

PHOTOS BY PATRIK GIARDINO

# *That's* Vegas, *Baby!*

**THE GREATEST BARGAIN DESTINATION  
ON THE PLANET** BY MICHAEL KONIK

**T**he uncharitable way to describe Las Vegas, the way someone who genuinely dislikes this mecca of indulgence and iniquity might describe it, would be to call the entire city a fraud. As in charlatan. Or con artist.

I like Las Vegas—for some of the same reasons enumerated by those who intensely dislike the place. I enjoy the cheese and the glitz and the utter disregard for what generally passes for good taste in other parts of America. I'm amused by the unbridled, unrestrained excess. I like the schmaltz. So I think "fraud" is maybe too harsh a word for my old friend bordering the Mojave Desert. I prefer "fake."

Las Vegas is a fake, a magnificent fake. It's cubic zirconium, a counterfeit Rembrandt, fat-free sugarless ice cream. It's all unreal.

And that's why I like it.

Remember when you played childhood games of make-believe and let's-pretend? When you dressed up in Dad's oversized suit jacket or Mom's best Sunday hat? Remember when the realization of fantasies was far more important than adhering to the banal conventions of quotidian reality?

That's Vegas, baby.

If you need reality, Vegas isn't for you. But if you can dig a sort of parallel universe, where nothing is as it seems and no one minds, a Vegas visit can be utterly transporting, even if you go nowhere but your imagination.

And you do need some imagination to fully appreciate Las Vegas' appeal. Theater people call it "suspension of disbelief." Hipsters call it "going with the flow." I call it playing along. If you do, you can be instantly transformed into Grace Kelly, or James Bond, or The Terminator or Catherine the Great, or anyone you want to be—while no one back home is looking.

That's Vegas, baby.

Three of the best golf courses open to the public in Las Vegas are fakes. Shadow Creek, Royal Links and the newest one, Bali Hai, are all rolling-tumbling-undulating wonderlands that recall, respectively, a tropical rain forest, the seaside linksland of Scotland and a Polynesian island. All of them were built on perfectly flat

patches of arid scrubland previously better suited for conducting land-speed tests than for chasing golf balls. All of them are now green and luscious and utterly unreal. (And utterly delightful.)

Four of the newest hotel-casinos to grace the Strip are fakes. Paris, the Venetian, Bellagio and Mandalay Bay are all make-believe versions of France and Italy and, I guess, Myanmar (also known as Burma). Never mind that the real Lake of Como (the one without a casino attached to it) doesn't erupt into a nightly dancing-fountains spectacle featuring the warblings of Andrea Bocelli, Luciano Pavarotti and Frank Sinatra. Never mind that there's no bay remotely near the real Mandalay (after all, the name makes such a nice rhyme). And never mind that in the real Paris one seldom sees boulevards lined with shrieking slot machines. These Vegas places look and feel good, even if they fudge the historical and geographical details. Nobody has ever seemed to care much that Las Vegas' fake version of Egypt, Luxor, is built in the shape of a pyramid, despite the fact that the real city of Luxor, on the banks of the Nile, has no pyramid. Pyramids are cool; slanted elevators are cool; Cleopatra is cool—and Vegas is about coolness, not veracity.

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I could give you the 200-page version of how they're able to pay the light bills in Las Vegas—not to mention being able to offer \$9.95 steak-and-lobster dinners and \$49 hotel rooms. But I think the short version will suffice: Unless you are a professional gambler—and if you are, please accept my apologies in advance and expect to be profiled in my next book—you will lose at Las Vegas casinos.

Not every time. Not all the time. But you will in the long run. Remember the long run? It resides everywhere except Las Vegas, back in the everyday life that occurs when your 48 or 72 hours in never-never land come to an end.

For Las Vegas to flourish, it must inflict pain (in the form of needlessly squandered money) on the more than 30 million people who visit every year. Yet we hardy pilgrims, who come from every state in America and virtually every country on Earth, feel somehow privileged to donate our wages to the Barnum-like showmen who make our travail feel oh-so-good.

The casino wins a small piece of every dollar wagered, over and over and over, until all those small pieces accrete into a 27-story luxury hotel that looks vaguely like some famous building in Europe. Or a golf course with a Scottish burr.

Not that that should stop the smart visitor from thoroughly enjoying all the accouterments and distractions and having a good time. I mean, a ridiculously good time. The kind of time other vacation destinations try to represent in advertisements featuring smiling models and airbrushed beaches but seldom deliver.

Las Vegas is one of the greatest eating and drinking towns in the world, with perhaps the finest collection of restaurants outside of Paris (the real one in France) and New York City (the real one next to New Jersey). Picasso (at Bellagio) and Lutèce (Venetian) are consistently lauded in all the foodie magazines. Virtually every celebrity chef worth his toque and Food Network time slot (Wolfgang Puck, Emeril Lagasse, Charlie Palmer) has a Las Vegas satellite branch modeled closely on his original restaurant—the one located in an authentic place like Chicago or New Orleans. Even if you're not an epicure eager and willing to shell out a few C-notes for a seven-course tasting menu and a bottle of '90 Château Haut-Brion at one of Vegas' temples of gastronomy, the town is still rife with loss-leader prime-rib specials and all-you-can-gorge buffet deals. Indeed, the running joke among locals is that no one living here can afford to cook; it's cheaper to dine out.

Las Vegas is one of the greatest people-watching spots on Earth, because visitors here behave with an abandon and honesty that they do not—cannot—exercise back home. An abundance of (free) alcohol will do that to people. So will the drama and the heart-quickenning excitement of having one's fate decided by the turn of a card or the tumble of a die. Walk through any Las Vegas hotel-casino and you'll see hundreds of miniature spectacles being composed on the spot, like so many guerrilla theater events. Moreover, despite the alleged purification Las Vegas has recently endured, the city still pulses with a panoply of adult pleasures, and the casts of these human extravaganzas tend to look better, more obviously attractive, than the cast, say, of the grocery store checkout line back home.

Las Vegas is one of the greatest entertainment cities on the planet, right up there with Branson, Missouri—and last time I checked, Branson didn't offer showgirls in feathered headdresses. In addition to the mythic chorines, you'll find famous magicians like Lance Burton (at Monte Carlo, the Vegas version), famous stage

productions like the increasingly pretentious yet enduringly alluring Cirque du Soleil (at both Treasure Island and Bellagio) and a rotating roster of household-name “headliners”—Tony Bennett, Dennis Miller, Vanessa Williams—performing at whatever casino will pay their six-figure fees. All these diversions, remember, are offered with the express purpose of getting potential losers to park themselves (and their bankrolls) at one particular casino instead of the one across the street. Despite this nefarious motive for headliners and circuses, it’s almost impossible not to be amused in America’s true Entertainment Capital, unless you have no interest in music, dancing, comedy, magic or feathered showgirls.

You see, the most enduring shows in Las Vegas celebrate the art of fakery. It’s no accident that mimics are the toast of the town. Long-running showroom staples like “American Superstars” (Stratosphere), “Legends in Concert” (Imperial Palace), “The Rat Pack Is Back” (Sahara) and “The Dream King” (Boardwalk) feature anonymous performers pretending to be celebrities. “Boy-lesque” (which seems to play at a different casino every six months) features boys pretending to be famous girls. And two major Strip properties, the Flamingo Hilton and the Mirage, boast name-in-lights headliners you’ve probably never heard of doing impressions of hundreds of people you probably have. Indeed, the most entertaining show in Las Vegas, “Danny Gans, Man of Many Voices” at the Mirage, stars an underexposed genius (no network television specials, no movie cameos) who sings like hundreds of overexposed pop culture icons. Gans glides from Michael Bolton to Johnny Mathis to Michael Jackson as effortlessly as Las Vegas glides from the everyday to the surreal. Like the city he performs in, Gans is an impostor, but one whose presence you never want to leave.

That’s Vegas, baby.

As a longtime lover of this city, I’ve watched two trends over the last decade that appeared to be refashioning its image, or trying to. The first was Las Vegas as a family destination, a sort of Disneyland in the desert. The second was Las Vegas, long the greatest bargain destination on the planet, as a superswank luxury destination. Those shoes didn’t really fit, not on these feet anyway.

The blackjack “shoes” continue to fit just fine. And for the time being, that magnificent fake, Las Vegas, Nevada, seems inclined to do what it does best: Be itself. 🎲

*Michael Konik, the author of The Man With the \$100,000 Breasts and Telling Lies and Getting Paid, is considered “the dean of the world’s gambling writers.”*

## Leaving for Las Vegas?

For current information about hotels, packages, shows and attractions, start with the **Las Vegas Visitor Information Center** (3150 Paradise Road; 877-847-4858 or 702-892-7575; [www.vegasfreedom.com](http://www.vegasfreedom.com)).

## House Specialties

**PIRATE BATTLE AT TREASURE ISLAND** Tall ships and cannons. This being Vegas, the scoundrels always win. 3300 Las Vegas Boulevard South; 800-288-7206 or 702-894-7111; [www.treasureisland.com](http://www.treasureisland.com).

**SIEGFRIED & ROY’S WHITE TIGERS AT THE MIRAGE** Prettiest kitties in captivity. 3400 Las Vegas Boulevard South; 702-791-7111; [www.siegfriedandroy.com](http://www.siegfriedandroy.com).

**THE FOUNTAINS OF BELLAGIO** Fountains “dance” up to 240 feet high to the voices of Andrea Bocelli and Frank Sinatra. 3600 Las Vegas Boulevard South; 888-987-3456 or 702-693-7444; [www.bellagio.com](http://www.bellagio.com).

**99-CENT SHRIMP COCKTAIL AT GOLDEN GATE** Available 24 hours a day for the past 42 years, the last 10 without a price increase. One Fremont Street;

## Best Bets

**BARGAIN BUFFET** The “Firelight Buffet” at **Sam’s Town** serves a panoply of cuisines from five distinct ethnic stations. The fare encompasses made-to-order fajitas, rotisserie chicken, catfish and gumbo—\$6.99 for lunch; \$8.99 for dinner. 5111 Boulder Highway; 800-897-8696 or 702-456-7777; [www.samstownlv.com](http://www.samstownlv.com).

**HOTEL Caesars Palace** provides customer service and luxury worthy of a Ritz-Carlton, only here in the land of Nero you can request a room with a mirror on the ceiling. 3570 Las Vegas Boulevard South; 877-427-7243 or 702-731-7110; [www.caesars.com](http://www.caesars.com).

**HAUTE CUISINE Picasso** (at Bellagio) and **Lutèce** (at the Venetian) serve the kind of imaginative, gorgeous and ridiculously delicious food most gourmands associate with Paris or New York. You can get it in Sin City with sublime wines that will make you forget

### COMPLETE STEAK DINNER AT ELLIS ISLAND

Soup or salad, baked potato, garlic bread and dinner rolls, and 10-ounce filet of sirloin for the 1930s tariff of \$4.95. 4178 Koval Lane; 702-733-8901; [www.ellislandcasino.com](http://www.ellislandcasino.com).

**THE POOL AT THE HARD ROCK HOTEL** Who needs “Baywatch”? And as long as you’re there, the people-watching doesn’t get any more entertaining than at the bar on the main casino floor of the Hard Rock Casino. 4455 Paradise Road; 702-693-5000; [www.hardrockhotel.com](http://www.hardrockhotel.com).

**DAY HIKE AT RED ROCK CANYON** One of America’s greatest natural wonders, about 15 miles from one of America’s most unnatural cities. At the terminus of West Charleston Boulevard (Visitor’s Center: 702-363-1921).

you’re having dessert in the desert. Picasso: 3600 Las Vegas Boulevard South; 702-693-7223; [www.bellagio.com](http://www.bellagio.com). Lutèce: 3355 Las Vegas Boulevard South; 702-414-2220; [www.venetian.com/dining](http://www.venetian.com/dining).

**BLACKJACK GAME** Thanks to liberal rules, the eight-deck game at the **Las Vegas Club** has a mere 0.12 percent advantage against perfect play. If you don’t count cards but know the correct decision for every dealer upcard versus player total, I estimate that this game will cost you, as a \$5 bettor, about 50 cents an hour for all the free drinks you can handle. 18 East Fremont Street; 800-634-6532 or 702-385-1664; [www.playatlv.com](http://www.playatlv.com).

**MAGIC SHOW** Pretty girls, pretty birds and a pretty awesome magician make **Lance Burton**, at **Monte Carlo**, the most entertaining prestidigitator on the Strip. 3770 Las Vegas Boulevard South; 888-529-4828 or 702-730-7777; [www.monte-carlo.com](http://www.monte-carlo.com) or [www.lanceburton.com](http://www.lanceburton.com).

**HEADLINER** The “Man of Many Voices,” **Danny Gans**, at the **Mirage**, does dozens of singing impressions, from Anita Baker to Dean Martin to Kermit the Frog. He’s funny, fast-paced and eerily accurate. 3400 Las Vegas Boulevard South; 800-214-4267 or 702-792-7600; [www.dannygansshow.com](http://www.dannygansshow.com).

**THRILL RIDE** If you enjoy feeling like your skeleton has been separated from your internal organs, try the **Big Shot** at **Stratosphere**. This reverse bungee-jumping thing is mounted at the top of a tower, more than 1,000 feet above the Strip. Yikes! 2000 Las Vegas Boulevard South; 800-998-6937 or 702-380-7777; [www.stratospherehotel.com/tower](http://www.stratospherehotel.com/tower).

## Throwbacks

**LIBERACE MUSEUM** A vast repository of all the fabulous things related to “Mr. Showmanship.” Proof positive that Western civilization did indeed almost come to an end. 1775 East Tropicana Avenue; 702-798-5595; [www.liberace.org](http://www.liberace.org).

**STARDUST CASINO** Though much of the actual footage was shot at the Riviera, across the street, this quintessential “old Vegas” joint was the mobbed-up site of the events depicted in the movie *Casino*. Current home of Vegas icon Wayne Newton. 3000 Las Vegas Boulevard South; 702-732-6111; [www.stardustlv.com](http://www.stardustlv.com).

**THE NEON MUSEUM** Rather than housing the garishly glowing signs most people associate with the Vegas of yesteryear, the Neon Museum displays the best vintage colored-gas creations outdoors, on

**“THE RAT PACK IS BACK”** In this splendid show in the **Sahara**’s Congo Room (itself a throwback to the days of Louis Prima and Keely Smith), “Frank,” “Dino,” “Sammy” and “Joey” *return* to do one of their famous half-singing, half-goofing-around performances, which personified 1960s Vegas cool. Very hip. 2535 Las Vegas Boulevard South; 888-696-2121 (casino) or 702-737-2515; [www.saharavegas.com](http://www.saharavegas.com).

**POKER HALL OF FAME** Housed incongruously in a blackjack pit (just outside the mini-baccarat pit), this wall of honor at **Binion’s Horseshoe**, home of the World Series of Poker, pays tribute to the greatest gamblers ever to grace Las Vegas. 128 East Fremont Street; 702-382-1600; [www.binions.com](http://www.binions.com).—M.K.

Las Vegas' "glitter gulch," now known as  
"The Fremont Experience." 731 South  
Fourth Street (downtown Las Vegas);  
702-229-5366.