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## VIVA LA VEGAS - LIVING WELL IN SIN CITY

I LOVE Las Vegas. You always come home with a fistful of anecdotes, even if they aren't as lurid as those depicted in *The Hangover*. We arrived in July one year and were prepared for the "official" temp of 39C, but it was nearly 50C as we strolled down the main drag. I nearly fainted from heat exhaustion outside the Bellagio, one of the ritziest hotels in town, and the staff ran out to usher me into the icy-cold foyer. I revived quickly staring at one of the hotel's collection of authentic Monets while sipping a lemon, lime and bitters. "The view and the drink are on the house ma'am," said the bellhop warmly.

Hospitality is, of course, the most deeply rooted tradition in Las Vegas, where history is mostly dated from the construction of the Hoover Dam in the 1930s. I like to stay at the Cosmopolitan, not least because I love its tagline – "Just the right amount of wrong". The latest addition to the famous Strip, two

organised crime in 1950, the museum allows gangsters such as Siegel and Al Capone to share the floor with some of the men who hunted them down, including J.Edgar Hoover.

Most coach tours of Las Vegas take you to the grubby end of Fremont St, where many of the hotel/casinos still look much as they did during the Eisenhower era. The low, low nightly rates and retro buffets featuring prawn cocktails for \$1 have kept them in business. But there's been something of a mini-renaissance of late and old favourites like the El Cortez, where Sharon Stone's character in the 1995 film *Casino* met a sticky end, have undergone renovations. The Fremont East District, a few blocks away, has also regained a sense of hip with trendy clubs, cafes and shops.

Leading local and international chefs have been dishing up world-class food in Vegas for over a decade, but the stellar names who have taken up

his sophisticated take on a traditional steakhouse. Whether you choose from a line-up of wagyu cuts from Japan or an Australian Angus 300 New York strip, the flavour and texture are incomparable.

The paella at Julian Serrano alone is worth the pilgrimage. The famed Spanish chef may hail from Madrid, but he should become an honorary citizen of Valencia for his riff on the city's most famous culinary creation. Chicago chef, Shawn McClain, one of the most celebrated young cooks in the US, is in charge at Sage, where a chic bar serving expertly made cocktails is the opening act for the almost subdued dining room in the back. There's plenty of meat on the menu (McClain runs a steakhouse in his home town), but I opted for his trademark kushi oysters with tabasco sorbet and tequila mignonette, followed by a tender-as sheep's milk ricotta gnocchi.

A bar crawl tops many a visitor's list in a city that sports everything from vintage tiki lounges through back-alley bikie bars and some of the coolest drinking spots in the US. For a Don Draper vibe, head for chic watering holes such as The Griffin, Downtown Cocktail Room or Ghostbar on the 5th floor of the Palms, where celebrities often huddle near the floor-to-ceiling windows. Wine lovers should make tracks to the Hostile Grape at M Resort, where Enomatic wine serving machines allow you to choose your own mix of flights. More than 200 types of vodka and an extensive caviar menu lure punters to the plush booths of Red Square in Mandalay Bay. Speaking of Russia, the Minus 5 Bar, also at Mandalay Bay, keeps temps chilled to five below with imported Canadian ice so guests in winter coats and boots can "warm up" with premium vodkas as tourist sweat outside.

The Freakin' Frog offers over 700 beers and a whisky attic, if you feel like a frat house atmosphere. For a real pub experience without beer pong, though, head for Ri Ra at the Mandalay Bay Shoppes to find the only Guinness store on US soil. Or the Crown and Anchor, where a line-up of silver taps dispenses more than 30 beers - many British - to team with the bar menu of fish and chips, bangers and mash and chicken fingers that are really worth licking your digits for. My favourite? The Noir Bar, an intimate lounge at the Luxor hotel, which specialises in cocktails you won't find elsewhere such as carrot cake martini and the peanut butter and jelly cocktail.

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50-storey towers boasting 3000 rooms balance on only 3.5ha of land and there's plenty more packed into the tight space, including 13 restaurants and three vast swimming pools.

No wonder tourists come to gape and gawk. The West Tower has its own boxing ring, the Sahara Spa and Hammam is one of the most stylish spas in the world, and the triple-decker Chandelier Bar makes even the most sophisticated peer upwards like an out-of-towner. Easily the top cocktail destination in town, the five diverse bars offer hundreds of mixed drinks, from unique takes on - what else? - the classic Cosmopolitan to whatever takes the bartenders' fancies in the "only molecular mixology bar" in Vegas.

One of the biggest new tourist drawcards is the Mob Museum, officially the Las Vegas Museum of Organized Crime and Law Enforcement, which opened its doors, last year. A leading consultant on the project was Millicent Siegel Rosen, daughter of the infamous "Bugsy" Siegel, one of the three mobsters who ruled Las Vegas in the 1940s. Housed in the former federal courthouse where a US senate committee conducted hearings into

residence at the \$10.5 billion CityCenter which opened two years ago, have set a new benchmark. Even if you dine in and around the largest privately funded construction project in the history of the US for a week or more, you probably won't manage to exhaust all of the places to dine very well indeed.

Twist, the restaurant that tops the Mandarin Oriental Hotel, is under the aegis of Michelin three-star chef, Pierre Gagnaire, and was awarded the Forbes Five Star Award for 2012. Very much a smart European-style restaurant, I ordered Gagnaire's signature dish of langoustine five ways, with each large scampi-like crustacean appearing in a sauce markedly different from its predecessor. Although the choice was just pipped at the post in flavour by scallops with rare squab breast, foie gras and black olive gelee.

The ARIA casino is home to eight bells-and-whistles restaurants, including Jean-Georges Steakhouse, Julian Serrano and Sage. Jean-Georges Vongerichten needs no introduction for foodies who regularly visit New York and the Alsatian-born chef has produced in spades in Las Vegas with