

Beyond Downtown and the Strip

Contributed by Administrator
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Las Vegas may look enormous on the map, but as far as tourists are concerned the only significant neighborhoods are the Strip and downtown. Nowhere else even deserves to be called a "neighborhood," in the sense of having a distinctive identity, a variety of attractions, and being explorable on foot. If you think the individual blocks along the Strip are large, wait until you drive into the rest of the city. Soon the streets start to be spaced half a mile or more apart, and often there really is nothing between one and the next. As it has grown, the city has repeatedly vaulted across swaths of empty space, and sizeable portions of the grid remain completely undeveloped.

Certain districts of Las Vegas are known for their shopping - Maryland Parkway close to the University, for example - and there's the odd concentration of restaurants, such as on Paradise Road south of Twain. However, no area of the city ranks as a destination in its own right, nor is likely to tempt you out of your car should you happen to pass through. Instead, your only ports of call away from downtown and the Strip are likely to be specific individual attractions, either the scattered casinos that cater primarily to local residents or the handful of museums. And if you're not driving, none of the latter, with the possible exception of the Liberace Museum, merits an excursion on public transport.

Note that Las Vegas has fewer public parks than any major city in the US. If you want to get out into the open air, your best bet is to head for nearby Red Rock Canyon.

ELVIS-A-RAMA

3401 Industrial Rd tel 309-7200, . Daily 10am-7pm; \$15.

Located between the Fashion Show Mall and the I-15 interstate, but a little too far from the Strip for walking to be advisable (free shuttle buses operate on demand), the Elvis-A-Rama museum contains just enough Presley memorabilia to satisfy avid fans of the King. Personal possessions like his 1955 concert limo (bought with his \$5000 bonus for signing with RCA, and now worth an estimated \$340,000) are complemented by stage costumes, movie posters, and mass-produced souvenirs such as lipsticks and keyrings, billfolds and bubble-gum cards. A gift store sells irresistible examples of contemporary Elvis tat.

While it can't match the scale, sheer obsessiveness, or intimate personal connection, of the Liberace Museum, Elvis-A-Rama does at least justify its stiff price tag by throwing in hourly live impersonator shows on its small stage, featuring the sneering teenage Justin Shandor. The owner also promotes Elvis tribute performers at the New Frontier casino; call 794-8241, or access the website, for details.

LAS VEGAS NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM

900 Las Vegas Blvd N tel 384-3466. Daily 9am-4pm; adults \$5.40, ages 4-12 \$3.50.

A mile or so north of downtown, a block beyond the Children's Museum, the Las Vegas Natural History Museum has at least tried to move beyond its traditional dioramas of stuffed animals. Thus the Marine Life Room features a smallish tank of live sharks alongside its mounted specimens, while the Prehistoric Room now offers five large animatronic monsters, including a roaring Tyrannosaurus Rex. Even the old-fashioned exhibits in the International Wildlife Room are a bit less static than you might expect; note the zebra frantically trying to fend off two lions.

LIBERACE MUSEUM

1775 E Tropicana Ave tel 798-5595, . Mon-Sat 10am-5pm, Sun 1-5pm; minimum adult donation \$6.95, under-12s free.

The finest of Las Vegas's handful of museums is, not surprisingly, the one most in keeping with the city's sheer exhibitionism. The Liberace Museum, two miles east of the Strip, is a fabulous romp through the life and times of the former Walter Liberace (1919-87), who changed his name to a single word on the advice of fellow-Polish musical maestro Paderewski.

Liberace originally wanted to have his museum in his hometown of Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, but couldn't buy the house he had in mind, and plumped for scattering it across three separate buildings in a small Las Vegas mall instead. A framed contract from 1940 shows how he started out, playing five hours a night, six nights a week for \$45 in Milwaukee's Plankinton Red Room. Yellowing newspaper cuttings and family photographs trace his subsequent progress from sensitive youth to a caped Dracula, concealed beneath layers of pancake makeup. Alongside pictures of Liberace with Elvis at the New Frontier in 1957 and of showbiz pals ranging from Cary Grant to Bill Cosby, hang a fine collection of images of the pope, the queen, and Charles and Diana not with Liberace. You can also enjoy film of Liberace on stage with Debbie Reynolds, performing a frighteningly soulless rendition of "Your Love Is Taking Me Higher," and admire the conviction with which he advertised Blatz Beer in 1951.

With success came scandal - he was ruthlessly hounded by the press - but also phenomenal wealth. His collection of pianos ranges from an instrument dating from 1788, via one thought to have been played by Chopin for Liszt, to a giraffe-shaped piano with an upright harp-like frame, and there's also a fine array of cars, including a white hounds'-tooth London cab driven by an oversized white teddy bear. Home furnishings on display include a horrendously vulgar desk that belonged to the last czar of Russia, and Liberace's personal bedroom suite, equipped with two single beds.

If Liberace is remembered for just one thing, however, it wouldn't be his music - which, piped into the scented restrooms, has sadly not improved with age - but his costumes. He called them "a very expensive joke"; confronted by rhinestone-studded stage furs valued at \$500,000, \$600,000, and even \$750,000, it's hard to disagree. The pièce de resistance is the red, white, and blue hot pants set he wore for the Bicentennial in 1976. Said to have cost a million dollars, it looks worth ten bucks at the most

LIED DISCOVERY CHILDREN'S MUSEUM

833 Las Vegas Blvd N tel 384-3445. Daily except Mon 10am-5pm; adults \$5, ages 12-17 \$4, ages 3-11 \$3.

The Lied Discovery Children's Museum , a bit less than a mile north of downtown on a very pedestrian-unfriendly stretch of Las Vegas Boulevard, is a rather poor specimen of the modern breed of hands-on children's museums. Occupying a few rooms of a city library building, it's far less likely to stimulate childish imaginations than the wonders on the Strip. Local kids on school trips enjoy the chance to paint, draw, and sculpt, but even the youngest tourists may resent being dragged away from Luxor or Circus Circus . There are a few typical Las Vegas touches, like the fact that infant artists are rewarded for each work of art that they create with forty "Discovery Dollars," which they can withdraw from the Discovery ATM. However, a significant proportion of the more sophisticated displays tends to be broken at any one time, and unless a good temporary exhibition is taking place (call ahead) there's not a lot of point coming.

NEVADA STATE MUSEUM

700 Twin Lakes Drive tel 486-5205. Daily 9am-5pm; \$2, under-18s free.

The world can hold few quieter, emptier museums than the Nevada State Museum , three miles west of downtown. That's partly due, no doubt, to the fact that it's fiendishly difficult to find - follow the signs to Lorenzi Park from the intersection of Washington Avenue and Valley View Boulevard. It might also be because Las Vegas has a shorter history than any other major city; and yet despite ample floor space the museum seems to make so little of it. Las Vegas is unique in having grown up entirely since the invention of the camera - one image shows Paiute Indians toting bows and arrows in the valley in 1873 - but rather than celebrating its extravagantly photogenic flowering, the displays peter out altogether in the 1950s.

Things do seem reasonably promising at first. Galleries devoted to regional prehistory hold the skeletons of a Pacific horse - the horse evolved in North America and migrated through Alaska to populate Asia, but was extinct in America until the Spaniards reintroduced it - and a Columbian (not woolly) mammoth, which was found in Utah but may have been hunted by humans in the Las Vegas area.

Perfunctory captions and lifeless dioramas soon start to reveal the museum's intended audience as school parties with very short attention spans, however, and it barely touches upon the glitz and glamour, vice and viciousness of the early casino years. There's a tasty little account of the gangland feudings that surrounded the construction of the Flamingo , but the main exhibit to accompany it is the original door to Bugsy Siegel's suite - quite the dullest door you ever saw. Next up is some tantalizing material about atomic tests during the Fifties; and then, suddenly, it's all over, with not a word about modern Las Vegas.

Lorenzi Park , outside the museum and centered around a small lake, is perhaps the nicest of the city's rare public spaces. Its other significant feature is the Sammy Davis Jr Festival Plaza , a walled auditorium used for open-air concerts.