

VIVA LAS VEGAS

From gamblers, gangsters and strip shows to Celine Dion, Diana Ross and Liza Minelli... Las Vegas has seen them all.

Spencer Barnett reports...

IT'S no surprise that this year Las Vegas overtook New York as Thomas Cooks No. 1 destination in the USA. From a desolate desert town to the fastest growing city in America, this fantasy city is the place where adult dreams really do come true.

'Big Spring' was discovered by mistake in 1830 by Rafael Rivera, the first non-native to set foot on this land, who took a wrong turn as he made his way through the desert. He named the area Las Vegas, meaning 'the meadows'. By 1845 Las Vegas was a popular camping spot thanks to Big Spring, the only fresh water within a day's walk. So that's how this city was born. Mormons and mining communities all contributed to Vegas' growth and success in the early days, but it wasn't until 1931 when statewide legalisation of gambling was introduced that Vegas really grew up.

When you arrive the first thing that hits you is the intense dry heat. This is the most natural hazard here. When I visited in June, daily

temperatures were nearing 100 degrees farenhite. In December and January however, temperatures are in the 40's, so if you can't stand stifling heat don't go in the summer months. In fact with winter approaching, it's probably the best time to plan a trip to Vegas. Most casinos are on the four mile stretch of Las Vegas Boulevard South, also known as 'the strip'. In true American style, imitation is the highest form of flattery and you will find giant copies of the Eiffel Tower, Statue of Liberty and Venice's St Marks Square. The Luxor hotel and casino is loosely modelled on ancient Egypt with a ten-storey Sphinx that squats at its entrance. The stark shape of the Luxor's black glass pyramid can be seen from planes cruising at 30,000 feet. Whether you look out of your bedroom window to the strip or take a stroll down it, it is actually awe-inspiring. The brash tackiness of all these man made gambling venues combined with the mostly adult, mostly American punters who are so easily impressed by all this cheesyness makes you take a step back and say to yourself, "my god, is this all for real?" To overhear crowds of grown US citizens so easily get excited about taking a ride in a fake gondola or see them stand in amazement watching a robot dance around a shopping mall, really points out what a make-believe place this is. It certainly is a Disney land for adults where reality is left at the door.

Although the strip around which Vegas is built houses many of the most famous casinos, I would like to dispel the myth that you need a lot of money to gamble here. Vegas is all things to all pleasure seekers and the large establishment will cater for all levels of player. The minimum bet at Black Jack (21 or pontoon) could be \$1 in one section of the casino or \$10,000 in a VIP room. Part of the fun is walking around these massive gambling dens and just people watching; from wheelchair bound New Jersey OAP's feeding the fruit machine all day to the real high rollers betting thousands of dollars on the spin of a roulette wheel.

Vegas is also famed for it's extravagant and spectacular shows. Some of the worlds biggest stars perform in this entertainment capital, and some have there own residency like Celine Dion. Any first time visitor will be bombarded with billboard ads offering anything up to 70 different stage shows each night. There are a couple of really big shows that are the mainstay of the entertainment scene here, namely; EFX, Alive, Mystere, O and Siegfried & Roy. The latter recently made world news for the wrong reasons when one of the performing white tigers took a bite out of Roy. At \$100 a ticket this would have been great value to see but when I saw them I thought this over rehearsed camp extravaganza was money badly spent. Saying that, it is a matter of taste and Siegfried & Roy is an institution par excellence. The other show I caught was 'O'. Cirque du Soleil has outdone itself with this production in which 74 trapeze artists, contortionists, divers, and synchro-



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► nised swimmers navigate an unbelievable stage that transforms from the Arctic Ocean to an African watering hole practically instantaneously. Although still expensive at \$90 upwards, if there is one big show you're going to see in Vegas, I would certainly recommend this one.

Away from the glitz and the glamour of the strip there are countless trips to do and excursions out of town. I was lucky enough to take a helicopter to the Grand Canyon, and unforgettable experience that simply blows you away. It takes about 40 minutes of flying over the craggy Nevada desert until you reach this amazing natural wonder. You've seen it in movies or read about it in books but nothing could prepare you for being there. Everything you've heard about the Grand Canyon is true; it's stunning; overwhelming; mind-blowing. Flying through it we were a tiny spec against a monstrous backdrop of rock. It is so big your brain has a problem actually understanding its size as there is nothing in this wilderness to compare it against. It was only when our pilot told us that the height of the gorge we were flying through was about as tall as five Empire State buildings that you get a small idea of how big it actually is. Landing for champagne and nibbles at the bottom of the canyon gave a perspective from the ground, and made me wonder how, 100 years ago, native American Indians and other travellers made their way over this impossible terrain. On the way back to Vegas our helicopter hovered over the Hoover Dam, completed in 1935 at a cost of \$165 million. The dam's legacy has been monumental, endowing Las Vegas with all the power and water it needs. The Grand Canyon trip makes a welcome contrast to the totally man made, make belief city that feeds it with so many tourists.

Back down to earth it's hard not to gamble when I got back into my hotel. At the Bellagio when you leave the elevator to walk to reception, you are walking through a casino. When I strolled from reception to the pool I was met with more gambling tables. It is easy to see how people get sucked in to this 24 hour 'game'. Even at breakfast as I tucked into my blueberry muffins I found my self chancing more money on another game I can't even remember the name of. As the waitress poured my second cup of coffee, I found myself betting on a set of electronic numbers coming up; a kind of breakfast bingo if you like.

A trip to Vegas is a real eye opener. Go for the glitz and the glamour; the replica tackiness that the Americans pull off so well, and a must do trip to one of the natural wonders of the world. Don't go to win money because the only winners in Las Vegas are the casinos.

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