



HIGH ROLLING

LAS VEGAS US



Sure bets for the fast and curious

Forget The Strip ... the fun really begins when you tear yourself away from the tables and head for the edge of town, writes **Julian Swallow**

FROM the air, Las Vegas stretches outwards in a palette of dusty greys and browns until its suburbs mingle with the surrounding Mojave Desert.

In the daytime, with its necklace of neon switched off, the city's famous Strip disappears into the haze as our helicopter banks east; its colossal pyramids, Disney castles and pastiches of the Eiffel Tower and the New York skyline shrinking rapidly as we gain altitude.

Soon we are beyond the city limits, following a line of choppers that stretches across the sky in the direction of the Grand Canyon.

A soundtrack plays through my headphones, a mix of Americana and classical music that penetrates the din of the rotors whirring overhead. It is in sync with the ruggedness of the landscape below as we bank left over the Hoover Dam and cross Lake Mead – America's

largest reservoir.

Our pilot points out distant features on the ground: the spindly groves of Joshua trees, tracks worn by longhorn sheep and sections of desert stained red by minerals leeching from the rocky soil.

Imagine a trip to Las Vegas and chances are it will not look much like this. The self-styled entertainment capital of the world instead brings to mind scenes from *The Hangover*, the Rat Pack, wedding chapels,

showgirls, gambling, pimping, fear-and-loathing: in short, expressions of iniquity in all its most creative forms.



To be sure, Nevada's largest city still boasts casinos decked out to resemble dungeons, pirate ships and volcanoes, and acres of identikit slot machines and gambling halls pungent with the aromas of fading air freshener and carpet shampoo.

But this early morning trip into the Grand Canyon aboard a Maverick Aviation helicopter is central to how America's original Sin City is now seeking to redefine itself to its 40 million annual visitors – as an entertainment hub that stretches above and beyond an addiction to feeding mountains of coin into the greedy mouth of a one-armed bandit.

After about an hour of skimming above the landscape, our helicopter reaches the canyon's edge and begins its

slow descent to the floor 2km below. Its immense walls close in as we whirl downwards in dizzying circles, coming to rest alongside a bench above the Colorado River.

City tourism officials make much of the fact that gambling revenue is now outstripped by revenue from other sources, be it an array of top restaurants, shows or, indeed, a champagne picnic in the Grand Canyon.

Major events such as the National Hockey League end-of-season awards and national rodeo finals have also wheeled their way into the city's annual event calendar, and there are now no less than eight Cirque du Soleil shows running from burlesque to The Beatles.

One of the newest additions – *Michael Jackson ONE* – is based on the life and work of the late King of Pop. Acrobats

dressed as ghouls perform somersaults from a trapeze to *Thriller* as others descend from the ceiling, clawing the air above the audience's heads.

Similarly, there are a string of new nightclubs where big-name acts like Run-DMC play residencies and dancers slither on poles behind opaque screens. At 2am on a Saturday

at Hakkasan Las Vegas, a five-level restaurant and nightclub at the MGM Grand, a man in a panda suit works the floor, dousing revellers with foam in a quasi-phallic ritual as the DJ works the decks.

Be it indoors or outdoors, day or night, Las Vegas makes a virtue of this kind of excess.

Across town at The Cosmopolitan Las Vegas, the patrons of Rose. Rabbit. Lie are treated to an altogether different spectacle in a club designed by Australian Ross Mollison to recall the New York scene of the 1920s or 1930s.

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Wandering wide-eyed through side-rooms and antechambers decorated to recall dusty libraries or edgy jazz bars, patrons stumble upon a succession of ever more outlandish acts, including a Swedish man inserting spoons into his nose and a pair of African-American twins dressed in GI uniforms who tap-dance in tandem.

It hasn't always been like this. When it was founded in 1905, Las Vegas was just another railroad town. It took the legalisation of gambling in 1931, the best efforts of gangsters such as Bugsy Siegel – who touchingly named his casino the Flamingo after the long legs of his showgirl girlfriend and

the laundered money of organised crime – to kickstart Las Vegas towards what it is today – a theatre of dreams for people from across the US and around the world.

At times wandering around this city, whose metropolitan area now exceeds two million people, it seems there are no true locals. Interstate hustlers press demo tapes into your hands on sidewalks in an attempt to find fame and fortune on its streets. Showgirls and singers are shipped in en-masse. Nightclub hostesses hail from Oregon, Texas or the east coast. Even Australian accents are thick on the ground.

In 2012, 305,000 of us visited Las Vegas, making us the city's No.2 overseas visitor market.

Those seeking the city's earliest incarnations will find it still clings on in Fremont St, home to the Golden Nugget, one of Las Vegas' original casinos, and Vegas Vic, the world's largest mechanical sign.

The menu at the Heart Attack Grill, another Fremont St institution, is collapsing under the sheer weight of items such as the Quadruple Bypass Burger and Butterfat Shakes, belying the finer fare to be had uptown, while a big sign promises that customers who weigh more than 350lb (158kg) eat free.

However, nothing stands still for long in Las Vegas, and Fremont St is undergoing its own renaissance as locals look to bring the area back to life.

It has been turned into a pedestrian arcade with outdoor bars and a giant LED screen that projects music videos.

Visitors can even fly above the pedestrian traffic on a new zipline rigged up to an enormous model slot machine.

As a form of transport, ziplining has become somewhat du jour in Vegas, providing both a means by which to float over the city's sometimes crippling traffic of Hummers, stretch



limos and trucks advertising escorts on billboards mounted atop their trays. Just outside town at Boulder City, Flightlinez Bootleg Canyon offers thrillseekers the opportunity to shoot down 2.5km of zipline that descends a range of craggy hills.

If the ongoing love affair with Las Vegas is most commonly consummated amid the bright lights of The Strip,

then it is also true some of its best attractions lie beyond.

The city makes the most of its location close to the Grand Canyon, Death Valley, Hoover Dam, the alien inmates of Area 51 and the Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area. One of the world's best mountain bike parks also runs beneath the swinging ziplines at Boulder City, while the Las Vegas Motor Speedway is a growing mecca for revheads.

All of which explains why I find myself being strapped into the cockpit of a Ferrari F430 GT race car under the shadow of the speedway's grandstands.

Easing out of pit lane, I follow my instructor's directions, moving gently into a turn before accelerating as it opens out into the first straight. The burst of power pushes me back in my seat as I fight to keep a straight line.

Dream Racing is the only outfit in North America where you can take a Ferrari F430 GT for a spin. It's not cheap – \$500

for five laps of the infield track – but business is brisk.

Reviewing my laps on the in-car video later, I'm struck by my apparent cowardice in the corners, the delay in depressing the throttle and my leaden-footed braking. Yet, with the feedback from the steering wheel translating every bump on the track through my body, I can feel the rush of speed as I push the Ferrari in search of its top speed of 320km/h.

Las Vegas is not for everyone. Its *raison d'être* remains too closely aligned to

the accumulation of coin, while its mania for creating the

biggest, the shiniest and the most opulent of everything is rivalled perhaps only by Dubai.

However, with its growing array of attractions such as Dream Racing, it now offers something to satisfy the desires of most visitors. In short, a trip to the entertainment capital of the world need not be a gamble.

The writer was a guest of Hawaiian Airlines, the Las Vegas Convention & Visitors Authority and The Cosmopolitan Las Vegas.

GO2 LAS VEGAS

GETTING THERE

Hawaiian Airlines flies to Las Vegas daily from Sydney and four times a week from Brisbane.

hawaiianairlines.com.au

STAYING THERE

The Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas, 3708 Las Vegas Blvd South

Ph (702) 698-7000

cosmopolitanlasvegas.com/

EATING THERE

Aureole Las Vegas
Mandalay Bay Resort
3950 Las Vegas Blvd South
Ph (702) 632-7401

charliepalmer.com/aureole-las-vegas/

DOING THERE

Clubs

• Rose. Rabbit. Lie
Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas
3708 Las Vegas Blvd South
Ph (877) 667-0585

roserabbitlie.com/

• LIGHT by Cirque du Soleil
Mandalay Bay Las Vegas

3950 Las Vegas Blvd South
Phone: (702) 693-8300

thelightvegas.com/

• Hakkasan Las Vegas
MGM Grand Hotel & Casino
3799 Las Vegas Blvd South,
Ph (702) 891-3838

hakkasanlv.com/

Shows

• Michael Jackson ONE

Mandalay Bay Las Vegas
3950 Las Vegas Blvd South
Ph 877-632-7400

cirquedusoleil.com/en/shows/michael-jackson-one/default.aspx

Activities

• Flightlinez Bootleg Canyon
1512 Industrial Road
Boulder City, NV
Ph (702) 293-6885

flightlinezbootleg.com/

• Dream Racing
Las Vegas Motor Speedway
7000 Las Vegas Blvd. N.
Las Vegas, NV

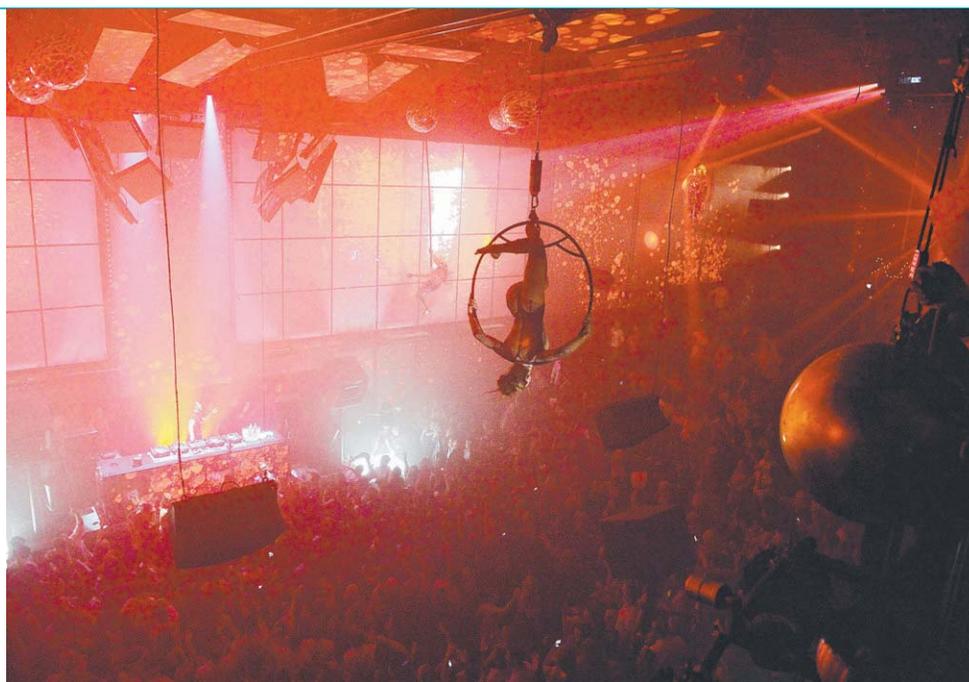
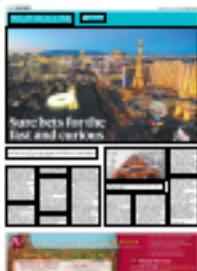
Ph (702) 605-3000

dreamracing.com/

• Maverick Aviation Wind
Dancer Helicopter Tour
Ph (702). 261.0007
6075 Las Vegas Blvd South
maverickaviationgroup.com



FULL SPEED AHEAD: Fly above The Strip via zipline (main); and the Las Vegas Motor Speedway where revheads can go for a spin in a Ferrari F430 GT (right).



HIGH WIRE: (clockwise from main) The LIGHT nightclub by Cirque du Soleil; helicopter joy ride in the Grand Canyon; ziplines, such as this one through Bootleg Canyon at Boulder City, are becoming the in way to explore the city and surrounds; and the Grand Canyon is a stunning one-hour helicopter ride from downtown Las Vegas.