

Out of the City

Contributed by Administrator
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Spend more than a day or two in Las Vegas and you'll soon find yourself gasping for a blast of sunlight and fresh air away from the casinos. A glance at the horizon makes it clear that you'll have to cross an expanse of empty desert before you reach anywhere interesting, but exhilarating day-trip destinations do exist.

Perhaps the most obvious targets lie in the eye-catching Spring Mountains to the west. At their base, monumental walls cradle the desert fastness of Red Rock Canyon , while further north wooded slopes rise toward the summit of Mount Charleston . If Red Rock Canyon whets your appetite for otherworldly desolation, you'll also enjoy the longer excursion to the incandescent moonscape of the Valley of Fire , northeast of the city. Finally, neither Hoover Dam nor Lake Mead counts as a natural wonder, but each is in its own way every bit as breathtaking.

The telephone area code for all phone numbers in the text, unless otherwise indicated, is 702.

This section only includes places that can be reached and explored in a day's round-trip excursion from Las Vegas. Although many tourists take the opportunity to visit the Grand Canyon while they're here, getting to the national park involves a 600-mile round-trip drive, so we've only covered organized flight or bus tours that can get you there and back in a day. Similarly, we haven't included the awe-inspiring national parks of southern Utah, such as Zion , which is 160 miles distant, and Bryce Canyon , eighty miles beyond that. All these parks are covered extensively in our Southwest USA guide. On the basis that Las Vegas holds enough casinos to last any sane human being a lifetime, neither does this guide include the nearby state-line gambling resorts of Primm, Mesquite , or Laughlin .

LAKE MEAD AND HOOVER DAM

The single most popular day-trip from Las Vegas is the thirty -mile drive southeast to the vast artificial reservoir of Lake Mead , and to the mighty Hoover Dam that created it. In many ways, the dam is also responsible for modern Las Vegas's very existence, not so much as a source of energy but because the workers who built it triggered the city's first gambling-fueled boom. As for the lake, it makes a bizarre spectacle, utterly unnatural yet undeniably impressive, with its blue waters a vivid counterpoint to the surrounding desert. Both the lake and its 550-mile shoreline, however, can be excruciatingly crowded all year round. Contrary to popular belief, only four percent of Las Vegas's electricity comes from hydroelectric power.

As the crow flies, the western edge of Lake Mead is barely fourteen miles east of the Strip, but no road follows that route. Although two minor highways provide the most direct access, most visitors choose instead to take Boulder Highway , climbing out of the valley at Railroad Pass and reaching Boulder City - still the only city in Nevada that doesn't allow gambling - thirty miles out from the Strip. The first surreal vista of the lake arrives as you drop out of Boulder City on Business-93.

HOOVER DAM

Staying on US-83 beyond the Alan Bible Visitor Center takes you through the rocky ridges of the Black Mountains to reach Hoover Dam . Designed to block the Colorado River and supply low-cost water and electricity to the cities of the Southwest, the 726ft-high structure ranks high among the tallest dams ever built. And at 660ft across at the base, it's nearly as wide as it is tall - amazingly, during its construction enough concrete was used to build a two-lane highway from San Francisco to New York. It was completed in 1935, as the first step in the Bureau of Reclamation program that culminated in the Glen Canyon Dam at the far end of the Grand Canyon, and the creation of Lake Powell.

While a trip out to Hoover Dam has traditionally been an essential adjunct to any Las Vegas vacation, visits to the dam itself have been restricted since the attacks of September 11, 2001, convinced the authorities that it was a potential terrorist target. In addition, although private vehicles are unaffected, commercial traffic has been severely restricted, with all heavy trucks heading between Arizona and Las Vegas obliged to drive an extra 38 miles via Laughlin pending the completion of a new road bridge a quarter-mile downstream from the dam.

Bus tours to the dam from Las Vegas, with Gray Line (tel 384-1234,) for example, cost around \$40 for a five-hour trip.

If you're happy enough just to get a general view of the scale of the thing, keep driving across the top of the dam into Arizona, and try to squeeze into one of the parking lots as the road climbs on the far side. To get a close-up view, you'll have to pay \$5 to get into the huge parking lot on the Nevada side of the river (daily 8am-6pm). From here you can walk down to the dam itself and walk along the top of it, looking towards Lake Mead from one sidewalk and then peering down the awesome drop to the river from the other. A splendid Deco monument on the Nevada side commemorates the dam's opening by Franklin Roosevelt in 1935. As the former "hard-hat" tours, which allowed visitors to step out into the open air down at the base of the dam, have been discontinued, you may well balk at the \$10 admission fee to the nearby Hoover Dam Visitor Center (daily: April-Sept 8.30am-5.45pm; Oct-March 9.15am-4.15pm; tel 293-1824,). This entitles you to inspect displays on the dam's history and construction, and join a new "Discovery Tour," taking an elevator ride down to see the giant turbine room at the bottom.

LAKESHORE SCENIC DRIVE

On a stark sandstone slope beside US-93, four miles northeast of Boulder City, the Alan Bible Visitor Center (daily 8.30am-4.30pm; tel 293-8990,) is the main source of information on the Lake Mead National Recreation Area. Even if you don't need details of how to sail, scuba-dive, water-ski, or fish from its six separate marinas, it's worth calling in to enjoy a sweeping prospect of the whole thing. Pick up some safety advice, too - the lake averages three fatal water accidents per month.

Though the lake straddles the border between Nevada and Arizona, the best views come from the Nevada side. From the visitor center, Hwy-166, better known as Lakeshore Scenic Drive , parallels the western shore of the lake as far as Las Vegas Bay. In places it's set back far enough that the water is not visible, but spur roads lead down to Lake Mead Marina and Las Vegas Bay Marina . As well as boat and jetski rental, both marinas offer restaurants and stores, but they're functional rather than pleasant places to stop. In between the two, Lake Mead Cruises Landing is the base of operations for the Desert Princess , an imitation paddlewheeler that makes up to four excursions daily, calling at Hoover Dam (\$19-51; tel 293-6180,).

MOUNT CHARLESTON

Las Vegas residents desperate to escape the desert heat flock in summer to the Spring Mountain Recreation Area . Thirty miles northwest of the city and forming part of the Toiyabe National Forest, it's more widely known as Mount Charleston , on account of its highest point, the 11,918-ft Charleston Peak. Ten thousand years ago, this isolated range formed a natural refuge for wildlife from the lakes that filled the Las Vegas Valley, and it retained its own unique ecosystem as the rest of the region dried out. Many of its plants and animals, including one species of chipmunk, are found nowhere else on earth.

The cool wooded slopes of Mount Charleston are much less of a novelty for most tourists, of course, but they do offer some great hiking , and in winter you can even drive out for a day of skiing or snowboarding . Higher elevations usually remain covered by snow between mid-October and mid-May each year, while the streams and waterfalls only carry substantial flows during the thaw in spring and early summer.

To reach Mount Charleston, follow US-95 six miles northwest of the intersection of Rancho Drive and I-515, making a total of fifteen miles from the Strip. At that point, head west along Hwy-157, Kyle Canyon Road , which for its first ten miles continues to cross flat, barren desert. Shortly after dipping through a jagged rocky "reef" that pokes from the valley floor, the highway enters Kyle Canyon.

RED ROCK CANYON

The closest concentration of classic Southwestern canyon scenery to Las Vegas lies a mere twenty miles west of the city center. The sheer 3000-foot escarpment that towers above Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area is clearly visible from hotel windows along the Strip, with every fiery detail picked out each morning by the rising sun. What you can't see until you enter the park, however, is that there's a cactus-strewn desert basin set deep into those mighty walls, surrounded by stark red cliffs that are pierced repeatedly by narrow canyons accessible only on foot.

Run by the Federal Bureau of Land Management, Red Rock Canyon covers almost 200,000 acres of wilderness. Like other such BLM areas, it's less groomed for tourists than a national park or monument. Thus while it includes over thirty miles of hiking trails, they're not as well signed or maintained as you might expect, and it's all too easy for novice walkers to get lost

RED ROCK CANYON SCENIC DRIVE

Red Rock Canyon's Scenic Drive (daily 6am-dusk; \$5 per vehicle, bicycles free) is a one-way loop road that meanders for thirteen miles around the edge of the basin before rejoining the main highway a couple of miles southwest of the visitor center. As the name implies, it's designed for drivers not pedestrians, but it's also popular with cyclists, who can cycle on designated trails as well as on the road itself, and for whom its gradients are never too demanding. Along the way, it passes a number of overlooks, many of which also serve as trailheads for hikes of varying lengths. Rock climbers should enquire at the visitor center for details of recommended ascents.

If you plan to hike, buy a good map in the visitor center before you set off; the free handouts aren't up to the job. Be warned also that the desert is home to mountain lions, rattlesnakes, and even gila monsters, which, should you permit one to chew on you for several hours, are poisonous.

VALLEY OF FIRE

While Red Rock Canyon certainly makes a tasty appetizer, to experience the true scale and splendor of the

Southwestern deserts you need to make the hundred-mile round-trip drive to the Valley of Fire , northeast of Las Vegas. Its multicolored, strangely eroded rocks are the solidified remains of sand dunes laid down at the time of the dinosaurs, 150 million years ago. If they seem familiar, you may have seen them in any number of movies, from One Million Years BC to Star Trek - The Next Generation .

The road into the valley, state Hwy-169, cuts away east from I-15 thirty long, empty miles up its course toward Salt Lake City. Passing briefly through a corner of the desolate Moapa River Indian Reservation, it then starts to undulate and climb the aptly named Muddy Mountains, whose gray-ochre wall forms the eastern boundary of the Dry Lake Valley