadent pastries from Bouchon Bakery and share a "Crazyshake" (an over-the-top milkshake with chocolate acting as an adhesive for more chocolate dotting the glass) at Black Tap Craft Burgers & Beer. When we're not consuming calories, we get turned around weaving through the gaming floor trying to find the elevator to get to our room — and wait, there are Ellen DeGeneres-themed slot machines?



The spicy Thai food at Lotus of Siam is worth a trip off the Strip. Be sure to get a reservation. (Kate Silver/For The Washington Post)

The restaurant I'm most eager to return to is away from the neon and crowds of Las Vegas Boulevard. To get there, we take a meandering walk, past the bronze statue of Siegfried and Roy near the Mirage, around the lush bird habitat at the Flamingo and through that familiar gauntlet of handbillers fwap-fwapping their pamphlets about women available to visit our room.

Then we veer off-Strip, taking E. Flamingo Road about a mile and a half east to meet friends at Lotus of Siam. In 2000, Gourmet Magazine named this Thai restaurant the best in North America. We feast on sumptuous beef jerky, duck curry and spicy

catfish. The location we visit is new (the old one flooded and is closed for renovations) but the food is even more remarkable than I remember.

Like the locals

The wide-open spaces, the red-rock vistas, the mountain silhouettes framing the valley, the Dr. Seuss-ish Joshua trees, the way it's so easy to breathe out here with all that hardy desert beauty — that, too, is my Nevada. Shaking off the frenetic tourist energy, Neil and I head out to Lake Mead, which is about 30 miles east of the Strip, for a morning hike on the Historic Railroad Trail. The path was constructed to transport materials to Hoover Dam beginning in 1931, and over the course of about two miles, it goes through five long, cool, eerie, dark tunnels, all while hugging the lake formed by the dam. It's especially beautiful today, under a cloud-stippled blue sky.

Having earned an appetite, we stop for breakfast in downtown Boulder City, which, as one of two cities in the state that bans gambling, is a kind of Nevada Mayberry. At a postcard-worthy diner called the Coffee Cup, we wolf down an omelet with green chile, avocado and cheddar (me) and hash browns smothered in pork chile verde (Neil) before driving back to Vegas to reunite with a group of friends who have also moved away. We're renting a house together in the McNeil Estates neighborhood, a cool community of swanky ranch-style homes with midcentury modern trappings about a mile and a half west of Las Vegas Boulevard.



The Lake Mead Marina and Rock Island, as seen from the Historic Railroad Trail, which runs along the lakeshore. (Sam Morris/Las Vegas News Bureau)



Downtown Container Park, in the recently developed Fremont East area of the city. (Brian Jones/Las Vegas News Bureau)

While musing over some Vegas vagaries — “You can still smoke indoors?”; “Oxygen bars are still a thing?”; “Glen Lerner (a personal-injury attorney with billboards everywhere) hasn’t aged?” — we admire some of the developments downtown. Fremont East, a strip of bars and restaurants just past a cluster of old-school casinos and the touristy Fremont Street Experience light show, has picked up momentum and density since we’ve all left. Once associated with seedy hotels and a Wild West, anything-goes ambiance — I met with a self-described hit man in a hotel here in the early 2000s for a story — there’s now a walkable district that includes the Downtown Container Park outdoor mall made of the stacked steel shipping boxes, as well as funky sculptures and a fabulous little book shop, the Writer’s Block. We happen upon “Market in the Alley,” which is a far cry from the unsanctioned dealings that once took place in surrounding passageways. People are buying crafts from vendors and sipping expensive cups of pour-over coffee. We run into an old friend and ask if there’s anything else we should check out farther east. “Nooo,” he warns, and gestures to a nearby business. “You don’t want to go past murder mart.” We nod. Change comes in increments.

Into the hinterlands

My happy place lies deep in the Mojave Desert, about 90 minutes west of Vegas, in the tiny, hardscrabble town of Tecopa, Calif. The latest census data puts its population at about 150, but locals will tell you it’s probably much lower. Some people come here for the hot springs. (There are a number of them.) Others come for the date milkshakes, served in a shop at a working date farm

called China Ranch. I come for the profound quiet and the tepees at Cynthia's.

Twenty-some years ago, Cynthia Kienitz started visiting Tecopa. The more time she spent in the desert, the more she felt shaped by it, much the way the sun bakes the loping mud hills here just outside of Death Valley and the Amargosa River carves a tumbling waterfall near the date farm. Kienitz, an interior designer, likes to say she got tired of the rat race and traded it all in to become a desert rat. She opened a small bed-and-breakfast in a home on the date farm, but then decided she wanted her guests to be immersed in the desert. So she set up three enormous tepees — each sleeps four in comfy beds — that look out on the date palm trees and surrounding bald hills. And then she added a half-dozen guest rooms in repurposed, well-appointed trailers so more visitors could live like locals. (Trailers are de rigueur out in these parts.)



The magic of the desert outside Vegas includes sand dunes in Death Valley National Park... (Bryan Mullennix/Alamy Stock Photo)



.. and Dr. Seuss-ish Joshua trees, such as this one in the Mojave Desert in California. (Mihai Andritoiu/Alamy Stock Photo)

I've stayed in both, finding solace in the stark landscape and the bejeweled night sky. Cellphones don't work out here, and locals wear headlamps at night. It all adds to the charm.

[Taking a gamble on a revitalized Reno]

During the day, Neil and I hike along a sandy path near China Ranch, past a couple of abandoned cars turned brown and crisp by the overbearing sun, toward earthy mounds that look like sleeping giants. Later, Kienitz, whom I've gotten to know over the years, takes us out on ATVs to tour an old mine and rudimentary cemetery, where the grave markers are simple crosses fashioned with two sticks. She briefs us on the history of the area, explaining that it was an active mining community from the 1870s to the 1950s.

At night, we head to Steaks and Beer, a tiny restaurant with two indoor tables and four bar seats, all of which are full. It's too cold

to take advantage of the outdoor tables. We walk a few yards away to wait at Death Valley Brewing, one of two breweries in town (“Probably the most per capita anywhere,” the man who pours our beer tells us), and over a red nitro and a coffee porter, we gaze at a man at the bar who’s toting a white bucket of homegrown persimmons, cutting slices with a large knife and handing them to anyone within arm’s length.



Rhyolite is a ghost town 120 miles from Las Vegas. (Kate Silver/For The Washington Post)

When seats open up at the restaurant, it’s clear why the place does a bang-up business: The \$36 filet mignon, served with vegetables and mashed potatoes, is perfectly seasoned and finished with a combination of red wine butter and reduced balsamic vinegar. It’s as good as any I’ve had in a Chicago steakhouse.

Stuffed, we use a flashlight to find our way back to our tepee for the night.

Temperatures are in the high 30s, and we’re grateful for heated mattress pads. Only our noses get chilly, and we sleep soundly

until the coyotes rise with the sun, their high-pitched howls sounding more human than canine.

We take one more desert detour, winding a couple of hours north of Tecopa through the sun-baked Death Valley National Park to the Goldwell Open Air Museum, where artists — mostly from Europe — have created sculptures against the barren backdrop. There's a bronze miner standing next to a penguin, and eerily cloaked figures called "The Last Supper." A short drive beyond are the crumbling buildings of Rhyolite, the remaining ghost of a Gold Rush boomtown. At its peak, there were about 50 saloons, 19 lodges, 16 restaurants, a newspaper, bathhouse and more. You can still see Tom Kelly's Bottle House — a well-preserved structure made of about 50,000 beer bottles.

By the time we return to Vegas and fly out of McCarran International Airport, both of us energized by the fresh air and sunshine and time with good friends, I think back to the places on my original "to do" list (China Mama for soup dumplings, Peppermill Fireside Lounge for a Blue Hawaiian, Dino's Lounge for a karaoke rendition of "Leather and Lace") and realize how many I didn't check off. A week may sound like a lot of time to someone who hasn't lived in Las Vegas. But for me, it wasn't nearly enough.

Silver is a writer based in Chicago. Find her on Twitter: [@K8Silver](#).

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[How cruising 2.0 is drawing in younger generations](#)
[In Chicago, finding the right bites in Lincoln Square and Ravenswood](#)

If you go

Where to stay

The Venetian

355 S. Las Vegas Blvd.

Las Vegas

866-659-9643

venetian.com

Frescoes line the ceilings and gondoliers serenade passengers in the neighboring Grand Canal Shoppes at this hotel and casino in a prime location on Las Vegas Boulevard. Rooms from \$169 per night.

Cynthia's

2001 Old Spanish Trail

Tecopa, Calif.

760-852-4580

discovercynthias.com

Choose to sleep in a tepee on a date farm or in a well-appointed trailer in this tiny desert town about 90 minutes from Vegas. Tepees start at \$165 and trailers start at \$98.

Where to eat

Lotus of Siam

620 E. Flamingo Rd.

Las Vegas

702-735-3033

lotusofsiamlv.com

The menu of Northern and Southern Thai offerings is as thick as a book at this off-Strip favorite of locals. Be sure to make a reservation well in advance. Entrees start at around \$15.

Steaks and Beer

9 Old Spanish Trail Hwy.

Tecopa, Calif.

442-261-1414

The steaks served here would stand out anywhere — but they're especially remarkable in this tiny restaurant in a hardscrabble desert outpost.

Entrees start at \$16.

What to do

Historic Railroad Trail

Lake Mead National Recreation Area

Boulder City, Nev.

702-293-8990

nps.gov/lake/planyourvisit/hikerr.htm

Pass through five dark tunnels on this easy out-and-back hike along a former rail trail that was used to transport materials to Hoover Dam from the 1930s through the early 1960s. You can turn around at the fifth tunnel (2.2 miles) or continue on to the Hoover Dam parking garage (3.7 miles).

Free.

Goldwell Open Air Museum

1 Golden St.

Beatty, Nev.

702-870-9946

goldwellmuseum.org

Towering art in the middle of the desert, bordering a dilapidated ghost town? Why not! The bizarre sculpture park, founded by Belgian artists, is on the outskirts of Death Valley, 120 miles northwest of Las Vegas. A tiny, on-site visitors center provides a good history on Rhyolite, the ghost town of Nye County. Free.

Information

visitlasvegas.com

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Where to find a respite from the neon in Las Vegas

By Kitty Bean Yancey March 26, 2015

Mention at a typical D.C. dinner party that Las Vegas is a favorite destination, and conversation stops.

Suddenly you morph from sophisticated world traveler to shallow lover of all-you-can-scarf buffets, yard-long strawberry margaritas and penny slot machines.

So when I and my favorite vacation mate, Barry, promise pals Paula and Patrick a long weekend of delectable dining, super shopping and hiking in addition to turns at the tables, they're understandably skeptical. But willing.

Real estate investor/developer Patrick did Vegas years ago, before the invasion of ultra-luxury hotels and celeb-chef restaurants. Paula, who works for a global firm that works with developing countries, is a newbie who envisioned “strippers on every corner.”

A couple of months later, we check into the MGM Grand resort’s recently renovated rooms.

I had lobbied for more extravagant lodgings — say, casino perfectionist Steve Wynn’s Encore resort tower suites, Bellagio rooms overlooking fountains that dance to music, the elegant tranquility of the non-gaming Mandarin Oriental. But (to Paula’s and my disappointment) the men prefer comfortable but not super-luxe digs so that we can indulge instead in diversions such as racing Ferraris and Lamborghinis and enjoying expensive meals.

“If you want to talk about high-end restaurants per linear mile, I don’t think it’s possible to beat Las Vegas,” says Anthony Curtis, founder of the [Las Vegas Advisor](#) newsletter and Web site. With world-renowned chefs stirring the pot (including D.C.’s José Andrés), choosing where to dine is a delicious dilemma.



The Picasso at the Bellagio. (Biondo Productions Photo Studio/Bellagio)

We start at Madrid-born Julian Serrano's Picasso at the Bellagio, a dimly lit den of romance where originals of Pablo's art hang on the walls, servers anticipate your need for a Manhattan and the pigeon is served medium rare, as requested. P&P pronounce the fare better than most \$250-per-couple Washington restaurants.

Then it's on to the blackjack tables, where Patrick reminds Paula of the rudiments of the game before we — jet-lagged — call it a night.

Friday morning, I drive the group to Exotics Racing, a half-hour from the Strip at the Las Vegas Motor Speedway. Barry and Patrick are entranced by the lineup of gleaming Maseratis, Porsches, Ferraris and Lambos. After an orientation, they don helmets and nervously rev red Ferrari F430s, as instructors in the passenger seats guide them through cornering and roaring down straightaways at 125 mph.

While they're occupied, I drive super-shopper Paula to Las Vegas North Premium Outlets, where tourists roll empty suitcases to fill with designer bargains. I give her an hour, only enough for her to survey the Coach store and pick out presents for her daughter and nieces. No time, alas, for the deals at Armani, Burberry, Dolce & Gabbana and Tory Burch.

Back at the track, the guys are giddy after doing five laps in fantasy cars. They wish they had bought more time, but we're on a schedule.

Paula and I have a date at the Encore resort's spa — for my money, Vegas's best. It's decorated like an opulent but tasteful stage set, with every detail perfect, from heated stone chaises by hot and cold plunge pools to locker fronts designed like vintage suitcases, to Moroccan lanterns that light the way to treatment rooms.

After a soothing oxygen facial (Paula) and expert deep-tissue massage (me), it's time to break out the spike heels and dress for a show.

I had suggested Cirque du Soleil's risqué combo of acrobatics and comedy called "Zumanity." But majority rule dictates a Vegas star spectacle, this one featuring country-music legend Shania Twain. The glossy-maned brunette trots out her greatest hits at Caesars Palace in the requisite 90-minute act (designed to get gamers back to the casino as quickly as possible). It includes multiple costume changes and two horses. A little cheesy, I think, but in Caesars' Colosseum, where the sound is super-size and

special effects over the top, we're on our feet with the rest of the audience at show's end.

Tonight's eatery is Nobu at Caesars Palace, a celeb fave from renowned chef Nobu Matsuhisa in which actor Robert De Niro is a partner. Struggling to catch our busy server's attention amid the buzz of VIPs and wannabes, we drop a few Benjamins on sushi and sashimi. Yellowtail tuna with jalapeño and black cod miso are memorable, but we decide we're paying a premium for the A-list vibe.

Saturday, we go separate ways, only to coincidentally end up in Red Rock Canyon, within 30 minutes of our hotel. Barry and I drive the 13-mile scenic loop and hike wind-whipped rock formations on our own. But ever-efficient Paula has done research and lined up a private guide. He picks Paula and Patrick up at the hotel, hands out jackets, water and snacks, and soon has both of the heights-averse duo climbing rosy-hued sandstone and inching along narrow ledges with noses pressed against the rock. They celebrate with a kiss and high-five.



Storm clouds roll in over Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, just outside Las Vegas. (Ethan Miller/Getty Images)

I persuade shopping-averse Barry to cruise the Shops at Crystals, a stunningly designed temple of commerce in the CityCenter complex. A salesman at Ermenegildo Zegna tells us high rollers drop six figures on the high-end menswear. Now think-tanker Barry feels better about spending double what he would at Brooks Brothers on an Italian version of the Washington uniform: navy blazer, tan pants.

For our last supper, I've chosen Andrea's restaurant, at the Encore resort. Encore is a favorite because it's a cosseting cocoon on the raucous Strip. Paula settles happily into a creamy beige banquette to order spicy tuna rolls from a server who could win Miss Congeniality at a pageant. Over the bar, a huge screen shows a mesmerizing image of the eyes of Wynn's second wife, Andrea. I tell the group that George Clooney is among celebs who've dined here; sadly, he's not in sight tonight.

Later, we sit under crimson Venetian glass chandeliers in Encore's casino and play blackjack with fervor. Barry, Patrick and I are more experienced, but Paula is on a roll and delightedly exits with a fistful of dollars.

We return to the MGM to enter cowboy heaven. National Finals Rodeo is in town, and a sponsor is throwing a party open to all. We grab plastic cups of Crown Royal whiskey and cheap wine and attempt to two-step alongside polite, square-jawed gents in boots and cowboy hats. One 6-footer pulls up his "Don't Mess With Texas" T-shirt to display a huge tattoo of John Wayne on his belly.

Nope, it isn't city-slick, but we're on our last night in Vegas, baby, having an after-hours high time singing along to "Friends in Low Places." We dance till 2, guaranteeing bleary eyes at the airport.

Cut to a month ago, when Paula and Patrick were over for dinner, and I was telling them Vegas had a record year (41.1 million visitors in 2014), new upscale hotels (the Cromwell, Delano, SLS Las Vegas), new shopping ops at the Linq open-air mall and a terrific restaurant from star chef Giada De Laurentiis.

"So," said Patrick, pulling out his iPhone calendar. "When are we going back?"

IF YOU GO

Where to stay

Encore Las Vegas

3131 S. Las Vegas Blvd.

877-321-9966

wynnlasvegas.com/encore

The newer sister property to elegant Wynn Las Vegas takes you far from the carousing crowds from \$199. Upgrade to a 745-square-foot Tower Suite in the gleaming bronze-colored high-rise, and get a private check-in area, plus a lounge serving complimentary breakfast from \$299. As with most Vegas resorts, joining the players club wins lower rates.

Bellagio Hotel & Casino

3600 S. Las Vegas Blvd.

888-987-6667

www.bellagio.com

Famed for fountains that sway and spurt to music, rooms and suites at Bellagio recently have been renovated. If you don't splash out for digs overlooking the waterworks, you can see them in real time on in-room TVs. From \$199.

MGM Grand Hotel & Casino

3799 S. Las Vegas Blvd.

877-880-0880

mgmgrand.com

This 5,044-room resort offers options for luxury lovers, including Vegas's Michelin-worthy, ultra-pricey Joël Robuchon French restaurant and trendy Hakkasan nightclub. Recently renovated Grand Kings give good value. Done in a sleek, boutique-hotel style, they boast pillowtop mattresses and start at \$75 plus tax. Like most every Vegas lodging, MGM Grand displays online month-by-month rate calendars showing the cheapest nights.

Mandarin Oriental Las Vegas

3752 S. Las Vegas Blvd.

702-590-8888

www.mandarinoriental.com/LasVegas

The discerning bed down in what is touted as “discreet luxury and Oriental harmony” at a tranquil non-gaming haven. Even standard rooms, starting at \$229 plus tax in slow periods, are divine. So is the spa, bar with Strip view and the popular afternoon tea service.

The Cromwell Las Vegas

3595 S. Las Vegas Blvd.

702-777-3777

www.caesars.com/cromwell

Opened in 2014, the intimate Cromwell has 188 rooms with hardwood floors and vintage-stylish furnishings. Guests have easy access to its hot nightclub, Drai’s, and the High Roller observation wheel. Rates start at \$145 plus tax.

Where to eat

Andrea’s at Encore

3121 S. Las Vegas Blvd.

702-770-5340

wynnlasvegas.com/andreas

Designed with a feminine sensibility with creamy decor as homage to resort owner Steve Wynn’s second wife (a Warholesque image of her eyes hangs over the bar). The menu is heavy on light sushi, but there’s Wagyu beef for hearty appetites. Small plates start at \$8; entrees at \$28.

Nobu Las Vegas at Caesars Palace

3570 S. Las Vegas Blvd.

702-785-6674

noburestaurants.com/las-vegas-caesars-palace/experience

Sip rare sake and savor sushi, sashimi and other Japanese/South American fusion dishes under whimsical light fixtures inspired by Japanese tea whisks. It's celeb-chef Nobu Matsuhisa's biggest outpost. The small plates, meant to be shared, start at \$7, but many are \$25 and up.

Picasso at Bellagio

3600 S. Las Vegas Blvd.

702-693-8865

www.bellagio.com/picasso

Surrounded by original Picasso masterpieces, guests fork up foie gras, veal chops and warm chocolate fondant with banana caramel ice cream. Diners on its terrace overlook the Bellagio fountains. Tasting menus only, starting at \$75 a person pre-theater; \$115 afterward.

What to do

The Shops at Crystals

3720 S. Las Vegas Blvd.

702-590-9299

theshopsatcrystals.com

The fashionista fantasy tempts with more than 40 high-end boutiques, from Balenciaga to Van Cleef & Arpels, The contemporary-art-museum-like surroundings are worth a stroll, even if you don't possess an American Express Platinum card.

Exotics Racing

6925 Speedway Blvd.

702-405-7223

exoticsracing.com

Rev a Ferrari or Lamborghini on a track, from \$299 for instruction and five laps. Porsche Caymans start at \$199.

Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area

3205 Nevada Route 159

702-515-5350

<http://on.doi.gov/18ActfX>

Fewer than 20 miles from the Strip, sienna-colored sandstone arches and other rock formations offer a rugged escape. Drive or bike a 13-mile scenic loop, hike more than 30 miles of trails. Hike This!

(www.hikethislasvegas.com) is a recommended outfitter. Tours also are listed at viator.com.

Vegas Uncork'd by Bon Appétit

At resorts all over town

vegasuncorked.com

Taste fare from Gordon Ramsay, Michael Mina, Emeril Lagasse, Jean-Georges Vongerichten, Guy Savoy and more. April 23-26.

Information

lasvegas.com

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