



Sharing the joy of travel.



Viva Las Vegas!

September 2009



By

Tim Larison, Travel Agent

[tim@familytravelgurus.com](mailto:tim@familytravelgurus.com)

Las Vegas has always been a favorite destination for us. Before we became travel agents Anne and I frequently visited Las Vegas for weekend getaways in the 90's. After starting our agency this decade we've attended a good number of travel conventions in the city. In September 2009 I was fortunate to attend a travel conference and participate in a special tour organized by the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Bureau. I toured many hotels and saw new shows I hadn't experienced before. In this report I'll give you my updated impressions of Las Vegas. I still think it's a great vacation destination!

### Las Vegas Today

Our host from the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Bureau gave us an update on Las Vegas in the current economic environment. You may have heard that Las Vegas room rates are at their lowest in years – this is true! However Las Vegas room rates really depend on what week you are visiting. If there is a big convention in town room rates will be higher. If you are asking us for a Las Vegas trip quote it helps to be flexible with your dates – then we can find the time period for you when rates are the lowest.

Las Vegas today has 140,000 hotel rooms which have an 86% occupancy rate. The U.S. average hotel occupancy rate is 60%. Vegas is alive and well! During my week's stay I noticed the hotels were crowded and the casinos were abuzz with activity – hardly the depressed economic environment I expected. Yes room rates are down and that has helped Vegas attract visitors, but the number of visitors isn't too much different than past years.

Las Vegas is in the midst of a building boom. The new City Center project will open later this year, adding 6,347 hotel rooms. By 2010 the city will have 160,000 hotel rooms.

Many Las Vegas shows continue to draw good crowds. What's the most popular show in the Fall of 2009? I was surprised to learn it is Donnie and Marie at the Flamingo Hotel – our host says this nostalgic show sells out every night. Of the many Cirque Du Soleil shows offered in Las Vegas the “Love” offering at the Mirage, featuring Beatles music, is the most popular. Cirque is planning an Elvis themed show for the new City Center.

I noticed quite a bit of street construction in and around the Strip. I was glad I used taxis and tour buses to get around during my stay. The drivers I had often took side roads to get around the construction traffic backlogs. I was glad I wasn't driving in this mess!

## Resorts

I saw a wide variety of Las Vegas resorts – from the budget midstrip Imperial Palace to the luxurious new all suite Encore property. I learned Las Vegas has a wide variety of resorts for different vacation styles. My impressions of each resort:

### Imperial Palace

I stayed here for two nights before my tour while attending a travel conference at the Las Vegas Convention Center. I wanted an inexpensive place to stay in a good central location – the Imperial Palace provided that. The midstrip location was great – within easy walking distance of many hotels and casinos (such as Caesars Palace across the street). I also liked the easy access to the Las Vegas monorail in the back of the hotel. I used the monorail to go back and forth from my convention several times each day. A three day monorail pass for unlimited rides cost \$28 – well worth it.

The room rates were good- \$50/night for a midweek September stay. The accommodations were basic but I did find my stay here better than when I visited in the 90's. My room was clean, maid service was timely, and the food at the buffet was much improved.

Tip for staying at the Imperial Palace: try to get a room on a lower floor. The elevators were very slow and frequently were filled to capacity. There are some rooms at the back of the hotel you can walk to without even using the elevator – those are the best in my opinion. For this trip I stayed on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor and had a few long waits for the elevator.

### Harrahs

Next door to the Imperial Palace and thus it also has excellent monorail access. I ate at the Flavors buffet here and it was very good. The buffet was small by Las Vegas standards but the salads were fresh and there was a variety of good choices for dinner. If you are looking for a value property midstrip, and the room rates at Harrahs are comparable or a little more than Imperial Palace I recommend staying at Harrahs.

### Excalibur

The all inclusive resort idea has come to Las Vegas! Excalibur this year started an “all you can eat” program for their hotel guests to eat at their Roundtable Buffet. For \$25 you get a wristband and can go to the buffet as often as you want from breakfast until closing at 10 pm. The program has been so popular that other Las Vegas resorts are trying it (and the Excalibur all you can eat pass will be raised to \$29 in the near future).

The Excalibur also offers a \$20 slot tournament open to all Thursday through Sunday at 2 pm. Once in the tournament the slot play is free and the winner gets a \$1000 cash prize. I’m not much of a slot machine player but I must admit this sounded like fun! The Excalibur slot tournament has a lower entry fee than similar tournaments offered at other casinos.

The Excalibur is another good place to stay if you are looking for low cost and well maintained rooms. Room rates during my week were in the \$50 to \$60/night range. The resort is in the midst of renovating their rooms. A renovated room will have a wide screen tv and a modern look compared to an original room with a medieval theme. A renovated room is \$20 higher in price per night.

I recommend the Excalibur for a low cost stay on the South End of the Las Vegas Strip.

#### Planet Hollywood

I stayed here three nights as it was the host hotel for my travel agent tour group. What an upgrade from the Imperial Palace! My 11<sup>th</sup> floor room was good sized with a comfortable king sized bed. The elevator service was fast and convenient – I never had a long wait. My room had good sound proofing as I never heard any noise from the hallway or from nearby rooms. One unique feature of the hotel is that each room has pieces of movie memorabilia. My room had Robin Williams’ sword from the movie Hook encased in glass. I talked to another agent who stayed in a Barbra Streisand themed room.

I liked the layout of the hotel, especially for conventions. There was a large mezzanine level on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor – just a short escalator or elevator ride away from the casino floor. I’ve been at other Las Vegas hotels where the meeting rooms were in the back of the resort and required quite a bit of walking to get to (such as at the Rio and Mandalay Bay). This was not the case at Planet Hollywood. If you have a small to midsized convention Planet Hollywood’s easy access to its meeting space makes it an excellent choice.

I also toured a honeymoon suite which was spacious and had a great view of the Strip.

Some downsides to my room: it was dark with not a lot of lighting. The closet space was limited, and there weren’t many power outlets. I had to use the bathroom outlet at night to recharge my camera. These were only minor annoyances, though. I liked my stay here very much.

#### Hilton Vacation Club

This timeshare program has 3 properties in Las Vegas – one behind the Flamingo Hotel, one in the north Strip area, and one by the Convention Center. Though the resorts are timeshares we can book you in a room here at a cash rate.

I was impressed with the size of the units. The One Bedroom unit is 756 square feet. It reminded me of the accommodations of the Disney Vacation Club (DVC) at Disney World. It had a nice sized kitchen, mini washer/dryer combo, a sleeper/sofa couch in the living room area, and a king bed in a good sized bedroom. Like DVC the one bedroom sleeps four guests. DVC's Boardwalk Villas 1 bedroom is 712 square feet, so this Hilton one bedroom is actually slightly larger.

Unlike other DVC and other timeshares, the Hilton does provide daily maid service at no extra cost. Hilton charges by the room, not by the number of guests, so there is no extra charge for a 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> adult staying in a one bedroom like there is at many regular hotels.

Do you have a large family or group? The Hilton offers a two bedroom unit which is really a one bedroom connected to a studio with an interior door between the two.

I recommend the Hilton Vacation Club for those who want a quiet place to stay away from the glitz of the casinos. Staying here can also save on meal costs thanks to the kitchen included in the 1 bedroom units.

#### Hard Rock Hotel And Casino

This property impressed me the most of all the resorts I visited during my week in Las Vegas. My initial impression before the trip was "the Hard Rock is off the Strip – why would I want to stay there?" I was soon to learn, though, that the resort is a destination in itself.

The Hard Rock has a beautiful new concert hall, "The Joint", that opened in the Spring of 2009. Our Hard Rock host told me of how magical the opening concert by Paul McCartney was in this intimate setting. Santana is the Hard Rock's "artist in residence" and performs exclusive concerts here throughout the year. The acoustics in this state of the art hall are amazing, said our host. As I sat in a concert hall suite on the 2<sup>nd</sup> level, looking down at the stage, I was wishing I could have been there for the McCartney concert.

The Hard Rock also had one of the nicest pool areas I've seen in Las Vegas. On the day of my visit the pool was a center of activity in the middle of the day. We toured the new Paradise tower with beautiful, spacious, rooms. More new rooms are planned in 2010. The onsite Rock Spa is another nice amenity for hotel guests. The resort has a full casino and numerous dining options.

Of all the resorts I saw in Vegas during my tour the Hard Rock was the one that most made me think "I MUST stay here sometime!!"

#### Stratosphere Tower

The Stratosphere is known for its impressive tower, the highest structure west of the Mississippi, but they have guest rooms, too! The hotel portion is at the base of the tower. The North Strip location results in the room rates here being very reasonable (\$50/night during my week). A Las Vegas monorail station is a 5 to 10 minute walk from the resort for access to the other areas of the Strip and to the Convention Center.

I especially liked the Stratosphere Buffet – with a large selection of food at a reasonable “all you can eat” price. I ate breakfast here, and I think this is one of the more underrated buffets in Las Vegas.

No visit to the Stratosphere is complete without going up in the Tower. I was whisked to the top in a high speed elevator; the views from the top were breathtaking. I did not have the opportunity (or desire) to experience the thrill rides at the top of the tower; on a future trip I am sure my teenage sons would enjoy these attractions.

### Las Vegas Hilton

Another resort with reasonable room rates, the Las Vegas Hilton is next door to the Convention Center. Room rates were in the \$70 to \$100/night range the week I visited. The Hilton has a walkway to the Convention Center, and a monorail station for easy access to the Strip.

While this is an older hotel (built in 1969) I was impressed with how well maintained the rooms were. Like the Excalibur, the Hilton is slowly renovating all of its rooms. A renovated room is \$10 more than a “classic” room. I think it’s worth the upgrade price – a renovated room has a small refrigerator and a better bathroom when compared to a classic room.

We had a delicious lunch prepared for us at the Casa Nicola restaurant. There were a number of other onsite dining options on the property, including a Benihana restaurant. I was impressed with the huge race and sports book (the largest in Las Vegas).

I was surprised at how low the room rates can be at the Hilton; I certainly will consider staying here next time I am attending a conference at the Las Vegas Convention Center next door.

### Encore/Wynn

The most luxurious resort I saw all week was the Encore. Before the trip I had thought the Encore was pretty much a duplicate of the Wynn next door. Not true. The average room size for the Wynn is 650 sq feet while a room at the all suite Encore property averages 785 sq feet per room. I toured a standard suite, an 1850 sq ft parlor suite, and 2250 sq ft salon suite at the Encore – among the nicest suites I have seen anywhere.

The Encore also features the Le Reve theatre where an “in the round” aquatic show is performed several nights a week. The theatre was very impressive, and I would love to see this show sometime. Our guide said the show features 85 performers including 6 former gold medalists.

The Encore and Wynn have a number of onsite dining options. My travel agent group was treated to hor’ dourves in one of the Wynn lounges – the lobster was delicious!

### Entertainment

No visit to Las Vegas is complete without taking in some shows! I was treated to a few shows during the week:

## Harrahs Legends In Concert

This attraction was a long time feature of the Imperial Palace; for 2009 the show has moved to a new theatre at Harrahs. Legends in Concert features 5 Celebrity Impersonators each night. My show had look-a-likes for Jerry Lee Lewis, Tina Turner, James Brown, Elvis, and Britney Spears. Don't ask me how Britney Spears got included with these other legends!

One screen to each side of the stage showed original movies of the real stars in concert while their impersonators performed on stage. All the impersonators were good, with Elvis being the best. Before the show my travel agent group had a chance to take a picture with Elvis. I heard a low voice saying "Come on Tim! Get in the picture!" First time I ever was ordered around by Elvis!

I thought showing movies of the original performers was a nice feature. I had never seen Jerry Lee Lewis perform, for example, and it was fun to see the old footage of his crazy 50's act.

Legends In Concert was a high energy, rocking show that was very enjoyable.

## Mystère by Cirque du Soleil

I have seen a number of Cirque du Soleil shows in the past; I found Mystère to be the best one yet. There wasn't a bad seat in the house in the specially built Treasure Island theatre. My seat was in the very last row in the center section and I had a good view of all the amazing acrobatics. Typical of a Cirque show there was some humor mixed in, too. If you attend this show and are escorted to your seat by a funny looking old guy, beware! He's really a comedian who is part of the show and he'll do some unusual things with your ticket!

## Tournament of Kings Dinner Show

This long running show at a specially built horse arena in the Excalibur was just as good as ever. We were seated in the Russian section and were instructed to root for our "knight" in various equestrian contests of skill. Next to us was a group of Asian tourists who were really getting into cheering for their "knight" from Ireland. To get the most out of the show you need to suspend belief and get into the spirit of cheering for your "knight". The Asian tourists certainly did this and made it fun for everyone.

Each guest was provided with a whole chicken, French fries, broccoli, and an apple cake dessert for dinner. No utensils were supplied for the meal – we with our fingers in keeping with the medieval theme. I thought the food was surprisingly good.

I was very impressed by the well trained horses performing a variety of stunts with their knights (jousting, racing, and more). After my visit to a Colorado Dude Ranch this summer I know controlling a horse isn't that easy!

Also very impressive was a female acrobat towards the end of the show. She did flips while standing on a narrow board and holding a burning torch in each hand! She was better than any acrobat I saw at the Cirque show the previous night, and unlike Cirque she was working without a net!

I highly recommend this show, especially for families.

#### Lake Mead Cruise

Did you know you can take a "cruise" near Las Vegas? I did, on the Desert Princess, the largest ship on Lake Mead. This was a very relaxing 1 ½ hour lunch cruise. As part of the cruise the history of the Hoover Dam was explained. It was interesting to see the dam from the "water" side and also to see the surrounding rock formations. The bus ride to and from the Lake was about 1 hour each way. On the ride back our driver pointed out several celebrity homes including Debbie Reynold's, Goldie Hawn's, Clint Eastwood's, and Steven Spielberg's.

A Desert Princess lunch cruise was a nice break from the high energy action of the Las Vegas Strip.

#### Summary

I really enjoyed my week in Las Vegas. I learned that Las Vegas can appeal to a wide variety of travelers – the gambler, the music lover, those who enjoy fine dining, and even families. We can recommend the right resort for you depending on your interests. With room rates the lowest in years now is a great time to visit Las Vegas!

Are you interested in a Las Vegas getaway? Contact us! [tim@familytravelgurus.com](mailto:tim@familytravelgurus.com), 866-200-8022

© Larison Travel LLP, 2009.