

Introduction
Making a Life in the City of
Sun, Sin and Suburbia

“Vegas is a town . . . where the vast majority of the population arises every morning absolutely delighted to have escaped Hometown, America and the necessity of chatting with Mom over the back fence.”

—DAVE HICKEY
AIR GUITAR



“There may be some who feel that Las Vegas is an abomination and should be destroyed. They would then have to argue, with me at least, that the oil companies are straight, the stock market is not a flimflam, and that our South American policy is not insane. They would even have to argue that the Democratic Party and the Republican Party are more honest than the Mafia.”

—MARIO PUZO
INSIDE LAS VEGAS

A couple of years ago, perusing the shelves of a used bookstore, I happened upon a 1979-80 edition of *Arthur Frommer's Guide to Las Vegas*. A quick flip through the chapters sparked a swirl of nostalgia about the pre-megaresort city and what dramatic changes had occurred over the past two decades. The guide painted a picture of a Las Vegas that was quite different from today. For example, Steve Wynn's name is mentioned only once in the guide, in passing reference to his ownership of the Golden Nugget. Also, a map of the area does not show U.S. 95, and Rancho Drive is called Tonopah Highway.

There's more. The guide lists just two hospitals: Sunrise and Southern Nevada Memorial (now University Medical Center), although a few others were operating at the time. There are 10 major hospitals today and counting. The main movie house in town at that time was the Red Rock Theatres on West Charleston Boulevard, which closed several years ago and was demolished. The guide makes no mention of master-planned communities. The Las Vegas Hilton was the state's tallest building, a distinction it lost well before the Stratosphere Tower was finished in the mid-'90s. Frommer's lists only one disco, Jubilation, owned by Paul Anka and described as "Las Vegas' answer to Studio 54." More than 20 years later, Las Vegas has 20 dance clubs, including one called Studio 54.

The "top 10 hotels" in 1980 were MGM Grand (now Bally's), Caesars Palace, Las Vegas Hilton, Desert Inn, Flamingo Hilton, Tropicana, Aladdin, Riviera, Dunes and Sands. Today, four of those hotels have been torn down (Dunes, Sands, Aladdin, Desert Inn), and only one of them (Caesars Palace) would make anyone's top 10 list. That's not a criticism, just an acknowledgement that the modern megaresorts have eclipsed the industry leaders of 25 years ago.

Of course, Las Vegas residents don't need a musty *Frommer's Guide* to know the place has changed significantly over the past 20 years. Just walk outside and the evidence is everywhere. Clark County's population in 1980 was 463,087. Today, the county's population has eclipsed 1.6 million. Those additional million-plus people have radically altered almost every aspect of life. Thousands of acres of scrub brush and lizards are now covered with houses, apartment complexes, shopping centers, casinos,

bars, restaurants, schools, parks and other accouterments of suburban living. The city has spread from the valley's center in all directions, its momentum slowed only by time, money and mountain ranges. During the '90s, the critics' mantra was that Las Vegas was developing at a rate of two acres every hour.

As dozens of new neighborhoods cropped up at the edges, the urban core suffered. Downtown lost its luster. The tourist numbers at Fremont Street's world-famous Glitter Gulch plummeted as the Strip, with its myriad extracurricular attractions, came to dominate visitors' interest. McCarran International Airport expanded to accommodate the growing tourist hordes, which required the acquisition of hundreds of homes to be demolished to make way for new gates and runways, as well as an ever-widening noise corridor. The expansion of U.S. 95 and construction of the Las Vegas Beltway required the demolition of hundreds more homes across the valley. The rush to the suburbs made residential living along some streets unbearable. Long stretches of Decatur Boulevard and Jones Boulevard, for example, once were lined with houses. Today, many of those houses have been torn down or converted into shops and offices.

Of course, the growth hasn't been all bad. More than anything, it has given residents more choices in employment, housing, recreation and culture. Tourism remains the city's economic engine — and always will be — but it's possible today to work in an array of interesting and rewarding fields that are not linked to the resort industry. Housing options are impressive — and still relatively affordable. One can live in a brand-new tract house on the outskirts or move close to the action, buying an old place downtown and fixing it up. The apartment market offers an array of options, and condos run from cheap to the pinnacle of jetset leisure. As for recreation, Las Vegas has everything imaginable — even that most unlikely of desert pastimes, ice hockey. Perhaps the most significant benefits of growth have been the cultural additions, from museums to art galleries, orchestras to ballet companies, rock 'n' roll concert halls to roller coasters. It would be physically impossible for one person in one lifetime to sample all of the city's fine dining establishments. Las Vegas has evolved well beyond its trademark lounges and buffets.



Some say Las Vegas is completely different from other cities. Others say once you venture beyond the Strip, it's basically the same as anywhere else. They're both right. Geography distinguishes Las Vegas from many other cities. It isn't by an ocean, a lake or a river. It isn't in the mountains, and it doesn't sit amid vast farmland. Its location is notable only because it's near the halfway point of the railroad line between Salt Lake City and Los Angeles.

The city was not founded by any religious or ethnic groups. The 19th century Mormon settlers didn't stay long. None of its neighborhoods is primarily Italian or Polish, for example. While its black population once was segregated into one area, that practice ended decades ago, and the area in question, the Westside or West Las Vegas, is now a melting pot of race and ethnicity. Areas that are now Latino didn't start out that way, but evolved with high levels of immigration and new housing construction.

Las Vegas differs from many other cities, especially those back East, in that its history is not woven into the fabric of its culture. Boston is the home of Revolutionary War rebellion. Philadelphia is the birthplace of independence. San Francisco was the cradle of the Gold Rush and later the counterculture. Las Vegas has not contributed in such a way to the American story, other than to be the catalyst for the mainstreaming of gambling.

Las Vegas does share one key characteristic with many other cities: It is associated with a dominant industry. Pittsburgh has steel, Detroit has cars, Hollywood has movies, Las Vegas has gambling. And for a long time Las Vegas' dominant industry made it a unique company town: No other major American city had legal gambling halls. But that is no longer true. Gambling in some form is now legal in 48 states, and casino-style games are offered in Atlantic City, Detroit and New Orleans, on riverboats and on Indian reservations across the land.

However, Las Vegas is still the only major city that depends almost entirely on gambling for its livelihood. Gambling, along with the accompanying attractions, remains the linchpin of the economy. A third

of Las Vegans work directly for the industry, and another third work for it in indirect ways. The final 33.3 percent wouldn't be here without it.

While some Las Vegans don't gamble, they find it extremely difficult to divorce themselves completely from the industry's charms, try as they might. The casinos host most of the city's best restaurants. They also have movie theaters, concert halls, nightclubs, showrooms, art museums and bowling alleys, making them the city's primary cultural and recreational centers. This fact certainly helps make the case that Las Vegas is different from other cities.

And yet, in many ways, Las Vegas is very much like other cities, especially those in the Southwest. Not far from the Strip are residential neighborhoods made up of middle-class suburban houses surrounding parks, ballfields, schools and churches. Shopping centers feature supermarkets, bars, hair salons and drugstores, while fast-food restaurants and convenience stores crowd around the intersections of major thoroughfares. It's the usual pattern, except with slot machines in the stores.

And many Las Vegans today have lifestyles that simply do not involve the casinos. It is fairly easy and common for a resident to avoid setting foot in a Strip hotel for months at a time. Oftentimes a prolonged absence from the resort corridor ends only when a visiting relative or friend wants a "guide" to see what all the excitement is about.



Let's get this over with: I can remember when Rainbow Boulevard was a gravel road. Well, at least parts of Rainbow were gravel when I was a boy, and today it's a major thoroughfare. Longtime residents are famous for making comments like this. The gravel road in question depends on how long you've been around. Some old-timers can remember when Decatur was a gravel road, and it developed decades ahead of Rainbow.

For some reason, this question of Las Vegas longevity fascinates us. Most natives are proud that they were born in Las Vegas; it doesn't take long after meeting one to learn about his hardscrabble youth when the community was small and it took only 10 minutes to drive across town.

I'm not a native. My family moved here from Wisconsin in 1976, when I was in the fifth grade. But when I tell people how long I've been here, they typically say, "Well, that makes you a native." Not quite, but I can say that I've lived here longer than more than a million people who came after me.

Plenty of people possess at least a snapshot knowledge of Las Vegas history, whether they learned it in school or picked it up from books, museums, television programs or conversations with longtime residents. The key moments tend to come up in conversation from time to time as newcomers wonder aloud just how this city emerged from the Mojave sands. But at the same time, it's often difficult to draw solid lines between the Las Vegas of black-and-white photographs and the modern metropolis. As you drive around the valley, it's a challenge to find remnants of that time before themed resorts and master-planned communities, neighborhood casinos and business parks. Most everything you see has been built over the past 25 years.

Las Vegas history starts with thousands of years of Native American habitation and at least 150 years of continual occupation by people of European heritage. But there's been more human activity here in the past quarter-century than in the preceding 125 years. Las Vegas has many stories to tell about its origins, its early settlers, its evolution into the world's gambling capital. But all that pales in comparison to the dramatic changes that have occurred since about 1980. Nonetheless, in order to understand what has happened recently, it's important to be at least vaguely acquainted with what happened before. Although this book focuses on more recent decades, I provide a modest chronology of Las Vegas' early history in the first chapter, in the hope that it will help to put recent happenings in the proper context. In researching this book, I constantly found important linkages between more recent historical developments and the city's pioneer days.

It's sometimes difficult to assess Las Vegas' recent history because, in many cases, it's still unfolding. For example, this book contains a chapter about the Summerlin master-planned community, yet the massive development won't be completed for at least another decade. Another

chapter discusses the Las Vegas Beltway, though it won't reach its full potential for at least 10 years. The chapter on Strip resorts discusses Wynn Las Vegas, although it was still months from opening as the book went to press. Some facts and figures in this book will be outdated by the time it hits store shelves. But that is the nature of all books about Las Vegas, and it only reinforces the vibrant, intriguing, important story that modern Las Vegas has to tell.



A frequently asked question in Las Vegas is, “Do you like it here?” This must be a common question in other cities, but it seems to carry greater weight here, in part explaining the high transience of the Las Vegas population. People come here to live and spend a few months deciding whether they like it. If they do, they stay. If they don't, they may leave. Sometimes it takes longer than a few months for somebody to feel comfortable here. Other cities seem to have much less coming and going. So, do I like Las Vegas? My woefully predictable answer: Yes and no.

On the positive side, I like the climate. Las Vegas has terrific weather seven to eight months of the year. That's a pretty good percentage if you think about it. Spring and fall are mild. Winter can get chilly but not bitterly cold. There is little snow to speak of, and rain is infrequent at best. (I actually could use a little more rain.) Summers can get intolerably hot — it's a dry heat, but that doesn't sell when it's 110 with no breeze for two straight weeks. But unless they're in San Diego, who can say they live in a climate that doesn't have a few rotten months? It's also worth noting that Las Vegas is unlikely to endure hurricanes, tornadoes, blizzards, mudslides or devastating earthquakes (although seismologists say the city falls within an earthquake zone). The city is prone to flash floods, perhaps once a year, but they usually aren't too bad if you're smart enough not to drive through deep water or move into the middle of a flood plain.

I'm also appreciative of Las Vegas' economy. It's basically been booming all the while I've lived here, and the costs of living have stayed relatively low. Unemployment is low, wages are relatively good and the opportunity for advancement in almost any field is great. In my 16 years of post-college

employment in Las Vegas, I have never been without a good job and I've been able to steadily advance in my field. While not every Las Vegan can tell such a story — the city has its share of homeless and poor — many of us can. And those who moved here from parts of the country with deep economic problems tell their Las Vegas success story with a lot more spirit than I do. While young couples in cities such as Los Angeles and San Francisco struggle to find ways to afford an entry-level home, my wife and I have been able to partake of that piece of the American dream with relative ease.

The public schools in Las Vegas get a bad rap, I think. My two daughters attend local schools, and they have had positive experiences so far. Their teachers have ranged from good to excellent and they've all been enthusiastic and well-meaning. The schools are underfunded and the teachers underpaid, but they don't seem to crumble under the strain. I fully expect my kids to leave the local school system sufficiently prepared for university work.

But lest this book turn into a chamber of commerce-approved advertisement for Las Vegas, let's turn to the negative aspects of living here, and there are many. The over-arching issue is the double-edged sword of growth. While growth brings jobs and culture and money to the community, it also brings headaches. The roads are congested and constantly under construction. The air is dirty. The schools are crowded. The social safety net is full of holes. Historic landmarks and ecological havens are destroyed to make way for the new. The city at times feels chaotic, anarchic, a constant whirl of noises, frustrations and changes. It's difficult to get into a routine, because the environment is always different. Very little of the city feels permanent, including the people. There's a severe shortage of "community" in Las Vegas, a young city where newcomers especially are reluctant to put down roots. Lasting friendships are prized because they are rare. Neighbors often don't know each other. They tend to keep to themselves, saying hello at the mailbox and that's about it.

The lack of community connection or pride seems to breed aberrant or self-centered behavior — drivers who race through school zones, run red lights and cut off other motorists with impunity; the guy who revs his

Harley in the middle of the night; the neighbor who operates a dangerous meth lab out of his garage. These examples of incivility are not unique to Las Vegas, but the fact that so few people feel a connection to this place often is reflected in a more prevalent uncaring attitude. It also has social effects: While low voter turnout is a national problem, newer Las Vegans often seem less interested in politicians and issues with which they have no history; contributions to local charities and the arts are meager; and interest in historic preservation, while growing, remains minimal. In the 2002 election, for example, Las Vegas area voters approved extra taxes for transportation projects but soundly defeated measures to help the homeless and expand the library system.

Name a modern social ill, and Las Vegas seems afflicted with a bad case. The rapid growth is a big reason. Politicians constantly struggle to find money to meet the ever-increasing demands for services and programs to properly care for the populace. The needs of one group are constantly balanced against those of another. In the process, the constituencies with the least political clout — the homeless, the mentally ill, etc. — tend to get crumbs left over after the powerful have taken their bites. The Nevada Legislature approved \$836 million in tax increases in 2003 — the largest tax increase in state history — and it was considered a measure to barely keep pace with the demands of growth.

Urban critic James Howard Kunstler, from Sarasota Springs, New York, is perhaps Las Vegas' toughest critic. His 2001 book *The City in Mind* contains a chapter that is one long rant against Las Vegas. "They say that Antarctica is the worst place on Earth," Kunstler writes, "but I believe that distinction belongs to Las Vegas, hands down." Condemning those who have suggested Las Vegas is a "city of the future," Kunstler writes: "If Las Vegas truly is our city of the future, then we might as well all cut our own throats tomorrow. I certainly felt like cutting mine after only a few days there, so overwhelming was the sheer anomie provoked by every particular of its design and operation."

Kunstler is well-known for his hyperbolic style. But his attack on Las Vegas feels ill-informed and unfair. After all, Kunstler is most fond of Eastern and Midwestern prewar hamlets that preserve or adopt New

Urbanist principles that encourage walking, foliage and a strong sense of place. Western cities grew within a different climate and a different time, making them difficult to compare with Kunstler's ideal. Still, Kunstler's comments are worth considering, in part because he's not alone. James Ellroy, whose 2001 novel *The Cold Six Thousand* is set partly in Las Vegas, went off on the city in a magazine interview: "It's a shit hole. It's a testimony to greed and prostitution and exploitation of women and narcotics and the get-rich-quick fervor that is one of the worst aspects of America."

As UNLV history professor Hal Rothman says, Las Vegas "is a hard town that will make you pay for your inability to restrain your desires." The 24-hour lifestyle is an open invitation for alcohol and drug abuse, for promiscuity and compulsive gambling. Gambling addiction is everywhere, but nowhere is the environment so rich for this devastating problem to flourish. What's so troubling is that Las Vegas collectively does so little to help problem gamblers. While other states and cities with legalized gambling have made treatment and prevention programs a priority, the issue gets back-burner status in the gambling capital of the world.

Las Vegas, then, has its pros and cons, much like any city. Local writer Scott Dickensheets, in an article for *Money* magazine in 2002, said, "Mixed feelings are practically a civic duty if you live in Las Vegas." Whether you like or dislike the place depends largely on what you consider important in life. But it's never that simple. One might expect very religious people to dislike "Sin City," with its morals-challenged mindset, but Las Vegas' significant population of Mormons and fundamentalists calls that assumption into question. One might expect the city's barren desert and harsh summer heat to be too much for natives of the lush Midwest and Northeast, but large chunks of the city's recent emigrants hail from places like Michigan, Wisconsin and New York.

One thing is generally agreed upon: Unless you're a diehard gambler or lounge lizard who can't imagine being anyplace else, Las Vegas is an acquired taste. In recent years, Las Vegas has boasted that anywhere from 4,000 to 8,000 people move here every month. It's true. But it's also true that almost half that many leave each month. Las Vegas is not for everyone, but over the past 25 years it has become steadily more attractive

to a wider spectrum of people. Las Vegas has matured from a frontier town to a modern metropolis. It is adding dimensions to everyday life that people across the country have come to expect in a major city. That transformation is largely what this book is about.