

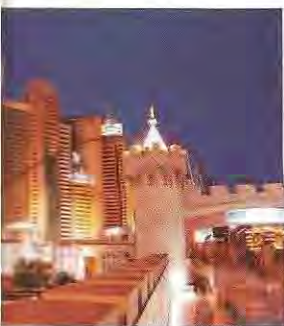


Las Vegas Wedding

RETURNING TO NEON VEGAS, THIS TIME FOR A FRIEND'S WEDDING, **ROWENA CARR-ALLINSON** PARTIES, EATS, DRINKS AND GAMBLES HER WAY THROUGH THE STRIP'S MANY HOTSPOTS, AND EVEN MANAGES TO TAG ON A TRIP OUTSIDE THE CITY'S MAYHEM.

city spotlight.

las vegas



“No one sleeps in Vegas!” Reza confides over the 80s Brit Invasion sounds blaring out of the speakers at Las Vegas’ Revolution Lounge. Despite the jetlag, we’re being talked into staying a little longer by one of the regulars at the Cirque-du-Soleil-run bar. At this rate I’ll never get those lost hours back.

It certainly seems he was right. Never have I travelled to a place where it being day or night is so irrelevant. Vegas really is the ultimate 24-hour city.

I’d been to the infamous ‘City of Sin’ a few years ago for a flying visit. I remember being lost in a gigantic jungle of casinos, neon and hordes of people looking for a good time along the legendary Las Vegas Boulevard, more commonly known as ‘The Strip’.

This time it was different: I was in charge of organising my friend Josephine’s wedding and wanted it to go like clockwork. Admittedly we wouldn’t get sucked into tacky tourist traps, I’d done my research and knew exactly what was what and where it was. The plan was a chic Vegas wedding weekend.

The Revolution Lounge was our first port of call, after having seen the fantastic and appropriately named Cirque-du-Soleil ‘LOVE’ show, inspired by the four lads from Liverpool. I’d heard about the Cirque’s shows, of course, but no one ever really explained the concept: a mix between acrobatics, dance, music and so much more. Even after seeing it, open mouthed in wonderment, it’s impossible to define. As the locals say, it was “awesome”, in the real sense of the word. Utterly different, creative and literally breathtaking! The show resembles its home city: bigger, better, crazier and without limits.

Usherettes in 60s-style Union Jack minis pointed us from the show to the lounge where the Brit theme continued. We danced to our teen-hood’s favourite tracks while sipping bubbly and feasting on strawberries and almonds. Very



The busy view from the Four Seasons hotel

civilised. The bar is the only one in Vegas to be totally interactive, with touch-screen-tables on which you can ‘draw’ and screens on which to project the results of your efforts, all without any wires...

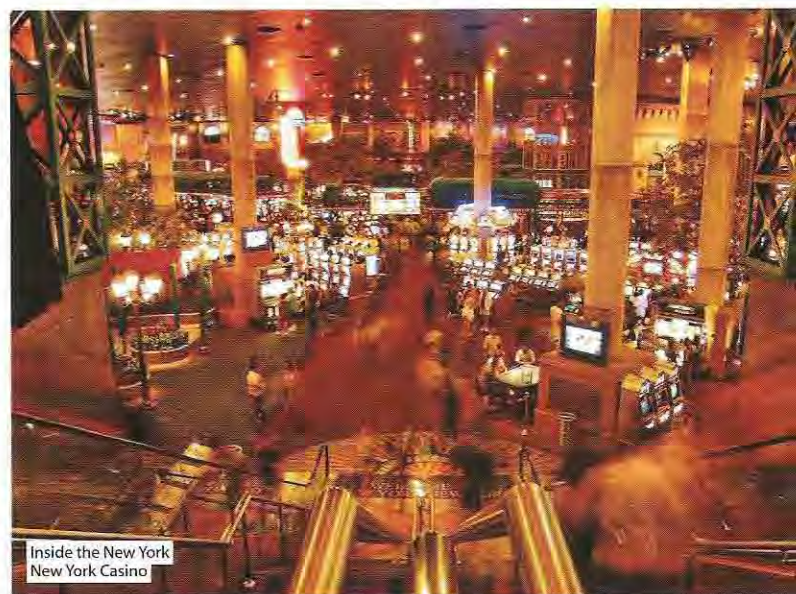
The techno-equipment in there is worth millions of dollars, and the closest I’ve seen to magic! In order to understand its intricacies, the software’s creator, or ‘guide’, is on hand. Sticking with the Beatles theme, he appears dressed in white tails, looking a little dazed. The interactive tables are a brilliant party trick that can impress even the most cynical luddites among us.

It’s slightly surreal, but then again nothing should surprise in Vegas.

NAVIGATING THE STRIP

When the idea of the quickie wedding in Vegas first emerged, I had my doubts. It’s quite clear when you’ve been once that this city isn’t everyone’s cup of tea. You really have to be prepared to take it as it is, and embrace its ‘Disneyland for adults’ side, the crowds and the constant action.

The city has its downsides. The casino floors can be overwhelming, and the sly signposting has been arranged by clever casino bosses



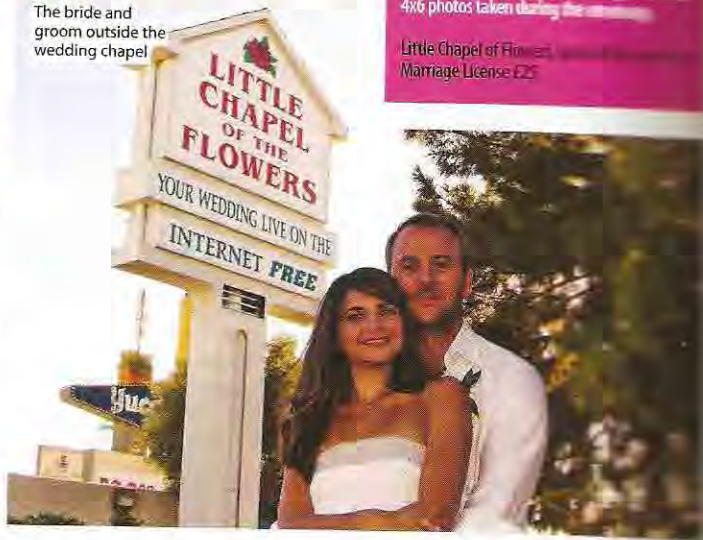
Inside the New York New York Casino



Lake Mead: perfect for a spot of jet-skiing



The bride and groom outside the wedding chapel



Getting married in Vegas.
 £300 package includes Elvis impersonator, limo service, use of the chapel, music, lighting ceremony, marriage certificate, traditional wedding music, professional coordinator, bride's six-piece bridesmaids, groom's boutonniere, wedding officiant, broadcasting live and for eight hours immediately following your ceremony, a photography package containing 100 4x6 photos taken during the ceremony.

Little Chapel of the Flowers
 Marriage License £25

who want you to navigate a certain route and leave a few dollars behind. There are no quick exits, no short cuts. And although you can hop in a taxi (a ride from one end of the Strip to the other is usually around \$10), the actual casinos are so huge and confusing that just walking from A to B becomes a real trek. Comfortable shoes are a priority. And trying to find a specific place can last for hours. Literally.

On the upside, if you don't mind walking, all the casinos are nicely interlinked so you can walk the length of the Strip indoors. That is, if you don't get distracted by the thousands of fruit machines,

As for the quick way around, there is a public monorail system that runs along the Strip with seven stops from the MGM Grand to the bottom end of the Boulevard, near the towering Stratosphere hotel. Each single ride will set you back \$5, and there's also a free mini-monorail connecting the Mandalay Bay to Excalibur via the Luxor.

It's a good idea to plan a couple of activities that don't involve noise, people and spending oodles of cash. After 48 hours, it's easy to suffer from 'over-exposure' so it's nice to get a breath of fresh air.

Our first foray out of classic Vegas territory took us to the beautiful, eerily quiet deserted cliffs of Red

stumble across bodies. The forbidding Mojave Desert from which Las Vegas emerged, is part of the City of Sin's folklore. Joe Pesci in *Casino* famously utters the line: "A lot of holes in the desert, and a lot of problems are buried in those holes." Luckily we didn't make any gruesome finds, just watched the sun, the sweeping views and took the 13-mile scenic driving tour, feeling like we were the only humans for miles around.

VOWS WITH THE KING

Wisely, we chose to stay in the only hotel on the Strip without a casino floor. The Four Seasons hotel sits on the top floors of the Mandalay Bay hotel. Apparently, the smallest hotel on the Strip, the Four Seasons only has 400 rooms, a fraction of the MGM Grand's thousands.

Luxurious and exclusive, it's the perfect escape from the city's hectic pace. Plush rooms, pristine service and sweeping Strip views as well as a pool oasis make staying here a real treat despite the steep pricetag.

While the girls escaped for some pampering ahead of the ceremony, the boys took off to Lake Mead for some jet-skiing. Jean-Charles, the groom, was impressed: "It was the most amazing place – flat waters, blazing sunshine and no one to be seen for miles on end. We went all the way to the Hoover Dam!"

After a relaxing Swedish massage at the Mandalay Bay's lavish spa,

and the almost compulsory manicure and pedicure with the extraordinarily chatty Chrissie, the bride and I ran up to her room to change and waited for the limo pick-up – a little cheesy, but an integral part of the experience.

The ceremony was short and sweet, with Elvis on hand to play away the bride and sing a few of his biggest hits. Seeing their smiles and eyes sparkling, I shed a few tears. I always do.

A short photo session with the photographer in the knockdown and we were off for cocktails at BOA at Caesar's Palace. With so many venues to choose from, we opted for an exterior patio with a view, and ordered a round of margaritas. On hearing the news of the wedding party the manager set over an assortment of their most special cocktails: strawberries, coconuts and pineapples galore.

Another well kept outdoor secret on my favourites list is the balcony at the Bellagio on the lower ground floor. The bar, which isn't signposted, serves chilled rosé wine and has brilliant views of the unmissable fountain water show.

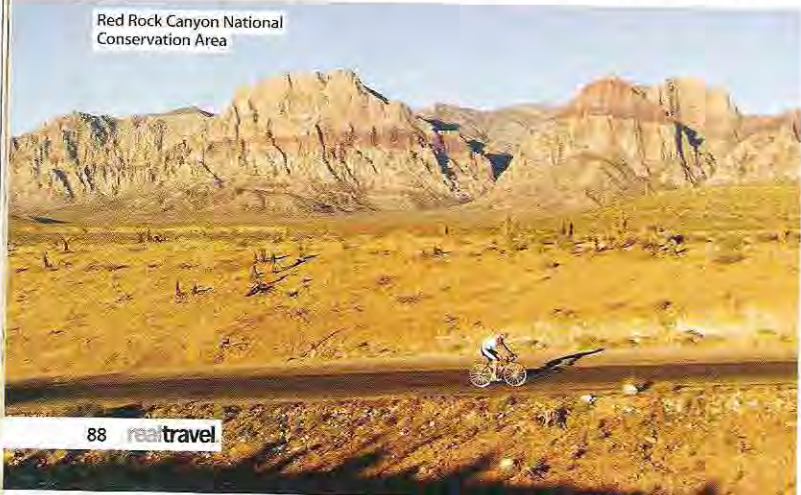
Our next stop that night was the hip casino at The Palms, followed by dinner at its contemporary Italian eatery, NOVE. With leather-clad seats, beautiful chandeliers and panoramic views, it's one of the city's trendy hotspots. We ended

"WE MADE THE MOST OF THE JETLAG AND GOT UP BEFORE SUNRISE, ARRIVING AMONG THE JOSHUA TREES IN TIME TO WATCH THE SUN COME UP"

souvenir shops and sparkling attractions. It's worth stepping outdoors though to see the buildings' incredible architecture, whether it's the Luxor's pyramid, New York, New York's Chrysler building replica, Treasure Island's life-size pirate ship or the Bellagio's grandiose front.

Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, a 20-minute drive away. We made the most of the jetlag and got up before sunrise, arriving among the Joshua trees in time to watch the sun come up.

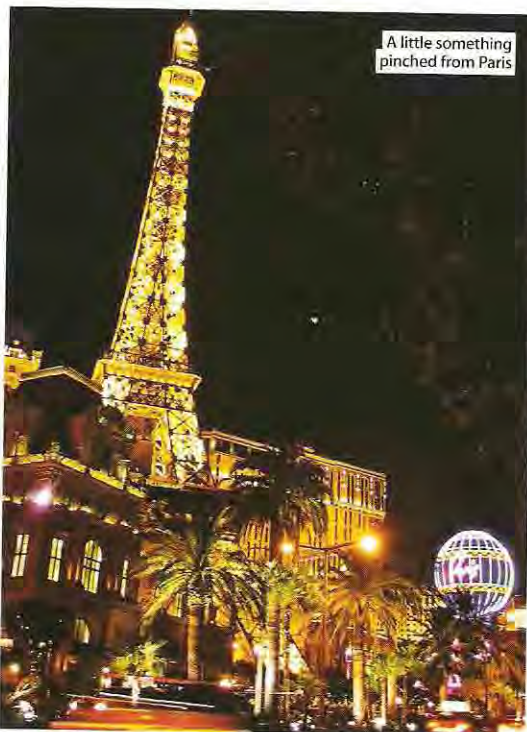
Anyone who's watched CSI will recognise the arid desert where Grissom and his team regularly



Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area



The Venetian Grand Canal – Vegas style



A little something pinched from Paris

in the specials: linguini with clams, seared tuna and the fantastic sweet canollis served with pistachios, strawberries, cream and caramel: a sort of do-it-yourself dessert which made our night.

We of course also tried our luck at gambling, miraculously winning double our money in a few minutes and wisely walking away from the roulette table before getting too caught up in the moment. It's

Thai and Vietnamese dishes in a cool ambiance complete with Koi carp pond and giant Buddha. The lobster wontons were incredible.

For a quick bite of sushi, try Sushi Roku at Caesar's where the tuna carpaccio and sweet-glazed salmon were deliciously perfect. For a contemporary take on steak, try BOA next door, and don't miss the jumbo prawn cocktail with its kicking horseradish sauce.

and PURE at Caesar's, where the Pussy Cat Dolls put on a nightly show, are the ultimate party places. On the wedding night, we skipped from bar to club, drinking, dancing and being merry. Not quite traditional, but celebrating our way.

Once a tiny city where people came to see the nuclear trials in the Nevada desert from a 'safe distance', then a seedy gambling haven run by the mob, today Vegas has gained a 'respectable' veneer, and has become the Number One indulgence destination where people flock to with one thing on their minds: enjoying themselves.

Oddly enough, Las Vegas is a lot of people's dream come true: dancing, drinking, gambling and even smoking indoors, which is a big no-no in the rest of the country. Regardless of their background, age or nationality, it seems no one is safe from Vegas euphoria. Not even our friends who call Paris, the most romantic city on earth, home.

Along with pristine weather, the hot nightlife, lavish spas and hundreds of restaurants, there are concerts, shows and sightseeing tours. Where else can you see the Grand Canyon, the Trevi fountain and the Eiffel tower in a day?

If you like to shop but can do without the heart-stopping prices, head off-Strip to the brand new Premium Outlet mall. A|X Armani Exchange, Tommy Hilfiger and Ralph Lauren all retail at a fraction of UK prices. But remember to get accurate directions from the hotel's concierge as the maps aren't terribly reliable as we found out after an

sensible to set yourself a budget... and stick to it. It's too easy to get carried away and become intoxicated by the thrill of the game, only to find you're going home empty handed.

Picking a place for dinner had been a real conundrum. Las Vegas is awash with fantastic restaurants which go way beyond interesting menus. Dramatic and snazzy interiors, impeccable service and fantastic food are all par for the course in this town.

It's easy to find cheap food at diners, drive-thrus or fast food joints like Denny's where a great greasy fry up is around \$10, but there's also plenty of choice for high-end food without breaking the bank.

During our visit, we sampled a few of the city's best addresses. Tao at The Venetian combines Asian influences and serves up Chinese,

The average bill was always approachable – certainly by London standards – and portions were US super-size style! Doggy-bagging is a great idea for dishes like sushi, to be stored in your hotel room's mini bar for later.

For a taste of the best steak Vegas has to offer, the dimly lit Fix at the Bellagio is THE place to go. The chef's Kobe selection, smooth as velvet, melts in the mouth and is without a doubt the best steak I've ever had. Worth it, even with a \$75 pricetag. It's one of those moments you wish would never end.

VEGAS EUPHORIA

Vegas is best known for its endless entertainment and outrageous nightlife, and so it should be. Clubs and lounges such as the Palm's Ghostbar with its glass floor high in the sky, the Bellagio's cosy Caramel

"ON THE WEDDING NIGHT, WE SKIPPED FROM BAR TO CLUB, DRINKING, DANCING AND BEING MERRY. NOT TRADITIONAL, BUT CELEBRATING OUR WAY"

infobox

Rowena booked her flight to Las Vegas via the Flight Centre. Flights to the Strip are available with American Airlines starting from £199 return Heathrow.

Flight Centre can also book hotels and car hire. Flight Centre 0870 499 0042 www.flightcentre.co.uk

SUGGESTED TOUR

Sun Trek www.suntrek.com

Trek America 0870 444 8735 www.trekamerica.co.uk

ACCOMMODATION

Four Seasons Hotel, Room rates approx £150 per night www.fourseasons.com

The Mandalay Bay Classic Gold room rates approx £100 per night www.mandalaybay.com

Hilton Garden Inn Motel, Room rates approx £50 per night www.hiltongardeninn.com

TRANSPORT

Rent a convertible car to travel in style. Prices for a Chrysler Sebring or similar start around £166 per week. Dollar Rent A Car www.dollar.com 0800 252 897

VISAS

British citizens don't require a visa to enter the States for up to 90 days.

FURTHER INFO

For further information go to the Visit Las Vegas website www.visitlasvegas.co.uk Alternatively visitors can call 0870 234 234 for a free Visitors Guide to the city.

extremely long, frustrating but worthwhile hunt.

The day after the wedding, the happy couple drove off into the sunset for a Californian honeymoon while we stayed to investigate the city. The jetlag had now disappeared and we were still hungry for more. We moved down a few floors to an affordable room at the Mandalay Bay which still spoiled us with its high-thread count sheets, a 4" plasma and a beautiful bathroom.

They like to say that 'What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas' – to tempt or rather to entice. The focus, although naturally one of indulgence, has shifted slightly from bad behaviour to 'organised' Vegas has become gentrified, demystified. Wild bachelor parties are still there but it's nothing you won't see back home. A more accurate slogan might be 'In Vegas, anything is possible' – become a millionaire overnight or even get married in minutes. Both you'll never forget! ■