

The Strip

Contributed by Administrator
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For its razor-edge finesse in harnessing sheer, magnificent excess to the deadly serious business of making money, there's no place like the Strip. Little more than fifty years ago, as Hwy-51, Las Vegas Boulevard was just a dusty desert thoroughfare, scattered with the occasional edge-of-town motel as it set off south toward California. Now, as a four-mile showcase of the most extravagant architecture on earth, it's a tourist destination in its own right, surpassed only by Orlando as the most popular in the US.

Las Vegas was not the first city to acquire an ever-lengthening "strip" of new businesses as it expanded along a single straight line. In fact Las Vegas Boulevard got its nickname because it reminded former LA police captain Guy McAfee of Sunset Strip back home. McAfee moved to Las Vegas in 1938, after being obliged to resign as commander of LA's vice squad merely because he controlled a string of illegal gambling joints. He took over the Pair-O-Dice Club, which had recently opened as Las Vegas Boulevard's first casino. During the next ten years, it was joined by El Rancho, the first real resort, in 1941; the Last Frontier in 1942, which in due course incorporated the Pair-O-Dice; Bugsy Siegel's legendary Flamingo in 1946; and the Thunderbird in 1948.

For casino owners, much of the appeal of the nascent Strip was that it lay outside the city limits of Las Vegas proper. Instead it was in Clark County, where they completely dominated what little political life there was, and were thus spared the legal and financial scrutiny suffered by their rivals downtown. Their control of the county machine enabled them to resist repeated attempts to bring the Strip under the jurisdiction of the city authorities, and they've been free to pursue untrammelled development ever since.

While the essential spur for every innovation on the Strip remains the desire of each casino to attract gamblers, seduction strategies have changed over the years. When most Las Vegas visitors drove up from California, the Strip was entirely geared toward motorists. Until the 1980s, roadside signs advertising lodging, dining and entertainment bargains were taller and more prominent than the casinos themselves. These days, the tourists fly in, with their accommodation prebooked, and the Strip itself is too clogged with traffic for aimless cruising to be a pleasure. The twin aims of the latest generation of giant casinos have become to keep their own guests on the premises for as much time as possible, and to lure in the pedestrian sightseers who throng the sidewalks outside. Pure spectacle is the name of the game, be it the volcano at the Mirage or the Sphinx at Luxor. Time was when each casino was a standalone oasis; now they're crammed so tightly together that they feed off each other - the Eiffel Tower at Paris, for example, sells itself as the ideal place to watch the fountain ballet at Bellagio across the street.

The northern end of the Strip is traditionally regarded as being the intersection of Las Vegas Boulevard with Sahara Avenue, although since 1996 the Stratosphere, a few blocks north, has made a brave attempt to change public perceptions. Its southern end, by contrast, is constantly shifting. The empty spaces south of the most recent casino to appear here - the latest, but almost certainly not the last, was Mandalay Bay - have always presented the double advantage of offering plenty of room to build, and also the closest location to both California and the airport. Broadly speaking, therefore, in following the Strip from south to north, this section also journeys back through the history of the city.

ALADDIN

3667 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

Although it opened in August 2000 as Las Vegas's first megacasino of the new millennium, the Aladdin really represented the last gasp - even the dying gasp - of the Strip's 1990s construction boom. A lavish \$1.4-billion project, it was built from the ground up to replace its legendary namesake predecessor (1966-98), which was best known as the venue for Elvis and Priscilla's wedding in 1966. Sadly, however, the new Aladdin was beset by funding difficulties from the word go, with the beleaguered Planet Hollywood chain withdrawing from what was supposed to be a joint venture, and it found itself struggling to survive as soon as I Dream of Jeannie star Barbara Eden tore off the final veil. Finally tipped into bankruptcy by the terrorist attacks of September 2001 - the Middle Eastern theme didn't exactly help - it's said to be on sale for around \$400 million, and it may turn out to be the casino that proves, for the moment at any rate, that there's a limit to the number of colossi the Strip can hold. Nonetheless, the Aladdin remains open, on the basis that once you write off the cost of building the thing, it's still worth collecting the day-to-day revenue it generates.

What's ironic is that the factors that have held the Aladdin back from making a profit mean that it's actually quite a nice place. Gaming analysts argue that the fundamental flaw is that you can explore the gigantic Desert Passage mall, with its upscale stores and restaurants; go to concerts at the 7000-seat Center for the Performing Arts; and get to and from the hotel rooms, without ever crossing the casino floor. Most visitors would consider those, and the overall lack of crowds, as conveniences, but without the subsidy of a successful gambling operation the Aladdin seems doomed to flounder.

The Aladdin's facade is designed to resemble a "Lost City," perched atop an artificial cliff and topped by an

extravaganza of Moorish domes, At Strip level, it's surprisingly hard to find your way into the property, and pedestrians are more likely to walk straight into the Desert Passage than into the casino proper. The basic floor plan of the whole ensemble is a giant figure of eight, with the twin circles formed by the Desert Passage, and the two holes in the middle being filled by the casino, closer to the Strip, and the Center for the Performing Arts further back.

While there are no paying attractions or novelties in the casino, it does have a few Arabian Nights flourishes, such as flying horses bursting from a mural, giant illuminated flowering trees, the large Aladdin's lamp that hangs over the central bar, and the Roc's Nest bar perched high above the action. Its upper floor also holds the London Club , a separate high-limit casino that under current Nevada regulations has to remain open to all comers, but is destined once the law books can be rewritten to become the exclusive, private preserve of high-rollers.

At over a mile long, the Desert Passage is a shopping mall on the same spectacular scale as the Forum and the Grand Canal Shoppes; its faux-blue "sky" is even capable of clouding over to deliver half-hourly "thunderstorms." The distinctions between its different areas, nominally themed to different countries, are mostly too subtle to grasp, but the general souk (marketplace) styling works well, and there are usually some eye-catching performers - belly-dancers, contortionists, musicians, and the like - at work in the open "squares" dotted at intervals along the double loop. The stores and restaurants too are interesting and diverse, which makes it a pity that, as disappointed tenants have charged, the sheer shortage of foot traffic makes the name "Deserted Passage" more appropriate. The fact that ownership of the mall and the casino are intertwined but not identical is partly responsible, in that the stores tend to be pitched at rather higher-end customers than the basically mid-range casino can attract.

BALLY'S

3645 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

Though long since outclassed by its mighty neighbors, the casino now known as Bally's was twenty years ago the most famous, and infamous, hotel in the world. This is the original MGM Grand , which opened in 1973. Setting out to prove that there was far more money to be made in the casino business than in producing movies, entrepreneur Kirk Kerkorian had sold off almost the entire assets of MGM Studios in order to build the biggest hotel that had ever existed. Named after the 1932 movie Grand Hotel , the MGM Grand did indeed generate vast profits. However, it was devastated in November 1980 by the worst hotel fire in history, when faulty wiring in the deli caused a blaze that killed 84 people and injured over seven hundred more. The MGM Grand reopened in identical shape within eight months, but four years later Kerkorian sold it to Bally's, the pinball and slot-machine manufacturers, who had just had a tremendous cash windfall from the worldwide success of their Pac-Man machines. That company later ran into difficulties, and sold the hotel to the Hilton corporation in 1996, which chose to keep on calling it Bally's . It's now run in conjunction with Paris next door by Park Place, who took over Hilton's casinos early in 1999 and also own Caesars Palace . Kerkorian, meanwhile, had retained the MGM Grand name for his own future use.

The fact that Bally's is actually one of the Strip's dullest buildings, consisting of little more than two monolithic rectangular towers, has been disguised by turning the whole thing into a giant neon sign. Not only the towers, but also the tubular walkway that carries pedestrians into the casino, shift constantly through a spectrum of four garish colors. The walkway moves so slowly, however, above a shallow pool, that you'll probably have tired of the light show long before you reach the end.

There's little to detain you inside the hotel, which is used more by conventioners and business people than vacationers. Non-guests tend to head straight for either the good-value Big Kitchen Buffet , up on the second floor of the South Tower; the large, high-tech Race & Sports Book, hidden away in the basement of the North Tower; or the monorail, right at the back of the property, which connects Bally's and the current version of the MGM Grand . At least the pedestrian walkway runs in both directions, so it's not too hard to find your way out again.

BARBARY COAST

3595 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

Slotted in between several of the city's greatest names, the tiny, 200-room Barbary Coast feels like a throwback to a long-lost Las Vegas. Its main distinguishing feature is a classic piece of old Vegas neon, the hourglass-shaped sign above its front entrance. That entrance is always thrown open to the Strip, and with clattering tables and slots just inside the door the Barbary Coast is kept ticking nicely by walk-in gamblers weary of ogling its outsize neighbors.

The interior of the Barbary Coast is filled with lots of brass and glass, including what's said to be "the world's largest Tiffany-style glass mural." Amenities on the ground floor, however, are minimal; apart from the chilled shrimp cocktails in the cabinets behind the main bar, there isn't even any food on sale. Inconspicuous elevators, however, lead to two expensive and highly rated restaurants: Drai's , down in the basement, and Michael's upstairs. The latter is named for proprietor Michael Gaughan, who also owns the newer Orleans out on Tropicana Avenue. Guest accommodation too is better than the rather faded elegance of the gaming area might lead you to expect.

BELLAGIO

3600 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

Back in the mid-1990s, when he started to plan Bellagio , Steve Wynn of Mirage Resorts set himself a very tall order. His goal was not to build merely the best hotel in Las Vegas - he felt he'd done that with the Mirage - or even the best hotel in the world. He wanted nothing short of the best hotel there has ever been, anywhere. Though Wynn's obsession ensured that Bellagio is a breathtaking achievement, it also demanded that it be judged according to standards that it could not conceivably meet. Seen as the latest in the long line of casinos that have set out to redefine Las Vegas, Bellagio is a triumph, but that's all it is: just another casino.

Before Bellagio , the theming in Las Vegas casinos always used to be playful - you weren't supposed to think that being in Luxor was like being in ancient Egypt, just that it was fun to pretend. Bellagio took itself more seriously. No longer was it enough to create an illusion; Bellagio , rather self-defeatingly, wanted to be real. Not only did it have to be an improvement on the Italian lakeside village for which it was named, it also had to outdo what's regarded as the greatest hotel in history, the nineteenth-century Ritz in Paris - hence the Belle Epoque late-Victorian flourishes tacked onto its understated Italian provincial elegance. And it even had to do so by somehow being more authentic than the original. The trouble is that Bellagio is not in Europe, it's in Las Vegas, and it's stuffed full of slot machines. Inlaid with jewel-like precision into marble counters, perhaps, slot machines nonetheless.

When it opened in October 1998, Bellagio was immediately recognized as being a quantum leap ahead of all its Las Vegas competitors. While it has assumed an iconic status - it was the obvious choice for the conspirators' target in the remake of Ocean's Eleven - it's also seen as something of a monument to the hubris of Steve Wynn. Its sheer opulence remains unmatched, but the Venetian has since proved that you can be this classy without being quite so po-faced and elitist about the whole thing, and combine grandeur with crowd-pleasing attractions and even, yes, a bit of old-style playfulness.

Wynn himself is no longer at the helm, Mirage Resorts having been bought up by MGM in March 2000 after a new casino venture in Biloxi, Mississippi, went disastrously wrong. Bellagio is now the jewel in the joint MGM-Mirage crown, raking in roughly thirty percent more revenue than the much larger MGM Grand , but Wynn's more obvious excesses are slowly being whittled away.

Bellagio 's main hotel block, a stately curve of blue and cream pastels, stands aloof from the Strip behind an eight-acre replica of Italy's Lake Como. The mere presence of so much water in the desert announces the wealth at Bellagio 's disposal, but the point is rubbed in every half-hour, when hundreds of submerged fountains erupt in Busby-Berkeley water ballets, choreographed with booming music and colored lights. At the foot of the hotel, the lake is bordered by a reproduction of a small Italian village. Several of the structures here are restaurants, which offer lakeshore terrace dining.

Most pedestrians approach Bellagio from its northeast corner, crossing the bridges from Caesars Palace or Bally's where Flamingo Road meets the Strip. Ponderous mosaic-floored revolving doors grant admittance not to the usual moving walkway but to the Via Bellagio , a covered mall of impossibly glamorous designer boutiques. At the far end of this plush paisley-carpeted corridor, the cacophony of the casino looms ever louder. Although only bona-fide guests are allowed to bring children aged under eighteen inside the building, there's no dress code, and the staff are unfailingly polite to all comers.

Hotel guests, by contrast, sweep up to Bellagio along a grand waterfront drive, to enter a sumptuous lobby that's deliberately distinct from the casino. Another pedestrian walkway, this time starting opposite the Aladdin , arrives close by. Within the lobby, mosaic butterflies and insects writhe across the floor, while the ceiling is filled by a brooding sort of semi-chandelier of glass flowers, made by sculptor Dale Chihuly. It's all said to be hand-blown, but "over-blown" would be closer to the mark. Even the area behind the check-in desks is themed; to reach the executive offices, disguised as a Venetian villa, the clerks have to make their way through a fully fledged Roman garden.

The lobby leads in turn to Bellagio 's real showpiece, the opulent Conservatory . Beneath a Belle Epoque canopy of copper-framed glass, a network of flowerbeds is replanted every six to eight weeks with ornate seasonal displays. Thus, fall is heralded by resplendent gold and yellow blooms surrounding a colossal cornucopia of harvest fruits, December sees Martha Stewart decorate a glittering Christmas tree, and so on. Individual spotlights can be trained on each flower, so the place is at its most spectacular at night. If you've developed a taste for Chihuly, you can buy small examples of his work from a namesake gallery at the Conservatory's far end.

To get the full benefit of Bellagio 's facilities, which include a luxurious spa and beauty salon, and an array of six superb landscaped swimming pools, you need to stay at the hotel. For any visitor to Las Vegas, however, the property as a whole makes an essential port of call. Unless you're as hung up on authenticity as Steve Wynn, swooning at the cost of its construction materials swiftly ceases to be a thrill, but there's still plenty to enjoy. For sheer ambition and energy, its major production show, the Cirque du Soleil's O , offers by far the best theatrical experience in town, while around a

dozen top-quality restaurants are arrayed along the lakefront, with the astonishing Buffet tucked away further back.

The most conspicuous casualty of the MGM takeover has been the Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art , near the pool at the rear. Wynn's pride and joy formerly housed his personal portfolio of Picassos and Monets, and was seen, by him more than anyone, as a bold attempt to introduce high culture to the Las Vegas scene. MGM showed no interest in keeping the collection on, and now, way outclassed by the Venetian 's twin Guggenheims, the gallery simply features lacklustre temporary exhibitions (daily 8am-10pm; \$12).

CAESARS PALACE

3570 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

As it approaches its fortieth birthday - a venerable old age by Las Vegas standards - Caesars Palace has been experiencing something of a mid-life crisis. In a city that's forever discarding the old in pursuit of the new, it's becoming less and less possible to coast along on the strength of what's perhaps the most famous name in the business. While Caesars still has plenty going for it, its latest owners, Park Place, have so far done little to capture popular attention back from upstart rivals like Bellagio and the Venetian . Some of that is down to bad luck; just when they were finally starting work on a massive hotel tower to add a thousand rooms to its previously paltry complement of 2500, the September 11 attacks forced postponement of their plans, leaving them instead with an ugly great hole right at the intersection of Flamingo Avenue and the Strip.

Of course, much about Caesars Palace has changed since Vegas's definitive themed casino was unveiled in August 1966. The trademark Italianate fountains out front are still there, but they've been joined by an ever-expanding array of pseudoclassical statuary and pavilions, and the half-naked Roman centurions and Cleopatra-cropped cocktail waitresses within have a vast fake Forum through which to strut their stuff. The one thing Caesars Palace will never have is an apostrophe - it does not belong to Caesar, it's filled by the thousands of Caesars who choose to visit it.

To build Caesars Palace in the first place cost under \$25 million - less than the volcano at the Mirage . The brainchild of entrepreneur Jay Sarno, who had owned progressively more elaborate motels in Atlanta, Dallas, and (in partnership with Doris Day) Palo Alto, it was the first Vegas casino to be financed through loans from the pension fund of Jimmy Hoffa's Teamsters' Union. A powerful Mob presence was barely concealed from the word go, and became even more apparent after Sarno sold out in 1969 for \$60 million. Under pressure from repeated Federal fraud investigations throughout the Seventies, Caesars passed into sanitized corporate control at the start of the Eighties. It was sold to ITT for \$1.7 billion in 1995; taken over by Starwood in 1998; and landed in the lap of Park Place in 1999. Sarno himself, who went on to build the first, disastrous incarnation of Circus Circus , died in a suite at Caesars in 1984. His crucial legacy lay in having set Caesars up on an expanse of land that has so far proved extensive enough to hold every enlargement architects have been able to imagine.

The exterior of Caesars Palace most matches its theme, the public spaces of ancient Rome, by being a haphazard accretion of disparate, often jarring, elements. Some are accurate depictions of classical Rome; some reproduce the architecture of much later periods; and others, like the geodesic dome of the Omnimax theater and the globe of Planet Hollywood , have absolutely nothing to do with it. The latest addition, all but completed at the time of writing though not scheduled to open until March 2003, is a towering circular replica of the Colosseum . Its sole purpose is as an arena for Celine Dion, who's expected to perform on two hundred nights every year to audiences of four thousand per night.

Caesars was originally designed to be approached by car. In those days, its distance from the highway was not a drawback, but made it seem even more majestic. When pedestrians started to cruise the Strip, Caesars was the first casino to respond by constructing moving walkways to haul them in - and it also established the tradition of making it as hard as possible for them to get away again. Currently its most flamboyant such walkway is the one at the northern end, added in 1989 to lure in guests from the then-new Mirage . Here the entrance pavilion is flanked by twin winged lions, and topped by a charioteer urging on his rampaging horses. One section of walkway trundles into the Forum Shops, while the other leads to Caesars ' huge, dimly lit Sports Book. Not only does the latter move in one direction only, but there isn't even a pedestrian exit here at all.

Even though Caesars remains relatively "small" in terms of hotel space, its interior is a bewildering labyrinth, vast enough that it takes half an hour's brisk walk to get from one end to the other. And that's if you know the place well; with its low ceilings, low lights, and lack of signs, it's designed to be as disorienting as possible, and you're all too likely to be distracted by the appearance of an armor-clad Roman legionary atop a bank of slot machines.

One side passage from the casino proper - the hub around which everything else revolves - connects with the Appian Way , a shopping mall where the replica of Michaelangelo's David beneath the central dome is identical to the original in every respect except for remaining uncircumcised. Another obliges you to squeeze between the golden prow of Cleopatra's Barge (a floating nightclub and bar), and an exclusive sushi restaurant. Keep on heading back behind the scenes, and you'll find yourself in the actual hotel, which is every bit as huge again. Large plate-glass windows look out

over the Garden of the Gods pool area, built using Carrara marble and modeled after the baths of Pompeii.

A high proportion of visitors to Caesars are here to explore the hugely successful Forum mall, with its top-notch collection of stores and restaurants. A complex play of lights transforms the Forum's blue-domed, cloud-strewn ceiling between dawn and dusk every hour, while its absurdly ornate fountains are peopled by animatronic statues that come to life at regular intervals. If the free shows whet your appetite, there's a fancier version on offer in the 3-D IMAX simulator ride at the far end, Race for Atlantis (Sun-Thurs 10am-11pm, Fri & Sat 10am-midnight; \$10). What you pay is expensive for what you get - shaken to smithereens in front of a four-minute sci-fi B-feature - but few kids seem to leave disappointed. Many head in fact straight for the Cinema Ride closer to the main casino, which serves up several different simulator rides on a smaller screen (same hours, similar prices, with discounts for multiple shows).

Caesars has been renowned for big-name entertainment ever since it secured the services of Frank Sinatra in September 1967 at the rate of \$100,000 a week. Its heyday as a Rat Pack hangout came to an abrupt end when Sinatra and the hotel's executive vice president exchanged blows on the casino floor while discussing a baccarat debt, but Sinatra himself was persuaded to return in 1974 by a four-hundred percent pay raise - an event promoted with the slogan "The Noblest Roman Has Returned."

More formal fisticuffs made Caesars for many years the city's premier boxing venue. During the early 1980s, it would erect a temporary arena capable of accommodating thirty thousand fight fans; however, that role has since been threatened in turn by the Mirage, the MGM Grand, and Mandalay Bay.

CIRCUS CIRCUS

2880 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

"The aspect of Circus that has me disturbed is the popcorn, peanuts and kids side of it. And also the Carnival Freaks and Animal side of it. The dirt floor, sawdust and elephants. After all, the Strip is supposed to be synonymous with a good-looking female all dressed up in a very expensive diamond-studded evening gown and driving up to a multi-million dollar hotel in a Rolls-Royce. Now you tell me what, in that picture, is compatible with a circus in its normal raiment, exuding its normal atmosphere and its normal smell?"

- Howard Hughes

A rare constant in the ever-changing world of Las Vegas fashion, Circus Circus has remained true to itself for almost forty years. Back in the 1960s, when it started out, combining children's entertainment with casino gambling under a single roof was a pretty radical concept. Later on, it came to be embraced as Las Vegas's most surefire money-spinning formula. Now it's something of a discredited cliché; and yet Circus Circus just carries on regardless.

Circus Circus began life as Jay Sarno's follow-up to his megahit Caesars Palace, reinvesting the profits from the sale of Caesars to create a new property that would appeal to fun-seeking families and high rollers alike. The basic theme, of a hectic, spit-and-sawdust gaming area at street level overlooked by a carnival-style "midway" on the mezzanine, featuring sideshows and circus performers, was much as it remains today. It took a while to get the details right, however. Not only did the original Circus Circus lack any hotel accommodation, but it even charged an admission fee to visitors. On top of that, Hughes' revulsion had some basis in fact. The midway was at first the sleazy preserve of unsavory independent operators. One sideshow, for example, "Bed Toss," invited to throw softballs in the hope of spilling naked showgirls out of giant satin beds. At least Sarno was forced to abandon his experiments with propelling "flying" elephants along a concealed monorail system, when it became clear that his would-be Dumbos couldn't contain their excitement and would have to wear diapers. Only once Sarno sold his stake to William Bennett, in 1974, did Circus Circus turn both wholesome and profitable, so much so in fact that Circus Circus Enterprises (now the Mandalay Resort Group) went on to become the leading casino operator in the country.

Though the main building of Circus Circus is very low-rise by Las Vegas standards, its presence on the Strip is unmistakable, thanks both to its gigantic Lucky-the-Clown neon sign and its marquee-like Big Top canopy. Clowns, contortionists and trapeze artists still cavort on the central midway stage upstairs between 11am and midnight daily, surrounded by a more consistently child-oriented array of fairground stalls and attractions. With new hotel towers being added year after year, the whole Circus Circus complex stretches so far back that there's even an in-house monorail link to help lost or exhausted guests return to their rooms.

No one could mistake Circus Circus for a sophisticated joint. Even the most gung-ho apologist for the gaming industry would be hard pressed to find anything glamorous about its three low-stakes, high-volume casinos. What's more, while Circus Circus may have pioneered the provision of no-smoking areas, its low ceilings actually make it one of the most claustrophobic and smoky places to gamble in town.

Circus Circus continues to lure in tourists with children - even those staying elsewhere in Las Vegas - largely because of its theme park, the Adventuredome (Mon-Thurs 11am-6pm, Fri 11am-midnight, Sat & Sun 10am-midnight), which was tacked onto the back of the property in 1993, at the same time as its now-vanished rival at the MGM Grand. Credit for its survival must go to the huge bubble of pink glass that protects its full five-acre extent from the extremes of the local

climate. Entered only through the casino proper, the dome encloses a Disney-esque melange of rides and sideshows. Around its central feature, a big red-rock mountain that reaches almost to the artificial sky, race both the Canyon Blaster roller coaster and the newer, spinning Chaos ride, passing such dioramas as an Indian pueblo village and a herd of animatronic dinosaurs. Visitors can choose whether to pay \$3-5 for each individual attraction, or to buy an all-day wristband priced at \$19 if you're over four feet high, \$14 if you're not.

DESERT INN/LE REVE

3145 Las Vegas Blvd S.

All Las Vegas's eyes and ears are currently directed towards the semi-derelict expanse that stands across the strip from the New Frontier . Until 2001, this was the site of the veteran Desert Inn casino, and its expansive, anachronistic golf course; as of early 2002, it's impossible to predict quite what will replace it.

The Desert Inn was bought in April 2000 by entrepreneur extraordinaire Steve Wynn, using \$275 million of his own personal cash, which had been burning a hole in his pocket since the sale of his Mirage organization to MGM. With his usual hyperbole, Wynn called this "the single most important piece of real estate in the western United States," twice the size of the Mirage and Treasure Island combined, with lengthy frontage not only on the Strip but on both Paradise Road and Twain Avenue. He has announced plans to build a new \$1.6 billion casino resort called Le Reve - French for "The Dream" - named for his favorite among his personal collection of Picasso paintings. What that will mean in practice, however, he's keeping close to his chest. He's dropped hints about it being "water-themed," and commented that unlike Bellagio , the Mirage , and Treasure Island - which "were all essentially the same building," and fundamentally "pictures to be viewed from outside" - it will be designed from the inside out. Scheduled opening date is September 2004.

At time of writing, Picasso's version of Le Reve was on display in the Wynn Collection (daily 10am-5pm; \$10), a one-room gallery set just off what was the Desert Inn 's main lobby, the only part of the old building still left standing. Nine of the total twelve canvases, by such artists as Matisse and Gauguin, are female portraits; one of the few exceptions is a Warhol triptych of Wynn himself. As for Le Reve , you can only assume the planned resort won't share the painting's in-your-face phallic imagery.

EXCALIBUR

3850 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

The oldest of the three casinos owned by Mandalay Resort Group (formerly Circus Circus) at the southern end of the Strip, the mocked-up medieval castle of Excalibur now makes a crude and unsophisticated neighbor for Luxor and Mandalay Bay . Hastily erected in 1990, in the hope of beating the recently opened Mirage at its own game, it only cost half as much to build - and it shows. Circus Circus Enterprises had earlier pioneered the concept of the child-oriented casino with the original, cheerfully downmarket Circus Circus itself. Excalibur went a stage further by appearing to be both designed and assembled by children, with its oversized primary-colored turrets drawn straight from a kindergarten art class, and its sharp angles and visible seams giving it the air of a cheap Christmas construction kit.

When Circus Circus was planning Excalibur , architect Veldon Simpson - later also responsible for both the MGM Grand and Luxor - was dispatched to Europe to check out hundreds of genuine castles. The model he chose to follow was itself a playful, romantic fantasy. Neuschwanstein in Bavaria was built in the late nineteenth century by Mad King Ludwig, a devoted Wagner fan, who stuck the fairy-tale flourishes of a French château atop the redoubtable walls of a German fortress. If that sounds familiar, it's probably because Neuschwanstein was also the blueprint for Sleeping Beauty's Castle in Disney World.

The name "Excalibur" was the winning entry in a public competition.

In truth, no one ever intended Excalibur to look like a real castle. Its colors are deliberately clashing, and its proportions distorted. Basically it's a gigantic billboard, designed to draw in tourists who see it from a distance. The castle itself is all but engulfed by the two huge hotel towers that hold its four thousand guestrooms, so you can only see it properly either from the Strip, diagonally opposite the main entrance, or from the air.

For its first three years, Excalibur was the world's largest hotel, and it prospered enough for Circus Circus to use its cash profits to build Luxor next door. At the root of that success was its appeal to low-budget tour groups - it was the first casino to have a separate driveway specifically for tour buses - and even now, as it starts to age, its popularity with family vacationers remains undimmed.

The pedestrian entrance to Excalibur has recently been revamped, to incorporate an elaborate station for the monorail system that ferries passengers to Mandalay Bay , right at the intersection of Tropicana Avenue and the Strip. The castle itself is set so far back from the Strip that you have to approach via a long system of moving walkways, on which almost no expense has been lavished. In theory there's a sort of moat down below a sort of drawbridge, with a sort of dragon lurking down there somewhere too, but you get little impression of any of it. A purple-robed figure of Merlin, dwarfed by

his surroundings, waves benignly from high on the central turret, while a booming, genial English voice welcomes all "loyal subjects" to King Arthur's domain of Camelot.

Once inside, you're plunged as ever into the maelstrom of the main casino floor, which is unique for the Strip in allowing visitors to take photographs of the gambling action. For once, however, it's easy to escape to the non-gaming areas both above and below. Upstairs you'll find most of Excalibur's restaurants, together with a replica of the whole edifice built out of sugar and chocolate, a bunch of "shoppes," a food court, assorted family-fun opportunities such as photo studios equipped with extensive wardrobes for dressing-up, and the Canterbury Wedding Chapel for single travelers seized by the urge to settle down. The real highlight, indeed to many eyes the crown jewel of the entire Strip, is a large outlet of the nation's best donut chain, the South's legendary Krispy Kreme, where you can ogle the whole cooking process through plate-glass windows.

Downstairs the atmosphere is reminiscent of a traditional fairground, along the lines of Circus Circus' midway, filled with sideshows where kids can spend real money attempting to win plastic swords and other Arthurian memorabilia (Mon-Thurs 11am-11pm, Fri 11am-midnight, Sat 10am-midnight, Sun 10am-11pm). A large indoor arena hosts King Arthur's Tournament, a twice-nightly mixture of jousting, joshing and noshing.

FASHION SHOW MALL

3200 Las Vegas Blvd S. We've reviewed shopping in the Fashion Show Mall.

The Strip's otherwise endless procession of casinos is interrupted between Treasure Island and the New Frontier by its one large-scale standalone shopping mall, the Fashion Show Mall. At the time of writing, the mall was in a strange sort of limbo, with large segments either under scaffolding or closed altogether. A massive overhaul, scheduled for completion in fall 2003, was expected to place it on a par with the Forum and the Grand Canal Shoppes. Until then, you'll find much the same major department stores and chain outlets as in thousands of malls nationwide, plus a food court, and a handful of restaurants. Note that the mall's underground parking lot is not a good place to leave your car after hours; it turns very quiet and spooky once the sun goes down.

FLAMINGO

3555 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

Though neither brick nor bloodstain remains of Bugsy Siegel's original resort, the very name of the Flamingo is dripping with Las Vegas legend. Popular myth regards it as having been, in 1946, the first of the great Strip casinos. In fact, El Rancho Vegas and the Last Frontier had already blazed the trail by then, and the Flamingo when it started out - with barely a hundred hotel rooms - was much more a consummately stylish Forties motel than a foretaste of the neon extravaganzas of the Fifties. What it did offer, however, was the ambition to look beyond its bleak desert setting in both theming and ambience, not to mention a glamorous hint of underworld menace.

Benjamin "don't call me Bugsy" Siegel's background was as a New York mobster, co-founder with Meyer Lansky of the infamous Murder, Inc syndicate. He headed west in the early 1940s in the hope of making it as a movie star; failing that, he settled for making it with movie stars. Though Las Vegas initially beckoned as a good base for running a horse-racing betting racket, the casino business swiftly caught his eye. Hearing about the cash-flow problems of LA restaurateur Billy Wilkerson, who was building a new casino a mile beyond the Last Frontier, he put together a million-dollar package that enabled him to squeeze Wilkerson out and take control.

Construction materials were expensive and in short supply after the war, and Siegel soon found himself in trouble. There are tales of contractors delivering supplies to the site by day, stealing them back at night, and then delivering them again the next day, not so much to defraud Bugsy as to avoid his wrath at their failure to get hold of any more. Desperate to start repaying the additional \$5 million he'd been forced to borrow, Siegel opened the incomplete Flamingo too early, only to have to close down after two weeks even deeper in debt. Although the hotel swiftly re-opened, and was soon running at a profit, Siegel's backers had lost patience, and he was shot dead at his girlfriend's home in Beverly Hills in June 1947. Literally within minutes, new Mob-appointed managers announced themselves at the Flamingo.

It could be said that Siegel's death was the perfect advertising gimmick; no amount of FBI investigations or congressional committees could mask the fact that the punters who flocked to Las Vegas actually liked the idea that they were rubbing shoulders with murderous gangsters. All through the Fifties and Sixties, as the Flamingo grew ever grander and glitzier, Meyer Lansky was still pulling the strings behind the scenes. When Kirk Kerkorian finally bought the Flamingo in 1967 - partly to have somewhere to train staff for his projected International Hotel - its financial records were in such murky shape that he could only get the tax authorities off his case by selling it on to Hilton in 1970. They in turn hived it off a few years back to Park Place, who also own Caesars Palace, Bally's, Paris, and the Las Vegas Hilton, and its official name was quietly changed back from the Flamingo Hilton.

The Flamingo today stakes its patch opposite Caesars with a magnificent cascade of neon. Its centerpiece is a bulbous unfurling flower of light, crested by the word "Flamingo" in a flowing, confident script. As recently as 1990, the Flamingo was briefly the largest hotel in the world, with 3530 rooms; it now has 3575, well below that of the MGM Grand, and pitches itself as a sophisticated upmarket resort, an elder statesman of the Strip too secure of its status to compete head-on with brash modern upstarts. Only a continuing predilection for the kind of pinks and oranges seldom seen outside Barbie's boudoir bear witness to its racy past.

Although there's little to see or do in the casino proper, the landscaped Wildlife Habitat and Arboretum around the back of the property is a lovely garden complex of pools, lagoons, water slides, palm-shaded walkways, and abundant flamingos, both real and plastic. There are also a few African penguins, bumbling birds also known as Blackfooted Penguins.

In an unusual twist, the Flamingo caters to customers who hanker for the old days by offering lower-stakes gaming and cheap eats in what looks like a separate casino next door, the nominally Irish-themed O'Sheas.

GUARDIAN ANGEL CATHEDRAL

302 Cathedral Way.

Immediately north of the spot where Desert Inn Road suddenly burrows underground, a small spur road to the right leads to one of the Strip's least likely sights. Though dwarfed to the point of invisibility by the surrounding cathedrals to Mammon, the starkly angular Guardian Angel Cathedral is a genuine Roman Catholic cathedral. Looking very spruce, and much newer than its actual construction date of 1963, it's a welcome haven from the frenzy outside its doors, but it does feature some true Las Vegas touches. The baptismal font resembles an oversized marble hot tub, coin-in-the-slot electric "candles" line the aisles, and of course there's a gift store. Best of all is the stained-glass window to the right of the altar, depicting the Stardust, the Sands and the Hilton rising above a maze of concrete freeways. Sunday Masses at the Guardian Angel Cathedral take place at 8am, 9.30am, 11am, 12.30pm & 5pm.

Ironically, one of the last remaining vestiges of the old, tacky Strip lies just north of the cathedral, opposite the Stardust. As well as the grubby Silver City casino - remarkable only for being owned by the Mandalay Resort Group, for whom renovations are clearly not a major priority - it's also the site of the downmarket Las Vegas Shopping Plaza. A true architectural gem has somehow survived alongside, however, in the shape of the little La Concha motel, whose gorgeous scalloped arches were designed in 1961 by black LA architect Paul Williams.

GUINNESS WORLD OF RECORDS

2780 Las Vegas Blvd S. Daily 9am-6pm; \$6.

Set back slightly from the Strip just north of Circus Circus, one of Las Vegas's dullest-looking sheds houses the eminently missable Guinness World of Records museum. As well as waxworks, film clips and photos depicting the gamut of weirdness and extremity, it also maintains a databank of Las Vegas superlatives.

HARRAH'S

3475 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

Until 1997, Harrah's was one of Las Vegas's best-known landmarks, kitted out as a proud neon-decked paddlewheeler known as the "Ship on the Strip." Spurred to upgrade by the proximity of megarivals like the Mirage, Caesars Palace, and the Venetian, however, it has ditched the supposedly old-fashioned riverboat trimmings in favor of a bland, unoriginal carnival theme. Gone too are the "party pits" in the casino, where the dealers dressed in party hats and capered like loons.

Its frontage now festooned with trumpeting golden Mardi Gras jesters - quite possibly left over from a mid-Nineties bid to open a casino in New Orleans - Harrah's is a sedate, rather boringly upmarket joint. The large plaza adjoining the Imperial Palace at its southern end, one of the few open-air public spaces on the Strip, entices passers-by with live performance on its Carnival Court stage, a sandwich and cocktail kiosk, and goodies from a Ghirardelli Soda Fountain and Chocolate Shop.

Inside, Harrah's caters to its middle-aged, middle-American clientele by making everything easy to find, and teases them with a prominent statue of "The Greenbacks," a very lifelike tourist couple dripping dollars from every pore and pocket. Look out, too, for the allegorical sculpture in the steakhouse called Virtue Wins, in which a glittering waxwork showgirl defeats two bronze gnarled cowboys who are cheating at cards. Upstairs, Jester's Court of Games is a large arcade of kids' video games. The main reasons outsiders might actually bother to pass through are either to catch the comedy shows at the Improv, or to use the spacious parking garage, handy for other nearby Strip attractions.

IMPERIAL PALACE

3535 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

Despite its small and ultratacky checkered exterior, which dragons or not looks more like a makeshift partition in a used-car dealership than the facade of a major casino, the Imperial Palace is among Las Vegas's largest hotels. Stretching away from its slender frontage on the Strip, it manages to cram in 2700 guestrooms.

Every square inch of the twelve-acre site has been pressed into use. During the 1980s, feeling squeezed between the newly expanded Flamingo to the south and the now-defunct Dunes to the north, it even reasserted its presence by building over its driveway. That's why, if you stroll off the Strip into what you expect to be the casino, you quickly find yourself either outdoors again, crossing the hotel approach road, or dropping beneath it on an elaborate escalator system.

The emphasis at the Imperial remains squarely on gambling. As well as its splendidly old-fashioned Race and Sports Book , rising in tiers above a central pit and reached by further escalators straight off the Strip, it also hosts a frenzied daily slot tournament, "Wild Times." Several gaming tables are labeled in Chinese, in deference to its many Asian customers.

Imperial owner Ralph Engelstad's two great passions are revealed in his Auto Collection , on the fifth floor of the parking garage at the rear (daily 9.30am-9.30pm; \$7, or free with coupon from casino). One, obviously enough, is for cars; he owns more than seven hundred vehicles, of which around half are exhibited at any one time. The other seems to be for dictators and despots; in among a Rolls Royce made for the Tsar in 1914, and a Packard that belonged to Juan Peron, stands Adolf Hitler's personal armor-plated Mercedes Benz. Engelstad was fined \$1.5 million by the Nevada Gaming Control Board in the 1980s for holding a party to celebrate Hitler's birthday, and was also banned from displaying Nazi memorabilia. Less contentious charabancs include Elvis's blue Cadillac and Liberace's cream Zimmer, with onboard candelabra.

LUXOR

3900 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

When it opened in October 1993, Luxor was heralded as the ultimate in-your-face Las Vegas casino. A stark, forbidding pyramid of black glass, it dominated the southern approach to the Strip, its colossal Sphinx standing guard over not merely this one casino but all the splendors of the city. These days, however, it's surprisingly easy to forget that Luxor is even there, not least because its owners, the Mandalay Resort Group, have comprehensively overshadowed it by building the mighty tower of Mandalay Bay next door. It doesn't help that black glass is one of the least conspicuous construction materials imaginable - especially at night, when the rest of the Strip comes into its own - while the entire exterior of Luxor is so featureless that it's hard to get any sense of the sheer scale of the place. That said, Luxor has been a great success, and ongoing improvements to its originally weak Egyptian theming have made it a better place to visit, or stay, than ever before.

For the record, the pyramid itself is 350 feet high, and it has been flanked since 1997 by two huge yet equally inconspicuous step-pyramids, bringing the total number of hotel rooms to 4427. In theory, it's approached from the sidewalk via a palm-fringed avenue of ram-headed sphinxes, though the only pedestrians around are in fact Luxor guests briefly braving the sun for a photo opportunity. Semi-constant construction work in this area gives Luxor the feel of an archeological site, as though it's being unearthed rather than erected. The transit system that connects Excalibur to the north with Mandalay Bay to the south drops its passengers in front of the main multistory Sphinx, which also doubles as a porte-cochère, its vast belly sheltering the vehicles that drive between its front and rear paws.

The spectacle that greets you inside the portals is every bit as dramatic. To reach the casino proper, you pass through a reconstruction of the temple of Abu Simbel, guarded by two huge seated statues. Luxor employees in gold Egyptian costumes patrol the precincts, posing for souvenir photos. As the pyramid is hollow, you're now in the world's largest atrium, which takes up 29 million cubic feet. Unfortunately, none of the elevators - those that follow the 39° slope of the pyramid are known as inclinators - offers any views to speak of, so unless you're a guest, the only way to see Luxor is by wandering around the lower levels. The gaming area is no more exciting than any other Vegas casino, but around the periphery you'll find some great friezes, statues, hieroglyphic inscriptions and other Pharaonic paraphernalia - look out for the high-camp bare-breasted maidens outside the Ra nightclub.

Escalators climb from the casino floor to the Attractions Level , the one place where Luxor 's theming goes wrong. Supposedly this area represents "the future," but its half-hearted "skyscrapers" are more of a weird hybrid of modern New York and medieval Cairo. Amid the mess are a small food court, a couple of restaurants, and a video game arcade. A meticulous replica of the Tomb of King Tutankhamen (\$5) attempts to strike a highbrow note, though most of the visitors who shuffle through it appear bemused by its ersatz treasures. After all, the original - which stands across the

river Nile from the city of Luxor, Egypt - remained undiscovered for millennia precisely because it was so small and pokey. Nearby, In Search of the Obelisk (\$7) is a two-part simulator ride that punctuates an incoherent saga of Indiana Jones-style derring-do with nauseating mechanical bumps and lurches. Other attractions up here include two IMAX movie theaters (one of them 3-D) that show Egyptian and general-interest films. Exact opening times vary, but broadly speaking they're in operation from 9am until 1am on Fridays and Saturdays, and from 9am until 11pm for the rest of the week. A pricey \$24 "Passport to Adventure" covers admission to the lot. There are in fact no pyramids in Luxor, Egypt.

Above all this, Luxor 's 36 stories taper to a point overhead; all the guestrooms face outward, and with so much free space to play with they're abnormally large by Vegas standards. The most powerful artificial light beam ever created shines up into the sky from the very apex. Though it's said to be visible from planes circling over LA, 250 miles west, it's barely noticeable in the general neon glare of the Strip. Around the back of the pyramid, the large, attractively landscaped swimming pool - open to guests only, and very short on shade - is overlooked by more counterfeit colossi, as well of course as several thousand hotel rooms and a couple of huge parking lots.

MGM GRAND

3799 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

A lot of careful thought and planning went into the construction of the world's largest hotel, the MGM Grand ; most of it turned out to be hopelessly wrong. In the early Nineties, the concept of Las Vegas as the family destination of the future was in its heyday, and the prospects of this billion-dollar project were seen as resting on its own theme park , MGM Grand Adventures. From the moment the hotel opened in 1993, however, the theme park was universally panned as being neither big enough nor thrilling enough, and it has long since closed down. What's more, the Grand 's original Wizard of Oz theme has also been abandoned; it meant little or nothing to modern kids, and in any case now that MGM has taken over Mirage the whole idea of luring children into casinos seems to have had its day. And yet the MGM Grand itself has gone from strength to strength, with the disappearance of the theme park heralded simply as an opportunity to add yet more hotel space to complement the original world-record five thousand rooms.

Spreading over 114 acres of a site previously occupied by the Tropicana 's golf course and the Marina hotel complex, the MGM Grand is bigger than Luxor and Excalibur combined. Its owner, Armenian billionaire Kirk Kerkorian - who like Howard Hughes is a former aviator - has twice before erected the world's largest hotel. The first was what's now the Las Vegas Hilton ; the second, also called the MGM Grand , became Bally's in 1985, after being devastated by a horrific fire in which 84 people died. Kerkorian sold everything but the name.

As seen from the Strip, the Grand 's most prominent feature is a seventy-foot bronze lion, towering above the intersection of Tropicana Avenue and Las Vegas Boulevard, and gleaming in front of a copper-colored wall of lights. Pedestrian entrances are located to either side, both at street level and also at the end of walkways from the Tropicana and New York-New York respectively, but the main entrance for hotel guests and all other traffic is a hundred yards or so east along Tropicana Avenue.

Getting rid of the Emerald City attraction that formerly stood just inside the doors - it also said goodbye Yellow Brick Road to the walkway that led on from it, relegated Dorothy to an alcove near the monorail station at the back, and toned down the general greenness of the whole building - left the MGM Grand with little for casual sightseers to look at. Shamelessly taking a leaf from the Mirage and its tigers, it developed the Lion Habitat , a wooded zoo close to the front entrance where real lions lounge around a ruined temple beneath a naturally lit dome. You can either watch the lions from the casino floor or walk through the enclosure via a glass tunnel, quite possibly as they pad directly overhead (daily 11am-11pm; free). Paying \$20 entitles you to participate in the grotesque charade of having your photo taken with a cute little lion cub; oblivious to your presence, it's made to look wistful and winsome by having its milk bottle whisked away for a fraction of a second (daily except Tues 11am-5pm).

The MGM Grand is connected to Bally's via a mile-long monorail. It's a long walk to reach it from the Strip, however, as it runs at the rear of those properties.

Each evening, the stage in the huge domed lounge alongside the Lion Habitat does a good job of luring in barflies with a steady procession of Elvis impersonators and the like, while the child-friendly Rainforest Cafe and the all-too-adult Studio 54 nightclub stand nearby. Most of the hotel's prestigious array of restaurants , however - big names include Emeril's, Coyote Cafe , and Wolfgang Puck Cafe - are way back, beyond the casino. Throw in the popular MGM Buffet , stage shows like La Femme and EFX , and of course all those paying guests, and it's hardly surprising that the hotel is always crowded. Even so, it steps up another gear whenever a big-name boxing match or rock concert is being staged in its fifteen-thousand-seat arena.

As for the MGM Grand 's casino, it's so big that it's divided into four separate sections. Just to stock the slot machines in the first place required \$3.25 million-worth of quarters - that's thirteen million of them. Turnover on its gaming tables (covered with blue rather than green felt, for no apparent reason) is so phenomenal that when the crowds after the Holyfield-Tyson ear-biting debacle in June 1997 mistook the popping of champagne corks for gunfire, and the resulting

furor forced the casino to close down for two hours, the loss was estimated in millions of dollars.

MANDALAY BAY

3950 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

Since early 1999, the forty-story sentinel of Mandalay Bay has marked the southern limits of the Strip, glowing like a beacon as its gilded windows commandeer the sunset. Built by Circus Circus Enterprises on the site of the former Hacienda - blown up at midnight on New Year's Eve 1996-97 - it was an explicit attempt to match the new generation of showpiece casinos like Bellagio .

Traditionally regarded as a canny but resolutely downmarket operator, Circus Circus Enterprises has followed a steady upward progression since the mid-1960s, from Circus Circus itself via Excalibur and Luxor . It celebrated completion of Mandalay Bay , which shares its trefoil design with Bellagio and the Mirage , and its gold-plated exterior with the Mirage and the Golden Nugget , with the logical final step of renaming itself the Mandalay Resort Group.

For each new casino built by the company, the target clientele has been envisaged as more affluent and more inclined to prize style over novelty. Not that Mandalay Bay is intended for existing customers, grown older and richer - it's aimed squarely at the next generation, not yet tied down by kids and eager to party at the House of Blues and its other music venues.

The name "Mandalay Bay" is supposed to conjure up romantic images from Rudyard Kipling's poem *The Road to Mandalay* . Though Mandalay itself is a real city, in Myanmar (which Kipling knew as Burma), the theming of the property remains generic. Landscaped gardens and walkways at both front and back abound in Asiatic motifs like pagodas and winged dragons, but both inside and out Mandalay Bay makes little effort to entertain rubbernecking tourists based elsewhere. Instead it opts to combine an overall soft-focus tropical feel with providing a full-on resort experience for its own guests. Unless you're staying here, you won't get to enjoy its superb open-air pool complex, complete with a scallop-shaped wave pool fringed by a sandy beach, and the "Lazy River" tubing ride. The beach is actually a bit too small to cope with when the wave machine is turned on at full blast, so it very seldom is, and the atmosphere around the pool is even more laid back than the designers intended.

When the Hacienda was built in 1955, it stood well over a mile south of the Strip. Though Mandalay Bay now counts as being on the Strip, it's still perceived as off the beaten track. For motorists, it's easy enough to reach, with its own dedicated freeway exit. Pedestrians, however, face a discouraging slog; that few bother in the heat may explain the rudimentary feel of the Strip-level entrance. Most visitors instead approach Mandalay Bay by means of the monorail that leaves from outside Excalibur at the intersection of the Strip and Tropicana Avenue. By Las Vegas's usual standards, this is a convenient ride; at least it's out front rather than right at the back. However, just to make sure you don't give Mandalay Bay a miss, the trains don't stop at Luxor on the way south, while on the return trip they don't take you back to where you started, but force you to walk through Excalibur .

Entering Mandalay Bay from the monorail stop or the parking garage, you arrive close to the House of Blues or "Restaurant Row" respectively, both of which are accessible without setting foot on the central casino floor. The dominant feature when the casino first opened was a huge statue of Lenin outside the Red Square restaurant. Allowing such a communist icon to overlook this cathedral to capitalism was too much for many palates, however. To mimic the destruction of similar statues in eastern Europe, Lenin was splattered with paint and then beheaded before, in a last indignity, his head was stolen by persons unknown.

Mandalay Bay 's one major attraction for sightseers, Shark Reef (daily 10am-11pm; \$14, under-12s \$10), is a long walk from the Strip, well beyond the far end of "Restaurant Row" at the back of the property. Aquariums are big business throughout the US these days, and despite its hefty admission price this one is drawing in visitors at the rate of a million a year. Its emphasis is more on eye-catching monsters than education, with video display panels rather than lengthy written captions next to each tank. The basic premise is that you're exploring a steamy, half-submerged temple complex, encountering crocodiles and jellyfish as well as, of course, several species of shark. Sharing their living quarters are some miserable-looking fish, many of them bearing large serrated bite marks and missing significant portions of their anatomy. An excitable marine biologist provides a running commentary on individual "audio wands," though for all his expertise he's somehow failed to spot that all the so-called "coral" on offer is actually a multicolored mix'n'match plastic kit.

It's at night that Mandalay Bay really comes alive. Boasting over a dozen top-class restaurants certainly helps, but the cornerstone of its strategy to lure hip contemporary customers is the House of Blues . Run independently as part of a national chain, this venue attracts the kind of big-name rock, soul and rap artists previously to be seen only off-Strip, at the Hard Rock . The crowds that spill out after the show's over tend to stick around into the small hours, grazing in the late-night lounges or gambling in the massive, ultramodern Race and Sports Book. For really major events Mandalay Bay also has its own 12,000-seat arena, while the uninspired revue Storm plays six nights a week in a separate theater.

The Mandalay Resort Group's plans to build yet another megacasino south of Mandalay Bay are currently on hold, but it's pressing ahead with the construction of a giant shopping mall between Mandalay Bay and Luxor, which may well open during the lifetime of this guide.

Finally, windows from the main hotel lobby - which centers on another mock temple, this one encasing a tank of tropical fish - look out on an attractive tiled fountain topped by a griffin, but oddly enough the pool beyond belongs to the Four Seasons hotel and not Mandalay Bay. The 424 guestrooms of the Four Seasons occupy floors 35 through 39 of the Mandalay Bay tower, but they're accessed not only via separate elevators but through an entirely different lobby building. If you're curious, you can stroll in using a discreet door alongside the Sea Breeze juice bar on the lower level of Mandalay Bay. As a gaming-free zone, the Four Seasons is eerily silent, the clamor of the slots being replaced by the clink of bone china teacups.

MIRAGE

3400 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

Perhaps the best measure of the impact the Mirage has had upon Las Vegas is that now, over ten years since it opened, it's hard to remember quite what was so different about it. Completed in November 1989, it was the first new hotel to be built from scratch on the Strip since 1973. Its high-rise Y-plan design was perfect for its prime position, commanding the point where the Strip curves northeast to parallel the rail tracks toward downtown. Owner Steve Wynn, however, eschewed many of Las Vegas's most time-honored traditions. He spared no expense on fixtures and fittings for the three thousand guestrooms, he neglected neon in favor of plating the entire facade with 24-carat gold stripes, and he even proclaimed that from now on Las Vegas was going to be a family destination.

By common consent, Wynn's \$620 million gamble was risky even by Las Vegas standards, and it was no secret that the Mirage could only pay its way by making \$1 million clear profit from its gaming tables every day of the year. The fact that it succeeded - not in every specific goal, but in the one detail that counts in Las Vegas, financially - transformed the city. However, in due course the opening of Bellagio saw the Mirage relegated to second-best even within the Mirage Resorts organization, and since 2000 it has been just another cog in the vast MGM-Mirage machine. While still holding its own, it no longer stands out from the crowd, and guests who previously stayed here as a matter of course now have half a dozen top-rank Strip casinos to choose from.

One of Wynn's most radical innovations lay in recognizing that the increasing numbers of pedestrians on the Strip called for a new kind of architecture. Driving past a casino, however big, you've barely enough time to read the slogans on its signs and billboards; walking past, on the other hand, you're free to stop and stare for as long as you like, and also to change your plans and wander inside. The much-vaunted "volcano" outside the Mirage was created in order to lure tourists in off the Strip at night - a time when they're in the mood to spend money, but might not otherwise want to venture out of their own hotel. It's basically a lumpy fiberglass island, topped by palm trees and poking from a shallow artificial lagoon, which "erupts" in genteel cascades of water and flame every fifteen minutes between nightfall and midnight. Anything less like a volcano would be hard to imagine, but for many years jostling crowds nonetheless filled the sidewalk every evening to catch a peek. At last, people seem to be ready to move on, so you may find you have the place to yourself.

The volcano also serves to signal the tropical theme of the Mirage, not that you'll need reminding if you go inside. Entering its opulent central atrium, housed beneath a geodesic dome, feels like stepping into a lush garden. Narrow footpaths meander away in various directions, skirting flowerbeds planted with an artful mix of fake and real vegetation. Off to the right, a massive thatched roof shelters the hotel's registration area, while the giant fish tank located behind the check-in desks teems with pygmy sharks and stingrays.

Away to the left, a busy corridor leads past a glassed-in environment of molded mock marble that's home at unpredictable times to the white tigers that feature in the stage show of illusionists Siegfried and Roy. Seeing them there is free; the alternative is to pay to enter the Secret Garden and Dolphin Habitat, reached via a landscaped ramp that leads up from the pool area at the back of the property (Labor Day to Memorial Day Mon, Tues, Thurs & Fri 11am-5pm, Sat & Sun 10am-5pm; dolphins Mon-Fri 11am-7pm, Sat & Sun 10am-7pm; Memorial Day to Labor Day garden Mon, Tues, Thurs & Fri 11am-3.30pm, Sat & Sun 10am-3.30pm; dolphins Mon-Fri 11am-5.30pm, Sat & Sun 10am-5.30pm; \$10, under-10s free, or \$5 on Wed when only the dolphin area is open). This surprisingly spacious zoo - a better deal than Mandalay Bay's Shark Reef aquarium - is as the name suggests divided into two distinct parts. The first consists of two interconnected pools, in which you can watch dolphins both above and below the water. It claims to be an educational and research center, so the dolphins aren't made to perform tricks, but they're encouraged to "exercise," which comes to much the same thing. Beyond that, enclosures in the gardens hold the world's greatest concentration of big white cats, including snow leopards and heterozygous white lions, all given names like "Destiny." Siegfried and/or Roy, who regale visitors with soporific anecdotes via "audio wands," are gracious enough to acknowledge that when it comes to saving the world's wildlife, "we cannot do it alone."

Siegfried and Roy, incidentally, have been appearing at the Mirage's custom-built theater ever since it opened. Though

their image might now perhaps be a little dated, they've always done great business. At one stage, they were due to be joined at the hotel by a Michael Jackson attraction, but that proposal was quietly shelved after the allegations of child abuse, some of which mentioned Jackson's stays at the Mirage .

All in all, non-gamblers will find that the Mirage offers less to see and do than the newer megacasinos. It remains an efficient moneymaking operation, however. You can buy anything from a fluffy white-plush toy tiger in the logo shop up to an Armani suit in the banally titled "Street of Shops," while the restaurants range from a good-value buffet to Japanese, Chinese, and American options, none of them quite on a par with what's available in the Venetian or Bellagio . In the end, it's the humble slot machine that keeps the whole place going, earning two-thirds of the Mirage 's million-plus-a-day bonanza.

MONTE CARLO

3770 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

Many visitors to Las Vegas like to imagine the city as still being under the thumb of the Mob, with each casino fighting a quasi-legal cutthroat war against all the rest. The Monte Carlo conclusively puts the lie to that notion. Remarkably enough, it's a joint venture between Las Vegas's two major rivals: the Mandalay Resort Group, who put up the money to build it and are wholly responsible for running it, and MGM-Mirage, which owns the land on which it stands. At the time it was built, Mirage were busy with Bellagio , and did not have the spare cash to create another casino. That potent combination meant that despite having over three thousand rooms, and therefore ranking among the world's ten largest hotels, the Monte Carlo took a mere fifteen months to go from the drawing board to its opening night in June 1996. Another light monorail system links the Monte Carlo with Bellagio to the north; it can't continue to the Mirage and Treasure Island because Caesars Palace is in the way.

The Monte Carlo is by a long way the soberest new casino to appear in Las Vegas in the last ten years. The usual Circus Circus thrills and gimmickry are nowhere to be seen, and you can't help suspecting that Mirage made it a condition of its construction that it didn't try to steal the thunder of Bellagio next door. Its nominal theme is that it's modeled on the Place du Casino in Monte Carlo, so there's plenty of sub- Caesars classical statuary around, and a certain Belle Epoque elegance about its plush Victorian trimmings. However, apart from its ornate 1200-seat theater, home to the show of the excellent illusionist Lance Burton, the theming does not extend to its restaurants and other facilities, and is probably of minimal significance to most guests. They tend to be an affluent and slightly older-than-average group, both because they see the Monte Carlo as being a quieter and classier place to both sleep and gamble than almost anywhere on the Strip, and because the hotel is shorter on crowds in general and kids in particular. The one place they can let their hair down is the Monte Carlo Pub & Brewery , a huge brewpub at the far end of an unassuming shopping mall known rather fancifully as the Street of Dreams.

NEW FRONTIER

3120 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

For all the fuss that surrounds the Flamingo , the New Frontier is the oldest casino still surviving on the Strip. In fact, although it opened in 1942, a year after the long-vanished El Rancho Vegas , it incorporated Guy McAfee's Pair-O-Dice Club , which had in 1938 become the first gambling joint on Las Vegas Boulevard. Originally named the Last Frontier , it started out as a glorified hundred-room motel that milked its desert setting for every possible drop of Old West appeal. The decor was a deliberate combination of crude log-cabin trimmings with glittering neon, marketed under the slogan "the Early West in Modern Splendor." There was even a theme park alongside, Last Frontier Village. The Little Church of the West, now serving as a wedding chapel at 4617 Las Vegas Blvd S, was once the centerpiece of Last Frontier Village.

The Last Frontier reinvented itself as the space-age New Frontier in 1955, and played host to Elvis Presley's first disastrous Las Vegas appearance the following year. In 1965, it was bulldozed and completely rebuilt, with a Western theme once again. That wholesale reconstruction did not extend, however, to getting rid of the Mob presence with which it had become permeated, and the Mafia continued in covert control for several years even after the hotel was acquired by Howard Hughes in 1967. Hughes was living in the Desert Inn across the street, and is said to have bought the New Frontier because he was alarmed that its new sign, at 184 feet the tallest in the world, might blow down and hit his home. That same worrisome sign still stands outside the New Frontier , looking deeply old-fashioned with its staid movie-theater lettering and tame slogans: "choice beef, poultry and seafood at affordable prices."

Current New Frontier owner Phil Ruffin announced plans in January 2000 to implode the entire property and replace it with a billion-dollar, San Francisco-themed megacasinio. This, however, seems unlikely to happen unless and until Steve Wynn's Desert Inn project revitalizes this quiescent segment of the Strip.

For the moment, the New Frontier is the last Strip property where it's still possible to park your car in the front lot, while the casino itself - sorry, "Gambling Hall" - remains locked in the Wild West tradition. A chuckwagon waits outside for its

owner to return, and you're confronted immediately through the saloon-style doors by vintage slot machines in the shape of John Wayne and other gunslingers.

The New Frontier has long identified its market as the kind of ageing cowboys and cowgirls who get their kicks from knocking back tequila at Margarita's Mexican Cantina and paying rock-bottom prices for barbecued chicken in the Cattleman's Buffet . Surprisingly, however, the actual hotel behind this down-at-heel veneer is a sleek, new edifice of gleaming reflective glass. Surrounded by tousled palm trees and topped by green roof tiles, it wouldn't look out of place on an exclusive Hawaiian beach. Not all the rooms live up to that promise, but the two-room suites in the Atrium Tower are good by any standards.

NEW YORK-NEW YORK

3790 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

Of all the strange and inventive games played by architects in Las Vegas, the current craze for creating counterfeit cities has to be the weirdest. It was spearheaded by the construction of New York-New York , which was hailed as a radical new departure from the moment it was first unveiled at the start of 1997. On the one hand, it looks utterly unlike the conventional idea of a "building," and yet on the other it's immediately recognizable as being an entire metropolis compressed into a single structure. The motives behind the creation of this miniature Manhattan were much the same as for the original; when space is at an absolute premium, the best way to build is upward. Thanks to its exuberant attention to detail, it's an absolute triumph, and remains the most perfectly realized of all the Strip's themed casinos.

From street level, New York-New York looks stunning, its twelve pastel skyscrapers silhouetted with absolute clarity against the blue desert sky, and fronted by a proud, pristine Statue of Liberty . Perhaps mercifully, the copycat towers do not include those of the World Trade Center, so although the facade became an obvious site for memorials in the wake of September 11, 2001, it hasn't acquired any extra symbolic significance. Its various components range between a third and a half of the size of the originals, with the highest point of the whole ensemble being the 510-foot, 47-story Empire State Building . This squashed-up cityscape is not simply a static tableau. Matching red and green fireboats jet arcs of water across New York Harbor, while a Coney Island roller coaster loops and swoops around the skyline in full view - and earshot - of the Strip.

For once, New York-New York is as much fun inside as out. Not that the distinction is all that clear; there's only a minimal correlation between the interior and the exterior, so you step through the doors to find yourself not safely inside Grand Central Station, but walking through Central Park at nightfall. Stuffed owls gaze down on the gaming tables from fake trees strung with fairy lights, and the carpeted walkways are disguised as footpaths strewn with fallen leaves. The one drawback is that by Las Vegas standards, New York-New York is a small joint, with a mere two thousand hotel rooms, and its narrow aisles can often feel overcrowded with sightseers.

As well as the obligatory casino and its elegant "Guys" and "Dolls" restrooms, the ground floor holds several unexpected delights. The Greenwich Village section comes complete not only with fast-food outlets and a fake subway station, but even fire hydrants, trashcans, and mailboxes sprayed with impressive (if firmly PG-rated) graffiti. Elevators up to the hotel rooms leave from lobbies styled to resemble specific buildings - one reproduces the Art Deco embellishments of the Chrysler Building - but unfortunately the towers above don't correspond to what's visible from outside. Among several scattered eateries are the excellent Il Fornaio deli and the America diner, with its massive relief map of the US suspended alarmingly from the ceiling. There's also an oxygen bar, Breathe , if you find yourself hyperventilating.

Most of the upper floor - officially, the Coney Island Emporium (daily 8.30am-2am) - is given over to a vast array of carnival sideshows, video games, and other attractions intended for kids. Its corridors also accommodate the often lengthy lines waiting to climb aboard the little yellow taxicabs of the Manhattan Express roller coaster (Sun-Thurs 10.30am-10.30pm, Fri & Sat 10.30am-midnight; \$10 per ride, or \$30 for an all-day Scream Pass). This is by far the best such ride in Vegas, racing out into the open air at speeds of up to 65mph, and spiraling through some fearsomely tight rolls; not an experience theme-park neophytes should undertake lightly.

PARIS

3655 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

By opening in September 1999, Paris , immediately north of the Aladdin , became the last Strip casino of the twentieth century. It's the handiwork of the same team of designers as New York-New York , who found themselves operating under similar spatial constraints. To make the most of its smallish site, they planted three legs of its centerpiece Eiffel Tower smack in the middle of the casino floor, and allowed it to straddle the Arc de Triomphe and the Opera. In this case, however, it's somewhat of a shame; feeling squashed up and claustrophobic is part of the fun of Manhattan, but Paris should surely be a bit more spacious and elegant.

It's slightly misleading to think of Paris as a separate casino at all. Technically it was built by Park Place, and licensed by

the Nevada Gaming Commission, as a major extension to Bally's next door, to which it's linked by a broad corridor at the back. At \$785 million, it cost around half of either Bellagio or the Venetian, and it shares much of its infrastructure and management with Bally's. As time goes by, however, the tail is beginning to wag the dog, with Bally's being seen as a minor adjunct to Paris.

The Strip-front exterior of Paris is a well-realized miniature, incorporating a welcome strolling and picture-taking area focused around a sparkling fountain and a handful of trees; a colorful replica Montgolfier balloon; and a sidewalk brasserie, Mon Ami Gabi, that's the only spot on the central Strip where you can sit down to eat or drink and watch the crowds go by. The Eiffel Tower itself - strictly speaking, the Eiffel Tower Experience - is also, of course, an extravagant sign in the finest Las Vegas tradition (daily 10am-midnight; \$9). Standing 540ft tall, it's half the size of the 1889 original, and made of welded steel rather than wrought iron, with "false rivets" added for cosmetic effect. Some components, most obviously the elevators, had to be built at full size in order for people to use them, so it's not a perfect scale model. Oddly enough, for all its presence on the Strip, it can barely be seen from elsewhere in the city, or even from the air. Nevertheless, taking the ninety-second ride straight through the roof and up to the summit - for which you might have to wait in line for up to thirty minutes - offers amazing views, at their best after dark, and most specifically across to Bellagio's water ballet. There's also a very expensive dinner-only restaurant, La Tour Eiffel, on its first level, seventeen stories up and reached by separate elevators.

The joyful wealth of detail inside Paris matches New York-New York, though in a slightly more twee and Disney-fied manner. Every member of staff (or "citizen of Paris") has a twenty-word French vocabulary, which is splendidly inadequate to cope with any genuine situation. Depending on the day-to-day level of economic optimism in the city, all kinds of gallant Gallic extras are employed to add a little atmosphere, including beret-wearing bicyclists who whistle chansons as they pedal basketloads of baguettes along its streets, dodging stripey-shirted accordionists and smart gendarmes. As well as a fine assortment of top-notch French restaurants, you'll find authentic bakeries, pastry shops, and even toy stores where the Sesame Street dolls talk in French. As any true Parisian could have warned you, the cobbled alleyways wreak havoc on high heels, strollers, and wheeled suitcases, but no one seems too concerned.

An air of French glamour wafts appealingly over the gaming tables, which are covered by metalwork canopies modeled on the metro stations of Paris, and the appeal of all that fabulous French food is unlikely to pall. Paris's original intention of programming predominantly French entertainment, on the other hand, has failed to pay off, and its 1200-seat theater has sat empty since the closure of a musical based on The Hunchback of Notre Dame.

RIVIERA

2901 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

In 1955, the new Riviera held considerable novelty value. Merely by remaining erect, it confounded skeptics who predicted that the sands of Las Vegas could never bear the weight of its unbelievable nine stories. Furthermore, its style, derived in theory from the French Côte d'Azur, seemed both exotic and romantic - even if in practice the decor owed more to the Florida resorts already run by its Miami backers.

Any attempt at creating a Mediterranean ambience having long been abandoned, the Riviera today touts for custom with one of the Strip's most exuberantly garish facades. The towering curved wall that faces south toward the Stardust consists in its entirety of a multilayered mirror, across the parallel planes of which swirl extravagant neon patterns of stars, stripes and curlicues. After that, the interior comes as a disappointment; while the Riviera claims to devote more floor space to gambling than any of its rivals, the casino area into which you're plunged straight off the Strip is relentlessly mundane. Immediately across from Circus Circus, and with its own sidewalk entrance, it even has a separate arcade known as Nickel Town, devoted exclusively to nickel slots and cheap snacks. Much further back, behind the whole casino caboodle, you come to the hotel lobby and the Riviera's own convention center, which is now the basis of its prosperity.

Ever since the Riviera began, it has stuck to the old formula of enticing in gamblers with traditional semi-sexy entertainment. When it first opened, it set new records by paying Liberace \$50,000 per week - by no coincidence, it went briefly broke within three months - and it still has four showrooms in nightly operation.

SAHARA

2535 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

Revitalized by an injection of capital from current owner William Bennett, the former chairman of Circus Circus, the Sahara is one of the few remaining bastions of a once-ubiquitous Las Vegas tradition. There was a time when Strip casinos relished the city's desert setting, but with the demise of long-standing soulmates such as the Dunes and the Sands, only the Sahara and the Aladdin still cater to those who nurture Arabian Nights fantasies of sheiks at play in the shifting sands.

Fifty years have elapsed since December 1952, when the combined efforts of LA jeweler Milton Prell and Phoenix developer Del Webb went into replacing the bankrupt Bingo Club with the gleaming new Sahara , but only recently has the hotel made any significant changes. On the down side, the trademark camels above the main entrance have been put out to pasture, in favor of a glittering golden dome encircled by Moorish arches. A plus, on the other hand, is the new Speed Ride , a magnetic-induction ride (or roller coaster, to you or I) in which the cars literally crash through the outer wall of the NASCAR Café , loop through the open air above the Strip, and then climb a 250-foot-tower (Sun-Thurs 10am-10pm, Fri & Sat 10am-midnight; \$6).

Inside, the Sahara 's theming was always pretty rudimentary, and it still resembles a Third World airport lounge more than a sultan's palace. At least the venerable Congo Showroom , the Casbar Lounge , and the Caravan Restaurant are still going strong. All would have been familiar to Elvis Presley and his entourage, for whom the Sahara was a second home throughout the 1960s - notably during the shooting of Viva Las Vegas in the summer of 1963, which kickstarted his hectic off-screen romance with co-star Ann-Margret - and to the Beatles, who performed here in 1964.

Elvis would no doubt have been unable to resist the crowd-pleasing indoor Sahara Speedworld (Sun-Thurs 10am-10pm, Fri & Sat 10am-11pm), where two distinct virtual-reality rides aim to reproduce the thrill of Indy car racing. In the first, \$8 entitles you to "drive" a three-quarter-size replica car, which bucks and surges in response to the slightest touch of the controls as you face your own private screen. At any one time, eight cars race each other around video renditions of either the Indianapolis racetrack or the streets of Las Vegas; printouts at the end reveal which driver beat the rest. The more you do it, the more likely you are to win, so the whole experience is fiendishly addictive. By way of alternative, you can also pay \$3 for the much less heart-thumping experience of watching a 3-D movie of the real thing.

SHOWCASE MALL

3769 Las Vegas Blvd S.

Immediately north of the MGM Grand, the Showcase Mall is a real rarity for the Strip - a gleaming modern development that's not a casino. The general trend away from catering to kids, however, coupled with the lack of gambling revenue, probably explains why it's floundered in recent years, with both the World of Coca-Cola museum and the All-Star Cafe fast-food restaurant forced to close their doors. In the absence as yet of any Strip casino offering its own movie theater , the twelve-screen complex here continues to do good business, but the mall's main feature is a Spielberg-owned arcade of up-to-the-minute video games and virtual-reality machines, Game Works (daily 10am-4am). Unlimited video-game play costs \$20 for one hour, \$25 for two hours, and \$27 for three; there's also a 75-foot rock-climbing wall (\$10).

STARDUST

3000 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

Though long since overshadowed by a host of nouveau-riche newcomers, the Stardust can look back on a career as a major Las Vegas player. A glittering child of the space age, it burst on the scene in 1958 as the self-proclaimed largest hotel in the world, no more than two stories high perhaps, but boasting more than a thousand rooms. Cascades of neon color erupted from its Sputnik-inspired Strip facade; it had its own rodeo facility, and soon acquired a Grand Prix racetrack as well.

However, all that dazzling starlight served to conceal some very murky figures lurking in the background. Its true owner at the outset was said to be Chicago mobster Sam Giancana, and control passed during the 1970s to the Midwest Mafia, based in Kansas City. A Federal raid in 1976 revealed the Stardust 's role at the heart of the largest ever "skimming" operation in Las Vegas, in which a concealed vault was used to whisk away an estimated \$4 million per year in unrecorded slot machine takings. Similar scandals erupted periodically well into the 1980s; Martin Scorsese's 1995 movie Casino tells the story in entertaining detail.

Under the ownership of the Boyd Corporation, whose other properties include Sam's Town , the Stardust is these days entirely legitimate. Its original frontage was supplanted 25 years ago by the more abstract but no less spectacular pink neon starburst sign that still stands today, albeit toned down by a very staid choice of lettering. With its windows tinted a rich, deep purple, the main hotel block looks comparatively upmarket, though the effect is spoiled by the low-rise casino sprawl in front.

For its first 33 years, the Stardust was renowned as the home of the French nude revue Lido de Paris , Las Vegas's longest-running show of all time. That reputation led to its use as the fictional location for the movie Showgirls . Entertainment nowadays has become rather more staid, with the Wayner himself making all-too-regular appearances at his namesake Wayne Newton Theater. Otherwise, in the absence of the usual modern frivolities and distractions, people tend to visit the Stardust specifically in order to gamble. The very large, high-tech Race and Sports Book, which has its own separate entrance straight off the Strip at the northern end of the property, stages regular \$10,000 football and handicapping contests.

STRATOSPHERE

2000 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

The stretch of Las Vegas Boulevard that runs north from Sahara Avenue, dominated by the mighty Stratosphere Tower, is not traditionally regarded as part of the Strip - not least because it lies within the city limits of Las Vegas rather than Clark County. This area was long known as Naked City, at first because the showgirls who lived here in the 1940s were said to sunbathe in the nude, but later to denote its status as one of Las Vegas's poorest and most crime-ridden neighborhoods.

In 1979, one of the great Las Vegas hucksters, Bob Stupak, opened the immensely tacky Vegas World casino where the Stratosphere now stands, half a dozen short blocks up from the Sahara. His promotional genius, expressed in advertisements and direct mailings that promised "virtually free Las Vegas vacations," filled the place with first-time Vegas visitors. An inveterate gambler himself, he also specialized in bargain deals for gamblers, offering games such as no-zero roulette, crapless craps, and "Double Exposure" blackjack, in which the dealer's cards were dealt face up. Stupak's dream was to erect the world's tallest tower alongside Vegas World - what could be more perfect than owning a building where people will wait in line to pay for the privilege of riding up the elevators?

Construction costs, however, proved wildly expensive, and plans had to be scaled down. Thanks to the strong desert winds, and the fact that the foundations could only be twelve feet deep, the tower ended up as not the tallest structure in the world, but simply the tallest west of the Mississippi. A harmless but all-too-visible electrical fire that lit up the half-completed edifice like a Roman candle did nothing to help, and panic among his coinvestors all but forced Stupak to sell his soul. To persuade the Minneapolis-based Grand Casinos company (no relation to MGM Grand) to buy a three-quarter stake in the project, he agreed that Vegas World itself would have to go and be replaced by a higher-class hotel to match the tower.

When the Stratosphere finally opened, in 1996, foot traffic turned out to be even lower than worst-case scenarios had dared to contemplate. The stewards employed to shepherd the crowds toward the tower were swiftly laid off, and the place was widely reported to be empty for the first ten months. In the longer run, however, it has done surprisingly well, kept busy particularly by European tour groups, who may perhaps be less sensitive than Americans to the fact that it's not really on the Strip, but are also attracted by the low rates for its no-nonsense rooms. It has also maintained the Stupak tradition of low-cost gambling with eye-catching gimmicks.

At ground level, the Stratosphere is far from enthralling. It's hard to tell quite what its theme is supposed to be: a hot-air balloon here, a chunk of the Eiffel Tower there, stray slices of general Americana elsewhere. For sightseers, the only reason to come is the 1149-foot tower itself. While the drabness of the main shaft means that it's not a great piece of architecture, the multicolored flashes and spirals of light around its base provide one of Las Vegas's finest displays of neon, and the "pod" at the summit fully lives up to expectations.

Tickets to reach the top are sold up on the second floor, while the elevators themselves start a long walk further on at the far end of a shopping-and-souvenir mall (Sun-Thurs 10am-midnight, Fri & Sat 10am-2am; \$6, but look out for discount coupons, and two- or three-for-one combinations with the buffet or stage shows). At the end of the 75-second ascent, you emerge outdoors, on the 109th floor, to be confronted by an astounding 360° panorama of the city. The views are even better from the floor below, where the windows of the indoor gallery are angled out over the edge, and detailed captions and photographs explain every discernible detail. The next floor down holds the Top of the World restaurant.

Most visitors come this high, however, in order to go another few steps closer to heaven on the two utterly demented thrill rides that occupy the uppermost level of the pod. The High Roller (\$5), the world's highest roller coaster, rumbles its way around the outside at what might seem an innocuous speed were you not a quarter of a mile up in the sky, while the ludicrous but terrifying Big Shot (\$8) is a four-person open-air couch on which you're shunted to the very top of an additional 160-foot spire, and then allowed to free-fall back down again.

The Stratosphere spent most of 2001 trying to get planning permission for a spectacular new roller coaster, in which riders would plummet down the side of the tower itself and then hurtle right across the Strip. When local residents finally blocked the project, the Stratosphere threatened to resuscitate an even more extraordinary ride, for which it was granted permission back in 1996: a King-Kong-shaped elevator, known as the Belly of the Beast. The gorilla would carry fifty passengers at a time up the outside of the tower, and then, under attack from simulated airplanes, let them go.

Sour grapes at its planning tribulations has also led the Stratosphere to announce its withdrawal from the new monorail system that will link the Strip and downtown. As the casino has always been seen as the scheme's most obvious beneficiary - finally, it would be able to benefit from a bit of passing trade - that would really be cutting off its nose to spite its face.

TREASURE ISLAND

3300 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

If you knew no better, you might imagine that the brash-looking Treasure Island , next door to the Mirage , was a vulgar and possibly unwelcome neighbor. In fact, the relationship is very close, even parental; Treasure Island was built by Mirage Enterprises in 1993 using the first flush of profits from the Mirage . They remain umbilically connected, by a monorail that loops between the front of the Mirage and the back of Treasure Island , and they also share the same approach road from the Strip.

Treasure Island was designed to appeal to a younger audience than the Mirage , a little less affluent but more likely to be traveling with kids in tow, and took the Mirage 's volcano concept several stages further. Here, the whole lower facade of the hotel is sculpted into a novelty attraction - an intricate, pastel-pretty seafront village, somewhere on the Spanish Main, that may seem awfully familiar to anyone who's visited Disney's Pirates of the Caribbean ride. In addition, the theming extends out onto the sidewalk, which is kitted out with boardwalks and rigging to accommodate spectators (and to obscure the view of drivers who might be tempted to stop). Finally, the diorama also incorporates moving parts and even live actors, in the shape of floating "ships" crewed by pirates and British sailors respectively. Architectural theorists are still arguing whether to call Treasure Island a building, a performance space or a theme park.

Amid a great deal of yo-ho-ho-ing and cannonfire, the two vessels slug it out across the lagoon-spanning plank bridge each evening, in the ten-minute Buccaneer Bay Show . There was great debate at the planning stage as to which the audience would identify with most, and should therefore win the battle. If you don't want to know which one sinks, look away now - it's the British frigate. The victorious pirates then invite the assembled crowd to come and join the celebrations within Treasure Island .

The Buccaneer Bay Show takes place daily at 5.30pm, 7pm, 8.30pm, 10pm & 11.30pm. Performances are canceled during bad weather or high winds, and in winter the 11.30pm show only takes place on Fridays and Saturdays.

The main hotel tower makes little attempt to match the Caribbean clutter below, standing aloof above the ruined battlements and higgledy-piggledy palms. The balconies on this slender, pale orange block are for show only; the whole structure forms a Y-shape, stretching back from the Strip, and holding almost three thousand guestrooms.

With their takeover of the Mirage empire in 2000, MGM seem finally to have abandoned the notion of Las Vegas as a family destination. The impact on Treasure Island has thus been dramatic. One by one, its old child-pleasing fripperies are being stripped away, a huge video arcade for example being replaced by the Kahunaville cocktail bar. Disappearing too is the oddly subversive quasi-Satanic symbolism that used to permeate the place, though the main sign on the Strip still depicts a giant skull, and the ornate double gateway boasts a matching pair of skull-shaped doorhandles.

Treasure Island has in any case always catered very cannily to its yuppie clientele. It offers a top-quality pool area and spa, serious gambling facilities such as a very high-tech Race and Sports Book, and of course a busy Starbucks coffee outlet, upstairs near the monorail stop. It also puts on classier entertainment than the Mirage , in the form of the over-portentous but nonetheless impressive Cirque du Soleil show *Mystère* .

TROPICANA

3801 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

On its opening day in 1957, the Tropicana was not literally alone in the desert - the now-vanished Hacienda had gone up nearby the previous year - but it stood a mile removed from the body of the Strip, and considered itself as a class apart. Bankrolled by the New Orleans Mafia, the "Tiffany of the Strip" was aimed squarely at high-rollers, and its flamboyant paradise-island trimmings epitomized Las Vegas luxury. Since Excalibur came along in 1990, however, the crossroads of Tropicana Avenue and Las Vegas Boulevard has become one of the Strip's two principal intersections, rivaled only by the spot where Caesars Palace and Bellagio face off across Flamingo Road. These days, the Tropicana palls in comparison to its three mighty neighbors. Even so, it continues to do well, thanks in large part to refugees from Excalibur and the MGM Grand who cross the pedestrian bridges over the Strip either to find a more traditional place to gamble, or simply to escape the kids.

Though the "tropical" theme of the "Island of Las Vegas" is pretty vague, and not based on any specific location, that didn't stop the Tropicana from trying to sue the Mirage for allegedly copying the idea. Appropriately enough, its current facade suspiciously resembles the Caribbean village at another Mirage property, Treasure Island , minus the pirates but plus false storefronts in pastel colors. The corresponding shops can be found within, just not behind the relevant "doors."

The interior of the Tropicana is a muddled maze that offers scant reward to those who try to penetrate it. It owes the "Tiffany" nickname to the ornate domed ceiling of stained glass that hangs above its central gaming tables. The ceiling is modeled on that of a San Francisco bank destroyed in the 1906 earthquake; its impact, however, is diminished by the fact that it only covers a small proportion of the total room space, which is otherwise so low-ceilinged as to make it almost unnoticeable.

In terms of traffic volume, the intersection of Las Vegas Boulevard and Tropicana Avenue is said to be the busiest in

America.

Devotees of Las Vegas history can spend a happy half-hour browsing through the Casino Legends Hall of Fame , near the Promotions Center on the first floor (daily 7am-9pm; \$4, or free with coupons handed out at main entrance). A bit too much space is given over to a collection of chips from every casino that's ever existed - many are for sale, priced from \$4 to \$600 - but when the focus shifts to the personalities of the past, things become more interesting. The entertainment section kicks off with Sophie Tucker, who starred at the Last Frontier in 1944, runs through Frank Sinatra and Liberace, and includes a bevy of showgirls from the Tropicana 's own long-running Folies Bergeres . If it's Elvis you're after, head for the movies section, where Viva Las Vegas is one of four classic flicks on display. Some spectacular footage of planned casino implosions also runs constantly, along with strangely tasteless film clips of the city's most disastrous fires. The "Bad Guys" section lingers lovingly on the skeletons in Las Vegas's closet, describing Bugsy Siegel as more of a "colorful uncle" than a founding father. The Tropicana 's tribulations are not ignored - it's widely acknowledged as having remained under Mob domination until 1979, when it was taken over by Ramada - as it moves to the surprisingly downbeat conclusion that "today Las Vegas's casinos are relatively Mob-free."

Where the Tropicana really does come up trumps is with its swimming pool , which is among the best in Las Vegas. Covering five landscaped acres, it's more of a waterpark really, surrounded by lush gardens and complete with hot tubs, fish-filled lagoons, a swim-up bar, and an outdoor wedding chapel.

VENETIAN

3265 Las Vegas Blvd S, .

The Venetian occupies a legendary Las Vegas location, which as home to the Sands casino from 1952 onward played host to the fabled antics of the Rat Pack . Although Howard Hughes announced plans for the "new Sands " during the late 1960s, the old structure was not demolished until November 1996, and the Venetian only just managed to make its debut in the twentieth century. It was the brainchild of one man, Sheldon Adelson, who made his fortune establishing Las Vegas's annual COMDEX exhibition as the world's premier computer-industry trade show, and then selling it for \$800 million in 1995.

The birth of the Venetian was plagued with complications, and its eventual emergence in May 1999, with only a handful of restaurants in action and no shops, was acclaimed as a textbook example of how not to open a casino. Initial prognostications were gloomy, and the Venetian racked up heavy losses. A few short years on, however, it seems like a real success story. While lavish enough to match Bellagio , it's somehow much more user-friendly, its architecture and attractions enticing enough to lure in the tourists, and its convention center and upscale accommodation ensuring that it's always packed with business travelers. The Venetian 's declared ambition to become the world's largest hotel remains on hold - September 11 stymied plans to add a second, thousand-room hotel tower, while the projected three thousand-room Lido tower is still on the distant horizon - but it has firmly established itself as the Strip's premier must-see casino.

Construction of the Venetian cost around \$1.4 billion, and Mr Adelson has got plenty to show for his money. His dream appears to have been to cram all the snapshots of his real-life honeymoon in Venice, Italy, within a single frame. The Strip facade incorporates loving facsimiles of six major Venice buildings - from south to north, the Library , the Campanile (allow your eyes to glide over the parking garage at this point), the Palazzo Contarini-Fasan , the Doge's Palace , the Ca' d'Oro , and the Clock Tower - as well as the Rialto Bridge , the Bridge of Sighs , and a small stretch of "canal." In yet another example of how Strip rivals feed off each other, the roomy balcony of the Doge's Palace makes a perfect vantage point to watch the volcano at the Mirage .

In front of them all stand two columns , modeled on a pair brought to Venice's Piazza San Marco from Constantinople in 1172. One is topped by St Theodore, the city's original patron, the other by a winged lion (or chimera) representing St Mark, who became its patron in 1204. The originals were used for public executions - criminals were hanged or even buried alive in the gap - so superstitious Venetians avoid passing between them to this day. In Las Vegas, however, there's little choice, as they flank the main entrance to the casino.

Although Venice was the first European city to have a public gambling house - it opened in 1638, and guests were obliged to wear masks - the challenge of making the casino itself particularly Venetian has been largely ignored. The coolness of its marble floor comes as a welcome relief after the heat of the Strip, but the slot machines and tables in the gaming area beyond are much like any others. Instead, the designers have aimed to propel visitors swiftly upward to the Grand Canal Shoppes . The central stairwell is quite magnificent, topped by vivid frescoes copied from yet more Venice originals, and leads to a hallway paved with Escher-like trompe l'oeil tiles. Beyond that lies the breathtaking Grand Canal itself, a ludicrous re-creation of the waterways of Venice, complete with gondolas and opera-singing gondoliers, that's quintessential Las Vegas, and as such utterly irresistible - for God's sake, it's upstairs . Tickets for gondola rides, both up here and also for the open-air section of canal out front, are sold at the very far end of the Grand Canal (indoors Sun-Thurs 10am-10.30pm, Fri & Sat 10am-11.30pm, outdoors much shorter hours, varying seasonally; \$12.50 per person, \$5 under-12s, or \$50 for a two-person private ride).

In fall 2001, the Venetian comprehensively out-trumped Bellagio 's now all-but-defunct Gallery of Fine Art by opening not just one but two distinct Guggenheim art museums . Both were designed by Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, and built in an ultra-modern style that's deliberately out of keeping with the Italian Renaissance flourishes of the Venetian proper. Lining the Strip side of the stunning, colonnaded main hotel lobby, the Guggenheim Hermitage (daily 9am-8.30pm; \$15, under-13s \$7) is a collaboration between the Guggenheim Foundation in New York and St Petersburg's legendary State Hermitage Museum. The aim is to provide much-needed funds for the Russian museum in return for displaying some of its finest treasures on a six-monthly changing rotation. The main area of overlap between the Guggenheim and Hermitage collections being the end of the nineteenth and the start of the twentieth centuries, exhibitions so far have concentrated on Impressionism and Cubism, with Monet, Picasso, and Van Gogh well represented. The actual paintings are held in place on the russet steel walls of the gallery's four small rooms using magnetism.

Further back on the casino's ground floor, the Guggenheim Las Vegas (daily 9am-11pm; \$15, under-13s \$7) is at eight times the size a more dramatic and versatile space, intended to display sculpture, architecture, and mixed-media presentations as well as painting. If its inaugural exhibition of "The Art of the Motorcycle" is anything to go by, it's aimed firmly at the traditional gimmick-seeking Las Vegas crowd. Sliding panels mean that it can function either as a single cavernous hall or two more- conventional gallery floors. As a whimsical nod to Strip sensibilities, when the uppermost skylight closes its underside displays a painted reproduction of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Sadly, the Venetian does nothing to honor its predecessor; the Sands Expo and Convention Center is the only place where the old Sands name survives.

WET'N'WILD

2601 Las Vegas Blvd S, . Early May to Sept daily 10am-8pm; \$26, under-4ft \$20.

If you've been to a water park before, you'll need no persuading to spend a half-day at Wet'n'Wild , immediately south of the Sahara ; if you haven't, you're in for a real treat. The ideal place to cool off during the long hot Las Vegas summer, or release the tension you've accumulated at the gaming tables, it offers an exhilarating array of flumes and chutes, plus a huge wave pool. Having paid the hefty admission fee - look beforehand for discount coupons in local magazines - you're free to pad around in your swimsuit for the rest of the day, repeating your favorite rides until the novelty wears off. Stand-outs include the seven-story Der Stuka plummet; Bomb Bay , in which the floor suddenly gives way to drop you 76 feet; and the Black Hole , a flume ride through interstellar darkness that's reminiscent of Disney's Space Mountain . Lines are longest during school vacations.