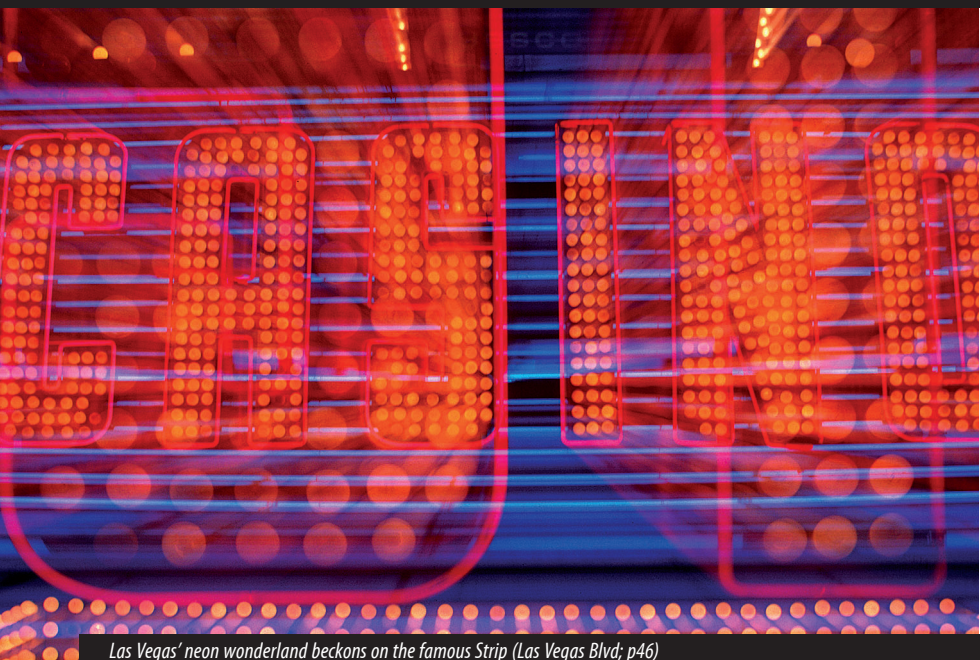


INTRODUCING LAS VEGAS



Las Vegas' neon wonderland beckons on the famous Strip (Las Vegas Blvd; p46)

A Bible-toting Elvis kisses a giddy couple that just pledged eternity in the Chapel of Love. A blue-haired granny faces a slot machine while chain-smoking and slugging gin-and-tonics. Sleep? Fuhgeddaboutit.

Like an ambitious starlet vying for your affections, fabulous Las Vegas is a wild ride – an outrageous fantasy that never lets you down. According to Hollywood legend, some ramshackle gambling houses, tumbleweeds and cacti were all there was the day mobster Bugsy Siegel drove into the Mojave Desert and decided to raise a glamorous, tropical-themed casino under the searing sun. Nobody thought anyone would ever come here. Everybody couldn't have been more wrong.

Vegas is the ultimate escape. Time is irrelevant here, especially after a few frenzied and intoxicating sleepless nights on the Strip. There are no clocks inside casinos, just never-ending buffets, ever-flowing drinks and adrenaline-fueled gaming tables. Almost any desire can be gratified instantly, since the USA's fastest-growing metropolis and its luxe megaresorts stand ready to cater to your every whim 24/7. Emptying your wallet never felt so damn good.

Often regarded as America's dirty little secret, Sin City is a bastion of naughty, hangover-inducing weekends for people from all walks of life. You can reinvent yourself a hundred times over or hide out with your lover in a hotel room for days. It doesn't even matter if you play the penny slots or drop a bankroll each and every night – you're guaranteed to leave town convinced you've just had the time of your life.

LAS VEGAS LIFE

Las Vegas demands a suspension of disbelief, so don't take it too seriously. In Sin City, fate is decided by the spin of a roulette wheel. It's a place where the poor feel rich and the rich lose thousands. In this high-octane desert oasis, all that glitters really isn't gold. Change here is as sudden and unpredictable as the secret implosion of a vintage casino hotel after midnight. Las Vegas wasn't built to last, after all. Just do what the locals do. Admit the city has its flaws – it's far from 'civilization,' it can be seedy, and it's an unforgiving place when you're down and out – but learn to love it anyway.

The most pressing problem facing Las Vegas today is its unsustainable growth. The city already boasts all but a few of the world's 20 biggest hotels and pulls in more than 39 million visitors each year, making it even more popular than the holy city of Mecca. Urban sprawl shows no signs of slowing down, and more often than

not, the metro area resembles one big strip mall. Traffic jams are common day and night, and air pollution sometimes is so thick that the mountains surrounding this desert basin become invisible. Most alarmingly, the entire Las Vegas Valley is projected to run out of water within the next 15 years. Unless something is done fast about smart urban planning, the city may experience an environmental crisis that would prove very tough to recover from.

'In this high-octane desert oasis, all that glitters really isn't gold. Change here is as sudden and unpredictable as the secret implosion of a vintage casino hotel after midnight. Las Vegas wasn't built to last, after all.'



Taking in the view on the observation deck of Stratosphere Tower (p82), the USA's highest structure west of the Mississippi

GETTING STARTED

While a spontaneous drive-through wedding at 3am with Elvis reading your vows may tempt, most trips to Las Vegas require more advance planning. Book hotel rooms as far in advance as possible (for bargain-hunting tips and last-minute deals, see p198), advisably at the same time you buy plane tickets. If you're not driving your own car to Las Vegas, but you still want to explore outside the city limits, reserve a rental car too.

When all that hard work is done, start playing with ideas of how you'd like to kiss the rest of your vacation budget goodbye. Do you crave a margarita body scrub at an over-the-top spa, or to feast at a top chef's table in a sizzling-hot restaurant? Would you like to be in the crowd for a Cirque du Soleil show, a killer band's gig, or a championship boxing match? If the answer to any of these questions is yes, make reservations and buy tickets ASAP.

If you're not flush with cash after booking big-ticket items, don't worry: kitschy old-school Vegas still has loads of free diversions, cheapo drinks, limitless buffets and penny slot machines. The Strip is a no-admission-charged spectacular that's open 24/7/365, no reservations required. Ultimately, don't crowd your vacation schedule too much. Allow time for hedonism, whether that means partying at an after-hours club, lazing by the resort pool, or hunkering down at the poker tables.

WHEN TO GO

For Las Vegas, the question really is when *not* to go? Most production shows are 'dark' (shut down) the week before Christmas and many shops close on Christmas Day. Otherwise, the city slows down only during the mildly chilly winter doldrums (late November through January) and dog days of summer (June, July and August), which is also sexy pool-party season. For more climate info, see p239.

You'll want to avoid Sin City during a big convention. The colossal crowds are off-putting, not to mention costly. Hotels jack up room rates, and dinner reservations and show tickets become impossible to get. Major sports events, such as championship boxing and Nascar races, also pack the city to a full house. The exact dates when annual conventions and special events occur may shift from year to year. The [Las Vegas Convention & Visitors Authority \(LVCVA; p246\)](#) keeps a current calendar.

FESTIVALS

Las Vegas is a nonstop party. Holidays (p241) are taken to the max, with New Year's Eve on the Strip seeing the biggest crush of humanity this side of Times Square. For old-school Nevada cowboy spirit, attend the National Finals Rodeo in December. If mod Vegas is your style, the CineVegas film festival and the World Series of Poker finals held dur-

ing summer attract Hollywood celebs, paparazzi and obscure unknowns hoping to be catapulted to stardom. The break-out Vegoose indie music and arts festival over Halloween weekend is Nevada's version of SoCal's famous Coachella.

Free alternative tabloids [Las Vegas Weekly](#) (www.lasvegasweekly.com) and [Las Vegas CityLife](#) (www.lasvegascitylife.com) have up-to-the-minute information on special events. So does the [Las Vegas Review-Journal](#) (www.lvrj.com) newspaper – look for Friday's Neon entertainment guide.

January & February

CHINESE NEW YEAR

☎ 702-221-8448; www.lvchinatown.com

Celebrate the Chinese lunar new year, which falls between late January and mid-February, with day-long festivities at [Chinatown Plaza](#) (Map p98), showcasing entertainers from around Asia and the Pacific Rim: Chinese acrobats, lion dancers, Japanese *taiko* drummers, folk musicians, martial arts demonstrations and more.

VEGAS HIGH ROLLERS

☎ 702-260-7406; www.lvscooterally.com

Retro bowling and pinball nights, poker tournaments, live ska bands and dances, and fab happy hours jazz up this scooter rally, with group rides around town and out to scenic [Red Rock Canyon](#) (p221).

March

NASCAR WEEKEND

☎ 702-644-4444, 800-644-4444; www.nascar.com
Rapid Nascar fans descend upon the 1.5-mile oval super-speedway at the [Las Vegas Motor Speedway \(p192\)](#), aka the Diamond in the Desert, for the Sam's Town 300 (Busch Series) and the UAW-DaimlerChrysler 400 (Nextel Cup Series) in early to mid-March.

ST PATRICK'S DAY

Downtown Henderson hosts a big parade, replete with floats and Celtic music, every March 17. Look for the patriotic Irish tint of the beer flowing from casino hotels facing Fremont St in downtown Vegas, which hosts its own rowdy street party. Back on the Strip, New York–New York's [Nine Fine Irishmen \(p156\)](#) stages a Celtic Féis festival with a parade under a miniature Brooklyn Bridge.

April

CLARK COUNTY FAIR & RODEO

☎ 888-876-3247; www.ccfair.com
In Logandale not far from [Valley of Fire State Park \(p225\)](#), this old-fashioned county fair in mid-April boasts four days of pro rodeo events, 4-H farm exhibits and demonstrations, barbecues, carnival rides and games.

UNLVINO

☎ 702-876-4500; www.unlvino.com
For more than three decades, this annual wine-tasting extravaganza in mid-April has brought together oenophiles and more than 350 winemakers and international importers. Proceeds, including from an art-and-wine auction, benefit the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV).

VIVA LAS VEGAS

☎ 562-496-4287; www.vivalasvegas.net
The ultimate rockabilly weekend happens downtown in mid-April, complete with a tiki pool party, rockin' bands, jive-dancing classes, a va-va-voom burlesque competition and souped-up classic car show. Grease back your hair, fellas, and bring your best pinup dresses, gals (if you don't have one, stop by [Bettie Page](#) inside the [Miracle Mile Shops, p116](#)). Colorful tattoos are optional, but recommended.

May

LEI DAY

☎ 702-845-9626; www.alohavalley.com
For the Hawaiian *ohana* (extended family) of island expats residing in the valley, this Polynesian and Pacific Rim block party comes alive with parades, food vendor stalls and live music and dance shows, everything from Polynesian hula to Hawaiian (Hawaiian-style reggae). It's held at the [California \(p85\)](#) casino hotel on the weekend closest to May 1.

CINCO DE MAYO

☎ 702-633-1000; www.cityofnorthlasvegas.com
On May 5, Mexico's victory over French forces in 1862 at the Battle of Puebla is still a great excuse for a party. Celebrations around town feature Latin American entertainers, including mariachi bands, *ballet folklorico* (folk dances) and, if you're lucky, *lucha libre* (Mexican stunt wrestling). In North Las Vegas, the [Taste & Tunes Festival](#) shows off Latino music, food, dance and arts and crafts in its popular Mexican village.

HELLDORADO DAYS

www.elkshelldoradodays.com
Dating back to the 1930s, this historic four-day hoedown features rodeo events, barbecues, country fiddlers and a re-creation of an Old West frontier town near downtown's [Fremont Street Experience \(p87\)](#).

June & July

WORLD SERIES OF POKER

☎ 800-342-7724; www.worldseriesofpoker.com
High-stakes gamblers, casino employees and celebrities face off in more than 40 tournaments running from early June through mid-July. The eight-day Texas hold'em main event, usually held at the [Rio \(p99\)](#) casino, earns the winner a cool \$8 million – and an even cooler championship bracelet; buy-ins cost \$10,000. Free public viewing.

CINEVEGAS

☎ 702-992-7979, 888-883-4278; www.cinevegas.com
This prestigious nine-day film festival in mid-June showcases indie flicks, first-time directors and major Hollywood names like Nicolas Cage and Dennis Hopper, who

chairs its creative board. The action revolves around the Palms' **Brenden Theatres & IMAX** (p181).

REGGAE IN THE DESERT

☎ 702-455-8200; www.reggaeinthedesert.com
This chilled-out festival brings together musicians, arts vendors and roots-reggae, ska and Jamaican dance hall fans for a starry night of Caribbean celebrations at the **Clark County Amphitheater** (Map pp84–5) in mid-June.

FOURTH OF JULY

On this all-American holiday catch fireworks at Summerlin's outdoor Star Spangled Spectacular, featuring the **Las Vegas Philharmonic** (p181), after high-velocity car races at the **Las Vegas Motor Speedway** (Map pp50–1) and at the jolly old-fashioned Damboree in **Boulder City** (p224).

August

DEF CON

www.defcon.org
The nation's largest conclave of underground computer hackers takes place over a long, heavily caffeinated weekend in mid-August, with cutting-edge techie tools, guest speakers, book signings, the Church of WiFi and a dunk tank.

OFFICIAL STAR TREK CONVENTION

☎ 818-409-0960; www.creationent.com
For wannabe Klingons, Starfleet academy cadets-in-training and alien fetishists hailing from various home worlds, this sci-fi con in mid-August is a glorious immersion in all things Trek. **Quark's Bar** (p162) is the social hot spot, just outside **Star Trek: The Experience** (p93).

September

AVP LAS VEGAS GODS & GODDESSES OF THE BEACH

☎ 310-426-8000; www.avp.com
A three-day event on the pro beach volleyball tour circuit, featuring two-person male and female teams competing round-robin style on tons of sand outside **Caesars Palace** (p56) in early September.

LAS VEGAS RESTAURANT WEEK

☎ 702-644-3663; www.threesquare.org
In early to mid-September, top-shelf restaurants and superstar chefs design

showy three-course meals at steeply discounted prices to benefit a nonprofit stop-hunger organization.

LAS VEGAS BIKEFEST

☎ 702-450-7662; www.lasvegaskifest.com
The city's largest bike rally brings hogs and heifers, motorcycle-riding poker players, Harley Davidson fans and Artistry in Iron competitions between master bike builders roaring into town in late September. Barbecues, bikinis and arm wrestling are part of the debauchery.

October

HALLOWEEN

Haunted houses and vampire castles, masquerade and fetish fantasy balls, ghoulish outdoor bashes and fantastic freak fests make spending October 31 in Las Vegas a cool idea, especially given the costume-rental options (Elvis in a white jumpsuit, anyone?).

VEGOOSE

☎ 800-594-8499; www.vegoose.com
Over Halloween weekend, this zany indie music and arts festival is on the national radar for its live performances by alt-rock bands, interactive performance art and costumed partying galore.

November

VEGAS VALLEY BOOK FESTIVAL

☎ 702-229-5431; www.vegasvalleybookfest.org
Disproving the popular misconception that Las Vegas has no culture, this two-day downtown event in early November hosts a literary basketful of readings, spoken-word performances, book signings, writing workshops and more stuff for little bookworms.

AVIATION NATION

☎ 702-652-2750; www.aviationnation.org
Over a weekend in mid-November, the nation's most famous military and civilian air show attracts more than 100,000 people to **Nellis Air Force Base** (Map pp50–1). Keep your eyes peeled for the USAF Thunderbirds, an aerial demonstration team that often zooms in during the show.

December

WRANGLER NATIONAL FINALS RODEO

📞 702-739-3267, 866-388-3267; www.nfrexperience.com

This hugely popular 10-day event in early to mid-December, held at the [Thomas & Mack Center](#) (Map p94), features top pro rodeo performers competing in adrenaline-driven events, such as steer wrestling and bull riding. Getting tickets is tough (see p194). Las Vegas gets taken over by real cowboys during this time. Highlights among all the hoopla are the Downtown Hoedown, a free honky-tonk party downtown on Fremont St, and the Cowboy Christmas gift show at the [Las Vegas Convention Center](#) (Map p94).

PIONEER LAS VEGAS BOWL

📞 702-732-3912; www.lvbowl.com

This college football match kicks off at [Sam Boyd Stadium](#) (Map pp50–1) in late December, where ready-to-rumble teams from the Mountain West and Pac-10 Conferences play for sold-out crowds.

NEW YEAR'S EVE

The Strip becomes a huge party scene, as thousands turn out to hear live bands, watch fireworks and fights break out, and see people faint. Did we also mention 'drink like fish'? Uh-huh, they do that too, all along Las Vegas Blvd and downtown at the [Fremont Street Experience](#) (p87).

COSTS & MONEY

Sin City is so seductive when it comes to extravagance. Once you've been in town for a while, the actual value of money will seem hazy to your bedazzled brain, which has been hypnotized by neon lights and go-go dancers. It's easy to get suckered into spending more money than you ever thought possible here. When you can buy a juicy steak for \$5, drop a nickel in a slot machine and win over \$100, and still fail to find a hotel room for under \$200 on a weekend night, it's hard to judge in advance just how much your trip will cost.

A typical visitor spends about \$250 per day in Las Vegas, but there are many ways to save money. First, set a strict gambling budget and stick to it, whether that means \$20 per day on video poker or a \$100 buy-in for a poker tournament. A month or more before arriving

HOW MUCH?

Valet parking: Free (but tip \$2 to \$5)
 Local in-room phone call: \$1.25
 Small bottle of water: \$2.50
 US gallon of gas (liter of petrol): \$3.15 (83¢)
 Souvenir Las Vegas T-shirt: \$5
 Ultra lounge cocktail: \$12
 Airport taxi ride to the Strip: \$15
 Weekend nightclub cover charge: \$30
 High-end hotel dinner buffet: \$40
 Cirque du Soleil ticket: \$60 to \$150

in Las Vegas, scout out the best hotel deals online; don't expect to pay less than \$120 per night for a basic hotel room on weekends. You don't need to rent a car, which costs at least \$25 per day, except for jaunts outside the city. A combination of bus, monorail and taxi rides are often cheaper and less of a hassle, not to mention safer if you'll be drinking.

Pick up everyday snacks and essentials at pharmacies (p243) rather than at hotel shops. When you're hungry, skip room service and head down to the hotel's 24-hour coffee shop instead. To get freebies and discount coupons for casino hotels, restaurants, shows and attractions, see p240. If you're down to your last dime, don't fret: there's plenty of free entertainment on the Strip and downtown (see It's Free, p62).

For tipping practices, see p243.

INTERNET RESOURCES

For the lowdown about what's happening on the Strip and around downtown, die-hard Vegas visitors and newbies alike can check out the following websites:

www.bigempire.com/vegas The Big Empire guide to Las Vegas on 25¢ a Day is a low rollers' guide to riding the gravy train all around town.

www.cheapovegas.com Cheeky, tell-all reviews of casino-hotel resorts on the 'Sensational Strip' and in 'Dingy Old Downtown,' plus comparison charts (eg best video poker, swankiest hotels).

www.jetcafe.org/npc/gambling/casino_death_watch.html Which historic casino hotel will be imploded next? Which ones are merely at death's door? Find out here.

www.lasvegasadvisor.com Daily news, money-saving advice columns and user reviews of hotels, restaurants, attractions, entertainment and nightlife.

ADVANCE PLANNING

A month before you go Book flights (p234), accommodations (p196) and a rental car (p237), if you'll be taking any trips out of town (p214).

Three weeks before you go Start surfing recommended websites (p15) to see what will be happening while you're in town. Score tickets for any production shows (p170), mega-concerts or headline events that catch your eye. Book a table at a hot chef's restaurant (p126) or make a luxe spa appointment (p184).

One week before you go Double-check your hotel's website to see if room rates have dropped, and if so, call the hotel to request that your reservation rates be lowered – you could save yourself hundreds of dollars this way. Dabble in local newspapers and magazines (p244) for late-breaking news about restaurants, nightlife and entertainment.

The day before you go Reconfirm your flight, hotel and car-rental reservations, then print out copies of everything. Get loads of extra sleep – once you arrive in Sin City, you'll need it!

www.lasvegaslogue.com Listings of entertainment, shows and events updated daily, plus celebrity gossip and news about nightclub, bar and restaurant openings.

www.lasvegasweekly.com Plug into the Vegas scene, including top picks for art, live music and club hopping, with an entertainment and events calendar, courtesy of the free alternative *Las Vegas Weekly*.

www.lvrj.com The online version of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* newspaper.

www.rawvegas.tv A rule-breaking online TV channel with 24-hour programming, from news shorts to reality vlogs (video blogs).

www.vegas.com All-in tourist site offers comprehensive rundowns of everything from casino hotels to golf courses to wedding chapels. Beware of advertorial content.

www.visitlasvegas.com For basic travel tips and cool photos, visit the bias-free (well, except for the fact that it's pro-Vegas) website of the LVCVA tourism office (p246).

SUSTAINABLE LAS VEGAS

Think about it: Las Vegas is an artificial playground built in the middle of the desert. Is it any surprise that the valley is expected to completely drain its water supply within the next 20 years or so? Apart from residential homes,

casino hotels and golf courses are among the biggest consumers of water, so do what you can to conserve it. See p31 for more background on the city's environmental issues.

Although you probably can't avoid flying or driving your own car to Las Vegas (the Megabus is a cheap alternative for LA residents, see p235), there are steps you can take to make your trip more carbon-neutral. Use public transportation to get around the city. Although more expensive than buses, the monorail (p237) is an electric-powered, zero-emissions local transportation option that reduces air pollution. Don't rent a car unless you're heading on a day trip out of town, for example, to the Grand Canyon. For carbon offset schemes, see Climate Change and Travel (p234).

At your hotel, reuse towels by hanging them back on the rack and bring your own toiletries. To prevent unnecessary housekeeping (do you really need your sheets changed twice daily?), hang the 'do not disturb' sign on the door while you're out. It's almost impossible to recycle plastic bottles in Las Vegas, so tote around a refillable water bottle instead. When dining out, order sustainable seafood (chef Rick Moonen is a big advocate, see p137) and dishes that feature seasonally available ingredients.