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JULY 17, 2016 



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# OF NEON AND

There's more to Las Vegas than bright lights and casinos, as **Morgan Tait** discovers.

**B**ig, bright and unashamedly over the top, Las Vegas lives up to the brash American stereotype, in neon.

But just minutes from the endearingly cheesy skyline of replica cities, civilisations and landmarks is an old playground offering the best of both worlds: the infamous city by night, and chances to veer off the beaten track by day.

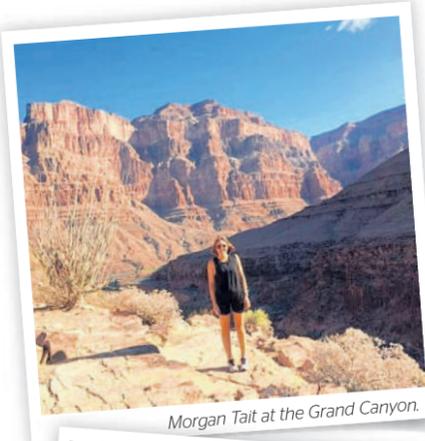
After a night of fulfilling any chosen vice, a hangover can be blown off in a cloud of desert dust while racing dune buggies off vertical drops; or with confetti still in your bra, but without breaking a sweat, you can bike 26km through the otherworldly Red Rocks Canyon.

Driving about an hour from the city in most directions can lead to experiences that rival a trip to an isolated national park; a stroll to MGM's new The Park complex means real grass to sit on and outdoor dining; there is yoga in front of dolphins or from the tallest building – and then you can head back to the casinos, resorts and clubs.

Here are six ways to make sure you get the best of everything Vegas has to offer:

## ACTIVE RECOVERY

**The Mojave Desert:** Beyond the green neon is another kind of green: nature. The scale of the Mojave Desert (which is actually a reddish brown colour) is hard to comprehend. Sand and scrub, huge dunes and natural rock formations have been the setting for many space movies because they truly do look otherworldly. Rise early before it gets too hot. Balance the night before with some sightseeing or blow away the hangover with the following mid desert activities.



Morgan Tait at the Grand Canyon.



View from my room at the Cosmopolitan.

**Sun Buggy:** Try this in the Nellis Dunes. Driving full speed off a sand dune may seem like making a losing bet with gravity, but the only failures are those who use their brakes and get stuck in the sand.

**Cycling:** Bike 26km without breaking a sweat. Take an electric bike tour through the terrestrial Red Rock Canyon and the lovely guide will talk you through the nine different canyons, offering information on geology, flora and fauna plus survival tips if you get lost in the desert.

## TREAT YO SELF

Mark your Veg cay with a special blowout experience.

**The grand adventure:** A 45 minute helicopter ride across dunes and plains does not prepare you for the scale of one of the world's largest natural wonders. However, flying through it and landing for a picnic does give you some sense of the extraordinary Grand Canyon.

**Eat where Leo celebrated his Oscar win:** Rivea, atop the upscale hotel Delano Las Vegas, is the gold standard for dining in the city.

Adjacent to the Skyfall Bar, this is where DiCaprio celebrated the night after he won his Oscar for *The Revenant*.

It's also where you can drink from hand painted bottles of champagne while sitting under glass bubbles that float from the ceiling, or on a number of balconies with 180 degree views of the nightscape.

**A massage at the Sahra Spa and Hammam:** At the Cosmopolitan Las Vegas. This will make you melt into the heated, automated massage table as classical music plays in your private room. Afterwards, wash away the jet lag in the sauna, steam room and whirlpool or lie next to the indoor pool and sip on lemon water and peppermint tea.

## CULTURE

**Techatticup Gold Mine:** For a slice of history, check out the original mid desert outlaw party destination of the 1800s at the Techatticup Gold Mine. Before the Hoover Dam created Vegas, miners ran amok in this lawless quartz mine. Tour guide Gabe paints a captivating picture of life on the final frontier.

**The Mob Museum:** Another glimpse into times past – shining a light into the glamorously dark past of the birth of Vegas in the prohibition era, featuring organised crime and the federal agents who took the mobsters down.

**Pioneer Saloon:** The derelict charm of the town of Goodsprings (pop. 200) has, like Techatticup, made it the set of many movies and its staff enthusiastically play up to the Wild West theme. Wearing cowboy hats and metal belt buckles, they pour moonshine and point out bullet holes in the walls – and the notches in the bar allegedly made by Clark Gable as he awaited news of his wife, Carole Lombard, who had perished in a plane crash in the desert nearby.

## SHOWTIME

**Stage show:** Quintessentially Vegas, you won't regret the modern take on a stage show. Cirque du Soleil's *The Beatles LOVE* is 360 degree rock poetry. An emotive journey through timeless Beatles hits on a state of the art set that enhances Cirque's distinguished body (and mind) bending acrobatics, flawless props and incredible production and lighting.

**J Lo:** Enjoy the offerings of resident pop stars like Jennifer Lopez and her *All I Have* show at Planet Hollywood. She doesn't disappoint with a repertoire from 2000s classics to her new Latin inspired numbers that also manages to incorporate plenty of booty shaking, showgirls and tributes to her children.

## CHILL

It doesn't have to be all bright lights and extreme sights. **The Park** on the strip has real grass to sit on and enjoy the food and beverages from



## TIPS

- Rise early and get outside before it's too hot. Your hangover will melt in the heat, or, just deal with it.
- Wi fi is everywhere. But avoid being spammed with promo offers by using a fake email address with the US postcode 90210.
- If you're worried about what to wear, fear not: Anything really does go. Day and night you will be next to someone in ripped denim, a floor-length ball gown or sequined bikini. Do pack loose and light. By the end of your stay in the home of over indulgence, that shift dress is likely to be more like a bodycon anyway.
- Drinks are free if you're gambling, so park up at a machine and play slowly (or not at all) until the waiter or waitress arrives.
- A tip about tipping: You need to cough up 15-20 per cent of the bill, and leave bellboys, room service and taxi drivers with a couple of dollar bills.

From left: Red Rock Canyon State Park Nevada, Delano Las Vegas Hotel and Casino, Inside The Caesars Palace hotel and casino, morning light at Grand Canyon, Arizona

# NATURE

any of its establishments. Head to **Beerhaus** with its modern take on an American sports bar, including impressive pub fare like pretzel sticks, gourmet burgers and hot dogs in fancy dressings. The icecream sandwiches and craft beer selection make it a treat destination and the mist machines and tabletop or outdoor games means you could easily settle in for hours.

## DOWNTOWN

Stay a night or more at the **Downtown Grand** to experience the hotel that has a refreshing new citrus theme. The dreamy rooftop pools are surrounded by lemon trees and herb planters, and serve tangy citrus and melon cocktails, giant bowls of frozen grapes or whole watermelons.

The **Freemont St** experience really is like no other. Buskers with a dubious range of talents from bad dancing to impersonating superheroes, flashing a giant appendage or literally nothing

at all line the street, which also hosts several casinos, bars and outdoor stages for live bands. It's home to the infamous **Heart Attack Grill** and most impressively, the overhead zip and zoom lines that offer an exhilarating ride above the bizarre bazaar below.

Here you will find cheap drinks and can fill your novelty American snack quota don't miss the ice chill at **Downtown Container Park** or the fish tacos from **Glutton**, try them with a delicious cucumber soda.

## NIGHTLIFE

If you can, get to the front of the queue for **Omnia** at **Caesars Palace XS at Wynne** also gets equally excellent reviews. **Light Bar** at Mandalay Bay Hotel is worth a visit: we witnessed a giant kangaroo pinata descend from the ceiling and spew out confetti after it was broken by a DJ, who was also dressed as a kangaroo and was

also suspended from the ceiling. The **Chandelier** bar at the **Cosmopolitan** has a delicious cocktail menu. Enjoy a spicy chilli Royal Tenenbaum while sitting under chandelier crystals dripping down the walls in a two storeyed curtain.

Try the **High Roller Experience** beforehand. You can enjoy an open bar in the cabin of the world's tallest observational wheel during its entire 45 minute rotation. Use the height advantage to suss out the rooftop bars and pool parties you want to sample later on.

For a more low key option try the dive bars Downtown like **Atomic Liquors**, from where punters used to watch the atomic bomb tests, or **Beauty Bar**, which is styled like a 1950s salon with hair driers and reclining leather seats.

Morgan Tait travelled to Las Vegas courtesy of Travel Nevada.

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