

An Insider's Guide to Las Vegas

Not a high roller? Want to get off The Strip? GCI's Vegas beat writer, Helen M. Stone, provides the end-all, be-all of Sin City's must-see sites and experiences. By Helen M. Stone

Vegas, baby! Well, first off, calling it "Vegas" is a sure sign that you are a tourist. Locals use the full name. And please don't say "Nev-AH-da" — that's a major cringe factor. It's "Nev-AD-a," thank you.

The Las Vegas strip is home to an incredible array of restaurants, shows and gaming. Wandering the Strip can be a great way to spend a few hours or a few days. People-watching is cheap and fun entertainment. Dining options range from a two-buck hot dog at Slots Of Fun to a meal that can top \$200 a person at some of the "celebrity chef" establishments.

For dining options that the locals love, consider moving off the Strip for better value

and a great selection. There are options that cater to every budget and taste.

Mexican food is a sure bet throughout the Southwest, and one of the best in town is Lindo Michoacan (www.lindomichoacan.com). They make their own tortillas moments before you get them, and the chips are as fresh as can be. *Mucho* spicy salsa, carnitas to die for and margaritas that will make you shout "Ole!" are all reasonably priced and artfully prepared.

In the mood for Asian? Lotus of Siam (www.saipinchutima.com) is considered by some to be the best Thai restaurant in the country. Don't let its somewhat seedy surroundings fool you. Ask for the Northern Thai menu, but don't miss the number 14 appe-

tizer, *Nam Kao Tod*, a totally addictive crispy rice with sausage, herbs, peanuts and lime. They do amazing things with fish and seafood and the wine pairings are stellar.

Speaking of seafood, KJ's Kitchen (www.yelp.com/biz/kj-kitchen-las-vegas) is one of the most authentic Chinese restaurants in Las Vegas and the fish couldn't be fresher (some are swimming in tanks awaiting your order!). Did you know that Southern Nevada has a Chinatown? It's all along Spring Mountain Road, just minutes west of the Strip. This is a spotlessly clean, white tablecloth (but not too expensive) place where non-Asians are a minority. But don't worry, the menus have English

translations and the servers are friendly.

With its reputed Mafia roots, you'd figure that Las Vegas would offer "killer" Italian food. Well, Casa di Amore (www.casadiamore.com) fits the bill. It's a step back in time, with a charming brick building, cushy booths and even complimentary limo rides from your hotel. And the food... *magnifico!*

Okay, so you want an All-American bargain. Check out Ellis Island Casino and Brewery (www.ellislandcasino.com) for amazing



deals on steak, prime rib and bar-becue. It's nothing fancy, but how about a thick slab of succulent, perfectly roasted prime rib and a beer for less than \$15?

No visit to Las Vegas is complete without taking in a show or two. The city has become a home away from home for Cirque de Soleil, and there are two outstanding choices. "Love" is a must for music lovers. The soundtrack is pure Beatles, with built-in speakers surrounding you in your seat while the incredible gymnasts and athletes defy gravity and take you on a journey through the Fab Four's genius you'll never forget.

As a total contrast, "Ka" offers epic battles and death-defying visual effects that will leave you clutching your armrests.

One of our own

A GCSAA member for more than 18 years, PJ McGuire is a past president of the Southern Nevada GCSA chapter and has been honored for his work as a founder and president of the Nevada Golf Industry Alliance. But PJ has a second calling – as a stand-up comic.

PJ's new career has taken off like gangbusters – he's worked with the likes of Andrew Dice Clay in dozens of venues in Las Vegas and beyond. And now GCSAA show attendees have a rare chance to see a special show tailored just for golf. PJ will be playing at Alexis Park Resort on February 28-March 2 for four GCSAA special shows at 9 p.m. Visit www.pjthecomix.com for details. Don't miss it!



PJ McGuire (left) is recognized for his work.

The stage is as dazzling as the performers, lifting and tilting and elevating.

For a total Tinsel Town treat, "Jubilee" has thrilled audiences for more than three decades and is the over-the-top, glitzy showgirl spectacular that you would associate with Old Vegas. This is the real thing, with gorgeous showgirls sporting huge headdresses and skimpy sequin costumes (the late show is topless). The revue-style show offers everything from Samson and Delilah to the sinking of the Titanic.

Need a break and want to let off a little steam? How about 10,000 square feet of vintage pinball machines? The Pinball Hall of Fame (www.pinballmuseum.org) is a wonderland of all the games you remember and some that you have never seen. Admission is free and the authentic, restored pinball machines range from a quarter to 75 cents.

NATURAL AND OTHER WONDERS.

Las Vegas may be famous for the Strip, but it is also central to a number of amazing recreational opportunities. You will need to rent a car, but most of these can be done in an afternoon.

First of all, if you have never seen Hoover Dam, this is a must. This amazing feat of engineering is truly one of the world's wonders (www.usbr.gov/lc/hooverdam). You can also walk across the newly constructed Pat Tillman Memorial Bridge, which is now the road to Arizona. The bridge is almost as dazzling as the dam itself and make this a destination you will kick yourself for missing.

The Springs Preserve is an even shorter drive from the convention area (or long cab ride) and offers a wealth of activities. The 180-acre site includes the Nevada State Museum, as well as miles of trails through the gar-



When the show is slow, get out of the city and visit the desert gardens of the 180-acre Springs Preserve.

dens. You can even rent a bicycle on weekends and take a spin on 2.2 mile loop trail. The Springs Preserve is a true getaway in the heart of town.

You can go a bit further and in about 30 minutes be out in one of the most spectacular desert parks in the Southwest. Red Rock Canyon Natural Conservation Area (www.redrockcanyonlv.org) has a 13-mile scenic loop drive that can give you a compressed geological extravaganza. But be sure to leave yourself an hour or so to take one of the many day hikes that are available. With any luck, the wildflowers will be popping.

If you have a bit more time, Mt. Charleston offers piney wood forests and if the weather holds up, you might be able to hit the slopes (www.skilasvegas.com). But even if there isn't any snow, Mt. Charleston offers miles of hiking trails to fit any timetable, plus a couple of decent restaurants/lounges to refuel after your mountain adventure. There is

even lodging if you want to make a weekend out of it.

Finally, a great desert day trip might be the best way to put the icing on your Las Vegas cake. Start in Boulder City and fuel up with a from-scratch breakfast at the Southwest Diner (www.southwestdinerv.com). Boulder City is a charming step back into history, and worth a visit on its own. You can also stop at one of the town's grocery stores or restaurants to pick up a picnic lunch, snacks and beverages for your road trip.

If you haven't seen the Hoover Dam, you need to start your desert adventure there. Then head to Lakeshore Road (National Park fee or pass required) and enjoy the views of Lake Mead. This will take you to Northshore Road, which leads you through incredible rock formations. You can stop at Redstone to get a close-up look.

Make sure to stop at Rogers Springs, where the Conservation

Corps built a catchment basin for the spring. A bit further on is Blue Point Spring, where you can spot relict (nearly extinct) leopard frogs frolicking in the reeds if you're lucky.

Keep going until the cutoff to Valley of Fire. This Nevada state park also requires a small entry fee, but the dazzling rock formations are well worth the price of admission. Be sure to stop at "The Cabins" for a great example of the Conservation Corps work —

the small abodes are hewn from the brilliant red rocks and boast incredible views.

Stop at the visitor center to learn about the geology, biology and history of the park, along with ideas on how to spend the remainder of your time. If you've made an early start, continue down the same road and take advantage of various hiking opportunities. You can marvel at an old movie set, experience an Indian fugitive's hideout or



The red rock formations of the Valley of Fire is an often-missed view for city-bound tourists.

squeeze through a slot canyon.

Down the road from the visitor's center, you can climb a ladder to see genuine Indian petroglyphs or take a couple short loop drives to view more amazing rock formations. By now, your day will be ending and you can take a quick drive to the freeway and be back in the city in about 45 minutes. A long day, yes, but one that will let you see a side of Nevada that most tourists miss.

So this trip, treat yourself to a few adventures beyond the Strip. Southern Nevada offers adventures way beyond the neon. **GCI**

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First Friday

First Friday has been a Las Vegas institution for the past eight years, and was recently kicked up a notch by new owners (www.firstfridaylasvegas.com). This art-centered, free event in rejuvenated downtown Las Vegas features great music, cool cocktails and the best in people-watching. Restaurants offer special deals, and newly added food trucks also fuel the fun. While you're there, check out the domed light show on Fremont Street and make an evening of it.

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