

## Downtown Las Vegas

Contributed by Administrator  
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Downtown Las Vegas has never been a "downtown" in the conventional sense of the word. True, it does stand on the site where the city was founded, a century ago. Having just laid its tracks across the valley, the San Pedro, Los Angeles & Salt Lake Railroad established Las Vegas in May 1905 by auctioning parcels of land close to the railroad station. A simple grid was mapped out, with the station itself on Main Street at the head of the principal thoroughfare, Fremont Street .

However, the city never grew to any size before the legalization of gambling in the 1930s; even in 1940, it had a population of just eight thousand. Fremont Street failed to develop a significant infrastructure of stores and other businesses, and those few it did acquire were in any case to be supplanted by the advent of the casinos. In time, the neighboring streets filled up with the offices of state and city administrators, but the downtown area remains much like the Strip in that the only conceivable reason to come here is to visit the casinos.

Las Vegas has always had the strongest of incentives to promote downtown at the expense of the Strip; the Strip is not in fact in the city at all, but in Clark County, so only the downtown casinos pay city taxes. In the 1940s, it officially baptized Fremont Street as " Glitter Gulch ," and for several decades downtown more or less kept pace with the burgeoning Strip. At the time the Mirage opened on the Strip in 1989, for example, the veteran Horseshoe downtown remained the city's most financially successful casino.

However, as the Strip raced ahead during its 1990s building boom, downtown appeared to be in terminal decline. It was clear that something drastic had to be done. One proposal, put forward by Steve Wynn of the Golden Nugget , was to turn Fremont Street into a Venetian-style canal. The ultimate solution was almost as absurd; a roof was put over the strip. As the Fremont Street Experience , it has become the scene of banal but undeniably spectacular nightly light shows. These have done a certain amount to entice the crowds back, although many visitors are disappointed to find that there's nothing to do once the show's over - except gamble, of course, which was the point of the thing. Despite the promises of Mayor Oscar Goodman, however, who has proclaimed downtown redevelopment to be the cornerstone of his administration, downtown continues to operate at an overall loss, and few observers seriously expect the forthcoming, much-postponed Neonopolis shopping and entertainment complex to change that.

Fremont Street today is downtown restyled as a sanitized suburban mall, its block-spanning casinos now seeming like little more than identical department stores. It has to be said that none of them downtown, not even the much-vaunted Golden Nugget , would merit a second glance on the Strip. If you come to Las Vegas specifically to gamble, there's a strong case for spending time downtown - the odds tend to be better, the room rates cheaper and the atmosphere a bit more casual - but otherwise you miss little by avoiding it altogether.

Downtown used to be seen as an area where you could walk around, in contrast to the Strip where you were forced to drive. Nowadays, however, the gaps that formerly peppered the Strip have all but disappeared, and most visitors explore sizeable stretches of it on foot. Downtown, on the other hand, offers little scope for strolling anywhere other than the few central blocks of Fremont Street. The streets to the south hold the occasional interesting shop, like the Attic or the Gamblers General Store, or budget restaurant, but although they may seem close enough on the map, they're grim and unsettling places to walk, and unbearably hot in summer

### BINION'S HORSESHOE

128 E Fremont St, .

If the Golden Nugget represents downtown at its most pretentious, then Binion's Horseshoe goes to the other extreme, resolutely promoting itself as the definitive downtown gambling hall and nothing more. That ethos dates back to its founder, Benny Binion , affectionately remembered as one of the great Las Vegas characters. Benny's record for violence was exceptional even by local standards: an itinerant Texan horse trader with at least two killings to his name, he ran the criminal underworld in Dallas during the 1940s, before a bloody gang feud persuaded him to re-locate to Las Vegas. Acquiring two faltering Fremont Street casinos, he replaced them with the Horseshoe , which opened as downtown's first "carpet joint" in 1951.

Binion himself lost control of the casino when he was jailed for tax evasion in the 1950s - he took advantage of the interlude to learn to read and write - and never regained his gaming license. However, his family bought it back in 1964, with Benny very much in charge behind the scenes. By the time he died, on Christmas Day 1989, the Horseshoe was the most profitable casino in Las Vegas. To Benny, the explanation was simple: "We got a little joint and a big bankroll, and all them others got a big joint and a little bankroll." The Horseshoe had in 1988 taken over the legendary Mint next door, simply bashing down the party wall, and in the process finally acquired a significant number of hotel rooms.

In the last few years, the Horseshoe has been thrown into turmoil by both a good old-fashioned family feud and a sensational murder. Benny Binion's son Ted had his gaming license first suspended due to his admitted drug use, and then, in 1998, revoked altogether because of his connections with the Mob. Later that same year, he was suffocated, after being forced to take an involuntary overdose, by his live-in lover and her new man, who were caught a few days later digging up \$6 million in silver bullion at his desert ranch. Meanwhile, the Horseshoe itself was going from bad to worse, following a hostile takeover by Ted's estranged sister and brother-in-law, who remain at loggerheads with the rest of the family. A cash flow crisis forced them to dismantle the casino's famous display case containing a million dollars in banknotes, beside which visitors used to pose for photographs; the future of its atmospheric, bargain-priced downstairs coffeeshop seems to be in doubt; and they've also been refusing to pay their share of the costs for the Fremont Street Experience.

For the moment, however, the Horseshoe is still in business, and still promoting itself as the place "where real gamblers hang their hats." In fact, once you get past its enormous neon sign, its dim, smoky and intensely serious interior holds nothing to appeal to non-gamblers. Such was Benny Binion's single-minded focus on gambling that he refused to put on live music, saying "I'm not going to let some S.O.B. blow my bankroll out the end of a horn." His greatest coup was to establish the Horseshoe as the permanent home of the World Series of Poker in the late 1970s. At that time, few casinos offered poker, which was seen as having too much potential for fraud and other trouble. Since then, the high profile of the four-week tournament, which takes place in late April and May each year and offers a winner's take of \$1.5 million, has encouraged others to follow suit. It continues to operate the highest limits of any casino in town, and possibly the world; you can bet as much as you like, so long as you bet it as your very first stake.

## CALIFORNIA HOTEL

12 Ogden Ave at First St, .

Of all the various Boyd Corporation properties in Las Vegas, which include Sam's Town, the Stardust, and the Fremont, the California Hotel probably has the lowest profile. Stretching between Main and First streets a block north of Fremont Street, and connected by a mezzanine-level footbridge with the neighboring Main Street Station - also Boyd-owned - it was, however, the first member of the group.

Sam Boyd, who had previously managed the now-vanished Mint on Fremont Street and held a stake in the Plaza, constructed the California in 1975. He named it in the understandable belief that most of its clientele would be Californian, but after initial occupancy levels proved disappointing he turned his attention to Hawaii, where he had spent five years running bingo games in his youth. Amazingly enough, sixty years on from that sojourn in paradise, the casino remains dominated by Hawaiian customers. It advertises itself with the slogan "whether you are from Hawaii or just homesick for her aloha spirit," and the majority of its eight hundred guestrooms tend to be taken by Hawaiian tour groups. Hawaiian menu items are prominent in the bars and restaurants, and there are even slot machines labeled in Hawaiian. All that makes for quite a pleasant atmosphere, though there's no real reason for non-guests to pass this way.

## EL CORTEZ

600 E Fremont St, .

Surrounded by pawn shops and T-shirt stores, a couple of rather uneasy blocks' walk east of the Fremont Street Experience, the shabby, quasi-Moorish El Cortez has allowed half a century to slip by since its brief 1940s heyday. In 1941 it was the largest downtown hotel - albeit with a mere 59 rooms - while in 1946 it served as a stepping stone for early investor "Bugsy" Siegel en route to the Flamingo. Since 1963, however, it has been owned by Jackie Gaughan, who lives in a penthouse flat upstairs and has barely changed a thing - according to scurrilous popular legend, not even the ashtrays, let alone the carpets. Its cut-rate rooms and suites make it a haunt of budget travelers, but the bottom dollar lies in its appeal to local low-rollers. As well as offering some of the lowest-stakes gambling in town, Gaughan continues to stage regular drawings of Social Security numbers, with prizes of up to \$50,000 for matching all nine digits.

## FITZGERALDS

301 E Fremont St, .

Fitzgeralds, which supplanted the former Sundance during the 1980s, occupies an entire block of Fremont Street. Owned since December 2001 by Detroit businessman Don Barden - the first black person to own a casino in Nevada - it's the most fully themed of the downtown casinos, but unfortunately the theme is so dismal that they might as well not have bothered. Every Irish cliché imaginable is brought to bear in the bid to part fools from their money, including the opportunity as you go in to rub a piece of the genuine Blarney Stone at the feet of "Mr O' Lucky." Further leprechauns, shamrocks and pots of gold abound inside. A small balcony adjoining the second-floor lounge makes a good vantage point for watching the evening light show outside, but that's about it.

## FOUR QUEENS

202 E Fremont St, .

Named not for a poker hand but for the four daughters of its original owner, the Four Queens has been a fixture on the downtown scene since 1966. In recent years it has prospered along with the three better-known neighbors with which it shares Fremont Street's busiest intersection, adding two nineteen-story hotel towers and sprucing up its lobby away from its old New Orleans theme in favor of matching the sparkling lights of the Golden Nugget .

The one unusual feature of the Four Queens is that it's one of the very few casinos in Las Vegas (along with Excalibur ) that allows you to take photographs in its gaming area. If you've been dying to take snaps of gamblers in action, this is the place to do it; just be sure to check with security personnel before you start.

#### FREMONT HOTEL

200 E Fremont St, .

Hard though it is to imagine, the Fremont Hotel was at fifteen stories the tallest building in Nevada when it was completed in 1956. The still-visible concrete facade of its main hotel tower was seen as shockingly modern and marked a deliberate eschewal of downtown's previously universal Wild West style of architecture. These days the Fremont , which has been owned by Sam Boyd of Sam's Town fame since 1985, is just another downtown gambling palace, not quite as fashionable as the Golden Nugget despite boasting the excellent Second Street Grill restaurant, but with its bright lights and purple baize tables jazzier than the rest of the pack.

#### FREMONT STREET EXPERIENCE

he gigantic metal mesh of the Fremont Street Experience , completed in 1995, stretches for four entire blocks of Fremont Street, from Main Street to Fourth. Ninety feet high, this "Celestial Vault" shades the pedestrianized street during the day, but comes into its own at night. It's studded with over two million colored lightbulbs, which effectively turn into a giant movie screen. Specially designed light shows are controlled by 121 computers, which run what are claimed to be among the most complicated programs ever written. Some simply consist of colorful patterns; others transform the quarter-mile length of Fremont Street into a virtual-reality theater. The spectators below gasp, stagger and applaud as they're catapulted into space or menaced by colossal swarming snakes. There's no plot or content, just pure eye-catching spectacle and a blast of soft-rock sound; in essence, it's an updated version of downtown's traditional neon signs.

Free performances of the Experience take place every night, hourly from sundown until midnight; schedules are listed on the website . It's jointly sponsored by ten downtown casinos, which turn off all their external lights while it's happening. Each show lasts a mere six minutes; the idea is that at the end you'll find yourself milling around on the street with nowhere to go except into the nearest casino.

#### GOLDEN GATE

1 E Fremont St, .

What's now the Golden Gate is unique for Las Vegas in being genuinely old, rather than simply themed to look old. The city's most venerable establishment, it has occupied its prime position at the west end of Fremont Street since 1906, when Las Vegas itself was just a year old. It started out as the Nevada Hotel , catering to travelers who arrived at the railroad station opposite, and was styled on the grand hotels of San Francisco, many of which were destroyed in that year's earthquake. As the first hotel in southern Nevada, it boasted a distinguished phone number: 1. It later became first the Sal Sagev (Las Vegas spelled backwards), and then, in 1955, the Golden Gate . Having barely grown since it added its third story in 1931, it's now so small that it thinks of itself as a B&B, and its casino area is tiny and unexciting. Many repeat Las Vegas visitors, however, make a special pilgrimage to its San Francisco Shrimp Bar and Deli , which claims to have originated the 99¢ shrimp cocktail in 1959 and to have served more than 25 million of them since then. Although the 99¢ price-tag remains in place, for more than the merest hint of shrimp you'll need to opt instead for a \$2.99 "Big" cocktail.

#### GOLDEN NUGGET

129 E Fremont St, .

The Golden Nugget is generally described, not least in its own brochures, as being the one downtown casino that matches the extravagance and splendor of the Strip. It doesn't. It's a bright, glittery place that attracts a much more upmarket clientele than any of its neighbors, but it's also deeply boring, and very far indeed from counting as a must-see destination.

The Golden Nugget has always regarded itself as a cut above its downtown rivals. It opened in 1946, the same year that

the Flamingo was unveiled on the Strip, with a decor modeled on the opulent saloons of nineteenth-century San Francisco. Its significance today, however, is as the place where Las Vegas's premier gaming entrepreneur, Steve Wynn, gained his first foothold in the casino business. During the early 1970s, the young Wynn - then a liquor distributor and real-estate speculator - accumulated enough shares in the ailing Nugget, together with inside knowledge of corruption among its staff, to engineer a boardroom coup in 1973. The Nugget swiftly prospered under his control, aided by the addition of its first hotel rooms in 1977. That enabled Wynn first to develop another Golden Nugget in Atlantic City, and subsequently to build the Mirage, Treasure Island, and Bellagio on the Strip. Like all those properties, the Golden Nugget now belongs to the combined MGM-Mirage conglomeration, while Wynn himself is busy concocting his new Le Reve project.

Although successive remodelings have ensured that the Nugget gleams like new, it still looks very much like a product of the 1970s, with more than a hint of Graceland about its long, neat rows of gold-painted lightbulbs, little white leatherette stools for slots players, and plump, white padded chairs at the gaming tables. On the plus side, at least the casino proper is well lit and high ceilinged, and much less gloomy than most.

Those parts of the Golden Nugget that lie closest to Fremont Street are devoted to gambling, with the exception of the small Buffet. In adding its two hotel towers, further back, the Nugget simply swallowed up and built over Carson Street for the length of an entire block, replacing the road with the disappointing Carson Street Café coffeeshop.

A surprisingly inconspicuous case near the elevators for the North Tower shows off the hotel's collection of genuine golden nuggets. Pride of place goes to the Hand of Faith nugget, found in Australia in 1980 and said to be, at 61 pounds 11 ounces the largest "on public display" in the world. At current prices, it's worth \$296,001. Alongside are several sizeable Alaskan lumps, including one worn smooth from being carried in the pocket of its owner as a good-luck charm for 25 years. In that time, a full two ounces were rubbed off.

## MAIN STREET STATION

200 N Main St at Ogden, .

Despite very unpromising beginnings, Main Street Station has turned into one of the principal downtown success stories of the 1990s. It started out in 1991 as an offshoot of the money-spinning Church Street Station development in downtown Orlando, but the Florida formula of paying a single admission fee to gain access to a complex of nightclubs and entertainment venues failed to transfer to Las Vegas. An unpromising location, two blocks off Fremont Street, did nothing to help, and Main Street Station went broke within a year.

Confusingly, Main Street Station is not part of what's known as the Stations chain, whose casinos are scattered across outlying neighborhoods of Las Vegas.

Once it was acquired by the Boyd Corporation, however, and brought back to life as a conventional hotel-casino in 1996, Main Street Station's distinctive and tasteful design began to pay dividends. The general concept is intended to evoke New Orleans in the 1890s, with an abundance of authentic antiques ranging from wrought-iron fences to Teddy Roosevelt's private railroad car and even bronze chandeliers from Buenos Aires. Thanks to the very high ceilings and natural lighting, all that period detail is never oppressive, and a well-thought-out array of good-value, down-to-earth restaurants and other facilities have put Main Street Station firmly on the tourist map. The Triple Seven Brewpub is a particularly good spot for a downtown drink.

## NEON MUSEUM

Las Vegas is seldom sentimental about erasing the traces of its past, but as casino after casino upgrades its image, eschewing "vulgar" neon in favor of "classy" gilt trimmings, dewy-eyed preservationists have campaigned to save its abandoned neon glories. As a result, the block between the end of the canopied section of Fremont Street at Fourth Street, and Las Vegas Boulevard to the east, has been grandly designated as the Neon Museum.

This open-air neon graveyard displays restored and fully functional signs gathered from all over the city. Some of these winking, blinking, garish delights are perched on street-level pedestals; larger examples cling to the corners of adjacent offices or parking lots. The oldest piece is a classic "Red Indian" motel sign that adorned the Chief Hotel Court in 1940; others include the Horse and Rider from the Hacienda, demolished to make way for Mandalay Bay.

You might expect the intersection of Fremont Street and Las Vegas Boulevard to be one of the busiest, most vibrant locations in the city. If so, you'll probably be bemused by its current seedy and run-down state, but successive Las Vegas mayors have been working hard to turn the situation around. For several years, and despite repeated postponements, an entire block of Fremont Street here has been due to become Neonopolis. At the time of writing, the complex was due to open in 2002, anchored by a fourteen-screen movie theater and a Jillian's restaurant-cum-nightclub-cum "bowling experience."

## PLAZA

## 1 Main St, .

The giant Plaza hotel and casino faces the west end of Fremont Street from the site of Las Vegas's now-defunct railroad station. Originally a railroad-company project, it began life in 1971 as the Union Plaza . The Union Pacific Railroad held a 75 percent stake, while a consortium of downtown casino operators had the rest. In time, as Union Pacific gave way to Amtrak, the partners consolidated, until Jackie Gaughan finally acquired the whole thing in 1993. Though Amtrak abandoned rail service to Las Vegas in 1997 - whereupon its facilities were swallowed up into the Plaza 's capacious bowels - Greyhound buses still use the adjoining depot.

Recent renovations, including the construction of a glass-domed Italian restaurant above the front entrance that offers great views of the Fremont Street light-show, have raised the Plaza a definite class or two above Gaughan's El Cortez . Like everything downtown, however, it's still aimed primarily at low-stakes gamblers, with its 2¢ slots, dollar blackjack tables, and a large Race and Sports Book that's forever busy with off-duty local employees and Greyhound passengers.