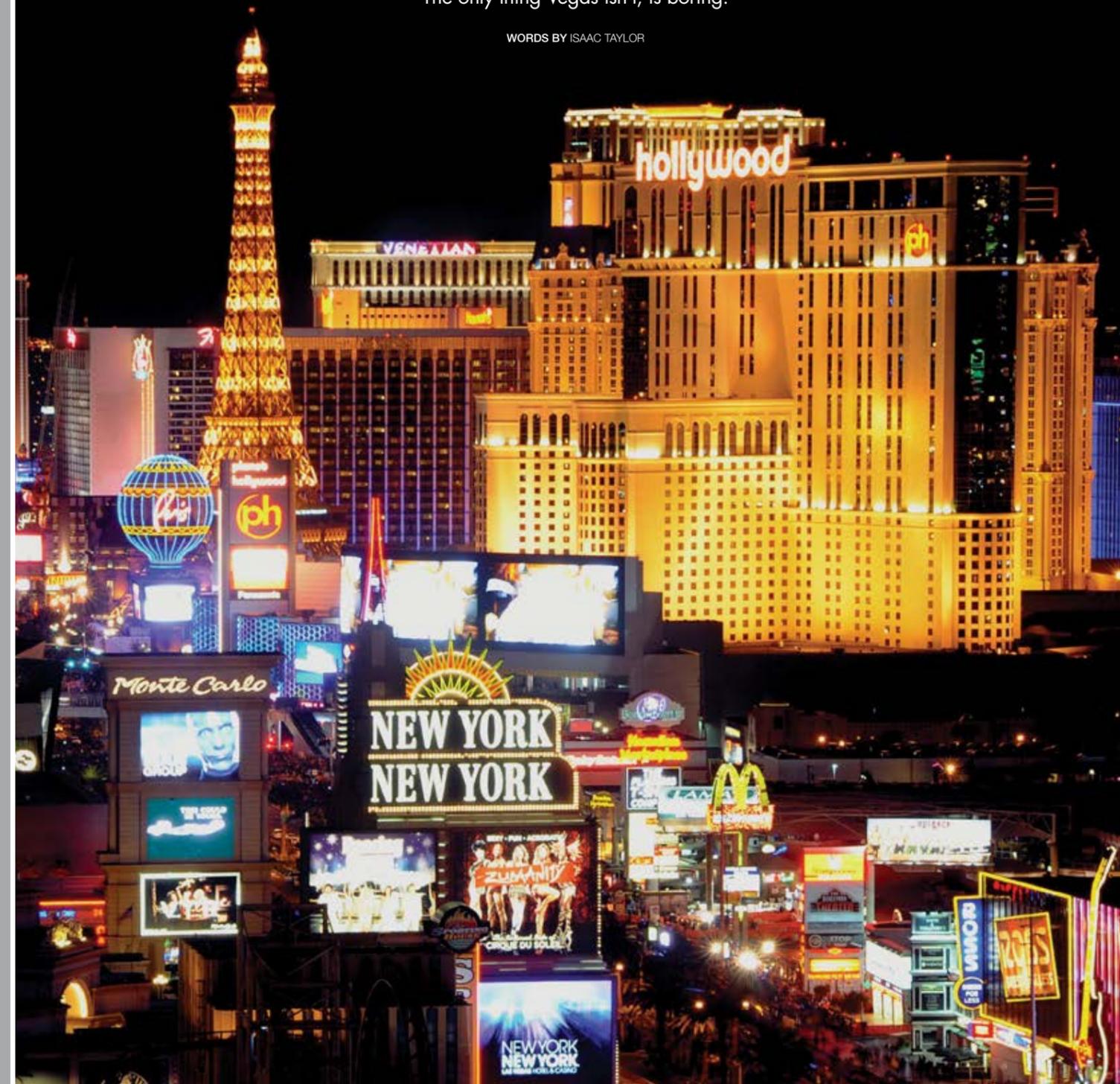


# THERE'S MORE TO VEGAS

Vegas is something different to everyone, it can be off the hook like it was for the dentist on the departing flight to LA who had just done a week long bender on 3 hours sleep. Or it can be an eclectic fine dining tour, with neon lit views of the city. For those who have an adventurous itch, Nevada is also a vast playland with adrenaline pumping ways of taking advantage of the rugged landscape.

The only thing Vegas isn't, is boring.

WORDS BY ISAAC TAYLOR



**O**ver the years we've built up an idea about what Vegas is. You think you have a pretty clear idea of what it might be like, Elvis impersonators, slot machines, and stag parties losing their mates.

But after experiencing it for the first time those concepts start to fade.

The Las Vegas strip is immediately accessible after touching down from a 16 hour connecting flight between Auckland and a brief stopover at LAX. It's the centre of activity for the city, with lights attracting an excitable crowd like moths. The street atmosphere buzzes with travellers and revellers excited to get as much out of Vegas as possible. Due to a lack of restrictions on public drinking most of the people are holding cocktails and large plastic yard glasses.

Entertainment is in abundance, the only question is what you want to do first.

J.Lo is performing just down the road, with a fully amped crowd of pop enthusiasts standing the whole way through the show, dancing in the aisles.

Or maybe Cirque Du Soleil is more your taste. They're currently performing the Beatles LOVE: Legendary Musical on a 360 degree stage that sits in the centre of the room. It mutates so often throughout the show that it's hard to guess what the stage will look like in the next act. Multiple viewings of this show are required if you want to see everything that's even happening.

**HOTELS & RESORTS**

The Cosmopolitan is a slick modern hotel in the heart of the strip, beside the Bellagio and across the road from Paris Las Vegas (hint: the one with the Eiffel Tower out the front.)

"Hotel" may be the wrong word, and "entertainment complex" sounds just a bit bland. Most of these places are entire micro-nations like the Vatican. There's so much in each one that you're really given no reason to leave. A short elevator ride from the suites in the Cosmopolitan are bars, spas, restaurants, high end stores, pools, and gaming, which seems more of a nod to Vegas' roots rather than it's future going forward. Also, it has a Day/Night Club which the Vatican doesn't have.

Northern views from the rooms are spectacular, giving an elevated front row seat to the fountain out the front of the Bellagio. Shows set to light and music and jets of water get put on every half hour and draw large crowds down on the street. It's much easier to enjoy the view from the safety of the 51st floor. Stepping out onto the veranda is also a good reminder of the all encompassing heat that the air con inside is holding at bay.

But if you do get among the crowds, or find yourself a little worse for wear after one of the clubs, it's good to de-stress with a spa and massage at the Sahara Spa and Hammam. Once again it's right inside the Cosmopolitan. The micro-nation thought of everything.



**FIRST TIMER TIPS TO GETTING FREE DRINKS**

If you're a guy free drinks are a novel concept, but it can be done just not in the way you might imagine. While the Casinos aren't as big a focus of the Vegas experience as they used to be, they make the perfect rally point for your crew before heading out to the next excursion. The house has a vested interest in keeping you tipsy and pumping in coins. So scout out the route a hostess is taking, get ahead of it and stick some money in the slots. Catch her eye, ask for a bourbon 'n' coke. Enjoy. Cash out.

**FIRST TIMER IMPRESSIONS**

Everything in Vegas is on a whole other scale. Bigger is always better. This is a town that's loud and proud of what it is. It is sincerely outrageous with zero self awareness. To the downbeat Kiwi demeanour these can sound like negatives, but even the most sarcastic cynic will be won over by Vegas' infectious swagger.

There's just something so great about a street hustler yelling "Who's here to get married!?" And fully expecting people within earshot to respond in the affirmative.



**DINING**

There are over 20 different restaurants and eateries inside The Cosmopolitan, so there's something for everyone. A personal recommendation goes to Jaleo, a Spanish place with an open-fire wood grill. One of the items on the menu sends one of the team into doing a quick drum roll ending with the entire staff yelling something in Spanish. No notes were being taken at this stage. Too busy enjoying some sort of Spanish waffle cone.

Afterwards nip across the hall to The Chandelier, which is a bar that is in the centre of the Cosmopolitan set up to look like you're inside a chandelier, hence the name. Enjoy a few drinks and if the call of nature is heard don't bother finding the public loos just head on back to the suite to freshen up, they're that close. Oh the decadence is great!

If you venture outside the micro-nation views from the Rivera are amazing as it sits atop the Delano (pronunciation was an issue of this place, is it Del-aah-no or Dell-a-no? No one could agree.)

According to our host, Leonardo Dicaprio dined here the day after his big Oscar win and David Hasslehoff has been spotted a few times as well. Apparently he speaks about himself in the third person a lot.

Directly beside the Rivera and sharing the same view is the Skyfall Lounge, which is good for cocktails and well, lounging. It offers a 180 degree view of the strip, with the closest world famous landmark being the Luxor Hotel, otherwise known as "that big black pyramid with the beam of light coming out of it."

The drinks at Skyfall are great, and the vibe of the place is perfect for a chilled hangout after dinner.



North of the strip and a five minute limo ride away is Downtown, which is the old central hub of Vegas where the Rat Pack used to hang out and Elvis had his wedding reception. It fell on hard times after the focus shifted from it to the strip, but it's bounced back in true Vegas style with the Fremont Street Experience. It's labelled as an outdoor mall but that does it zero justice. The length of the road is contained by a curved screen stretching 1,500 feet long and 90 feet wide, making it the largest in the world.

Directly below that is a 12 storey high zipline called Slotzilla, which propels you up to 64km/h down the entire length. The line to do it can take a while, but it's worth it. After blasting over crowds of people the zipline finishes above a stage with a band pumping out sing-along classics, this is one of three stages set up along the length of Fremont St. Every night is a party here, and it's hard not to sneak out of the hotel and take it all in and just people watch.

The street performers are bizarre, and coming out of Fremont St without an anecdote to take home is impossible. If you're lucky enough you'll see the guy who's offering to get his nuts kicked for a dollar. That's a real good deal!



## DINING

For a good down to earth meal, Glutton is a solid option if you're visiting Downtown. The service is great and the ahi tuna tacos are delicious. Delicious as in, you'll probably go back twice just to have them again.

For something a little heavier and keeping in the spirit of American dining there's Carson Kitchen, which is heavy on the deep fried dude food. If your bucket list includes "eating ice cream with bacon pieces in it, topped with bacon strips" then look no further.

## FIRST TIMER IMPRESSIONS:

There can't be another place like this, it's just so outrageous. It may not be the suit and tie place it once used to be but that's fine, this is better. Strangers stop and shout along to a rock anthem while cosplayers hustle pedestrians into a photoshoot. Now where is everyone getting those fluoro yard glasses from?

## SUNBUGGY

To really get to know the sand dunes and rough terrain it's off for some dune buggy racing with Sunbuggy, an ATV tour company which is less about the tour, and more about the raw fun of blitzing it up the side of a dune only to reach the top and come crashing down the other side praying that the person ahead hasn't stopped for any reason, because there's no way you're going to.

"White knuckle" is a good way of describing this activity, with these low vehicles giving a top speed of about 55km/h. Guides say that they only get about 4 people a year who flip these hardy vehicles. But no one has been injured and the buggies are all built in-house, as they don't trust the cheap imports.

Our guide took us out to Nellis dunes and quickly had us drifting and sliding around dunes. An overeager driver pushes their luck a little too much on a dune and buries the front of their buggy as they came down. The guide jumps out and digs the front tires out quickly and tells the driver to gun it, which has them going again in no time.



## FIRST TIMER IMPRESSIONS:

Don't bother trying to drift when you get started, no doubt you'll fly out of control at a later point which will scratch that itch just fine. Also keep that mouth shut or you'll have to report to NZ customs on the way home that you're full of foreign soil.



# THE GRAND CANYON

## HELICOPTER TO THE GRAND CANYON

Catch a helicopter from the strip with Maverick Helicopters to get one of the best views of the Grand Canyon you'll ever have. The trip is about half an hour each way, with panoramic views of the city, the outlying regions and various landmarks. Strapping into the heli and putting on the headset instantly gives a more intimate feel to the tour, as no one is left out of the banter. Chatter continues throughout the trip with the pilot telling everyone anecdotes while occasionally switching to a more official "tour guide tone" and informing everyone about the features we're looking at.

Just as the helicopter moves out from civilisation, aerial views of the Hoover Dam come into view. The pilot sweeps down to give everyone a better view, before setting off toward the main event.

Along the way it becomes clear that the Nevada isn't just a flat featureless desert, but a varied collection of environments. From rolling hills to rugged deadly mountains and sudden drops that turn into man made lakes. Suddenly the ground spikes up again and turns into a plateau with a somewhat abandoned settlement on it. The pilot informs everyone that it was supposed to be a retirement village with "lake views". Unfortunately there are jutting reddish yellow mountains which obscure the view more than just a little bit.

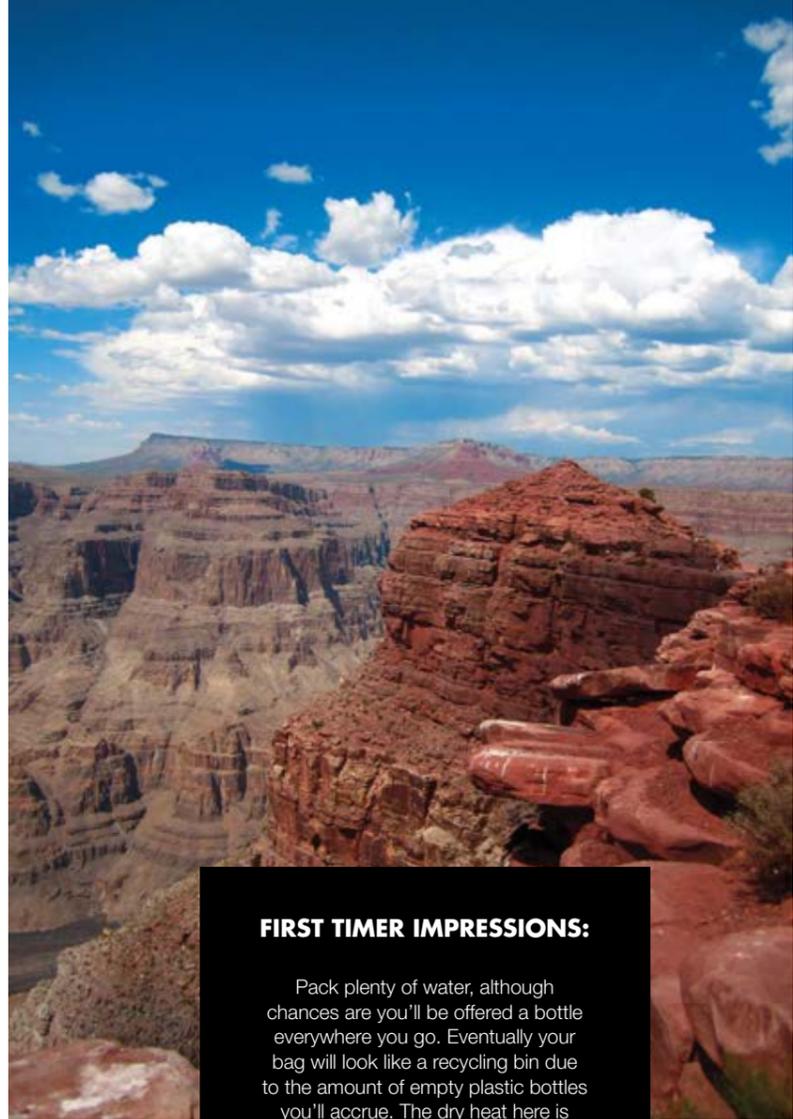
Passing perilously close to some cliffs the helicopter drops into the Grand Canyon, and the radio banter suddenly turns into stunned "wows" as everyone takes in one of the natural wonders of the world, followed by a few startled yelps as the sudden drop creates some turbulence.

Scale once again is impossible to judge and only after looking down and seeing the tiny dot of another helicopter far below is it possible to start making a judgement.

The helicopter passes the tiny skybridge which, extends timidly from the side of the canyon and then makes a slow descent to a gently sloping shelf where we touch down and have a picnic. This gives everyone an opportunity to jump out and have a good look around the Grand Canyon from the inside.

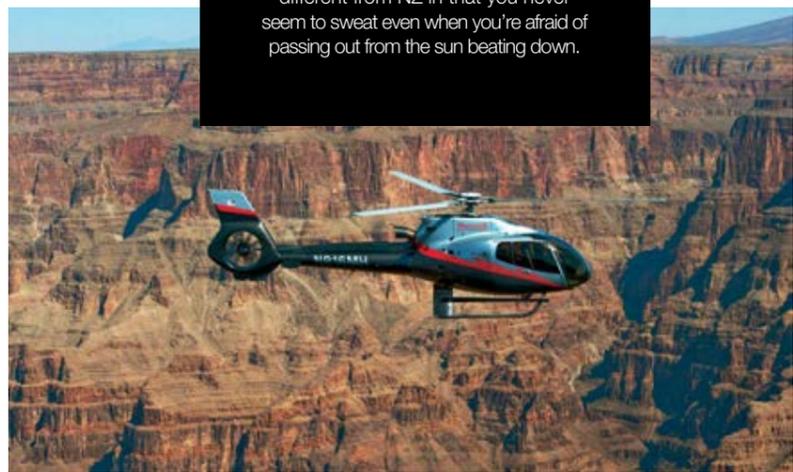
The tour continues in a nice roundabout trip, which lets everyone take in even more sights and a different view of the city.

It's a high that's hard to come down from, in more ways than one.



### FIRST TIMER IMPRESSIONS:

Pack plenty of water, although chances are you'll be offered a bottle everywhere you go. Eventually your bag will look like a recycling bin due to the amount of empty plastic bottles you'll accrue. The dry heat here is different from NZ in that you never seem to sweat even when you're afraid of passing out from the sun beating down.



## SPEED VEGAS

All the flat land means that there's plenty of space to plonk a private racetrack down, meaning that Nevada is really a motorhead's wet dream. A 10 minute drive out of town (just about every outdoor event seems to be 10 minutes out of town) is Speed Vegas, a brand new 2.4 kilometre track with an 800 metre straight. Upon arrival everyone peruses through a menu of tasty delicious supercars, with a few muscles thrown in for variety. Everyone picks a car, gets a rundown of the course, and jumps into a vehicle they'd never be able to afford, from a Lamborghini Huracán to an Audi R8 or anything in between.

A professional driver comes along for the ride giving pointers on when to slam on the brakes, corner, and open it up on the straight to reach insane speeds.

Options include riding along with a driver, who can generally top out your average speed by at least 30km/h or drive yourself... or drive yourself. The adrenaline will leave you with the shakes afterwards.

