

livin' la vida **vegas**

He swaggered into the Bellagio's poker room and found a seat at a \$500 Texas hold'em table. Right away, I could tell he was a skilled player, handling his cards with an efficiency of motion and calling the dealer by name.

He let the out-of-towners provide the play by play like the poker tournaments on TV. For the burly union workers from New Jersey and the insurance agent from Nashville, it was like a poker fantasy camp, deluding themselves that they were playing along with the major leaguers.

But this guy was a real pro. Within in 30 minutes he had nearly cleaned out everyone at the table, slipping the dealer a tip as he left.

As he walked past me heading for the door, I motioned him over for a drink.

"Was that a bunch of chumps or what?" I asked as he ordered a Scotch that was old enough to be my grandfather.

"Nah, they're just the new Vegas crowd," he replied, taking the measure of me with a glance. "They're here for the golf and four-star restaurants and to let their wives go shopping. Gambling is just another way to blow a few bucks and tell stories about it back home."

"So everything doesn't stay in Vegas," I grinned.

"Just another myth, my friend. Vegas is all about having stories to tell when you get home. People live for coming out to the desert and reinventing themselves for a week or two every year," he replied.

"Any more myths?" I asked, hoping for a real scoop.

"The old Vegas is dead—the mob is long gone. It's all corporate ownership now," he said, and it was hard to tell whether he really missed the old days. "Don't get me wrong, they'll take your money all the same."

"Thanks for stopping by," I said.

"Maybe I'll see you at the table later," he winked and headed for the door.

I walked out after him, wanting to see a bit of the old Vegas and see what the new Vegas is all about. Some vestiges of the old Rat Pack-era Vegas survive, like the neon cowboy "Vegas Vic" in front of the Pioneer Club in downtown. But mega resorts are the rage now, with plenty of only-in-Vegas entertainment to take in.

These days, as many people come to the city to play golf as to gamble. Tiger Woods won his first PGA Tour victory, back in 1996, at the Las Vegas Invitational at the Tournament Players Club at Summerlin. If it's good enough for Tiger, it's good enough for me.

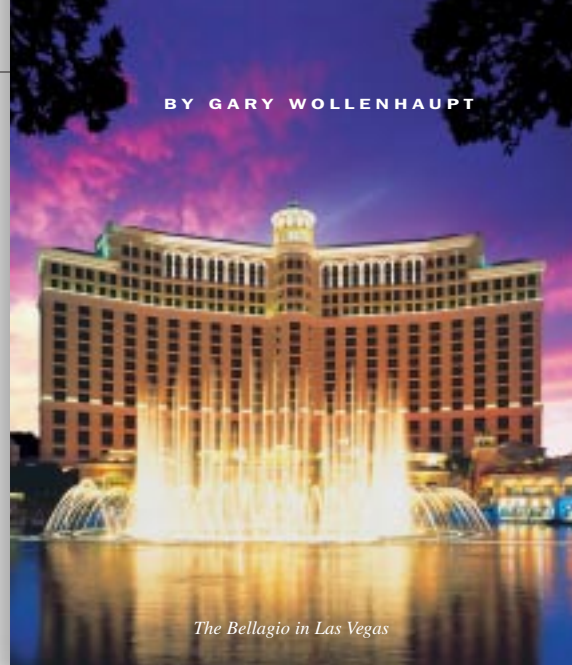
Driving down the strip, it's easy to see that Las Vegas is still the land of excess, and its golf courses are no exception. The Wynn Las Vegas course, 18 holes right on the strip, has water elements and daunting elevation changes. Over at Bali Hai Golf Club on the southern end of the strip, I like the island feel with towering palm trees and sparkling green fairways accented by white crushed granite.

I have to confess to being a little star struck. My wife wanted to stay at the Bellagio so she could see a casino caper. I told her she watched *Ocean's 11* too many times, but she was sure George Clooney and Brad Pitt would be there filming *Ocean's 13*.

Matt Damon, George Clooney and Brad Pitt during the filming of Ocean's 13 in Las Vegas.



Damon, Clooney, and Pitt get their style on in *Ocean's 13*



The Bellagio in Las Vegas



The Bellagio lounge



The Forum Shops at Caesars Palace



MGM Grand's Studio 54 nightclub

Walk into any casino and you'll find games for all skill levels. Start out on the nickel slot machines to get warmed up. Slot machines are simple and provide that instant feedback, with enough winning to keep you coming back for more. It's a great town to come and legally put your money down on sports events, races, big games like the Super Bowl and Final Four. It's the big leagues compared to putting \$20 in the office pool.

The table games require a little more skill but are simple to learn. The Texas hold'em craze has brought new life into poker, something my casino friend has capitalized on.

You could spend a week in Vegas and not set foot in the casino, if you cared to try. Luxury accommodations and fine dining could keep you or your significant other busy from dawn till dusk, or even all night, because the city never sleeps.

For living like a high roller, the Chairman Suite at The Venetian is considered the *crème de la crème*. The entrance to the 8,500-sq.-ft. suite begins with a step onto a black Java stone floor inset with semiprecious stones. The suite

includes a living room, dining room, media room, two master bedrooms, two additional bedrooms, and a workout room complete with a dry sauna and steam room.

The Skyloft suites at the MGM Grand have the ultimate luxury: a butler trained in the fine art of relaxation, from massage to aromatherapy.

The Villa and Forum Penthouse Suites at Caesars Palace can either be split into separate suites or combined all into one 45,000-square-foot suite with fourteen bedrooms, eight bathrooms, and such unique amenities as a private cigar bar, billiards room, and full fitness studio.

Don't overlook the fact that Vegas is a great restaurant town, named by *Bon Appétit* magazine as one of the top five restaurant cities in the nation. There are dozens of eateries ran by celebrity chefs with food so good you'll forget about your losses at the casino.

If you, like my wife, want to be entertained while you eat, check out Tony 'n' Tina's Wedding at the Rio All-Suites Hotel and Casino. Join the wedding party from two slightly dysfunctional families, complete with drunk-en guests, a pregnant maid of honor, an

impromptu "YMCA" dance, and, of course, family bickering.

Or learn how the pro chefs do it with a cooking class, available at many restaurants. For instance, Piero Selvaggio's Italian eatery, Giorgio Caffe and Ristorante at Mandalay Bay, offers custom cooking classes for groups ranging from 15 to 40 people. At Café Ba Ba Reeba! at Fashion Show, groups can learn how to prepare paella, the classic Spanish dish.

There's a restaurant for nearly every theme too, from the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino to Hofbräuhaus Las Vegas. Trekkies can enjoy a meal among their favorite characters at Quark's Bar & Grill at Star Trek: The Experience inside the Las Vegas Hilton.

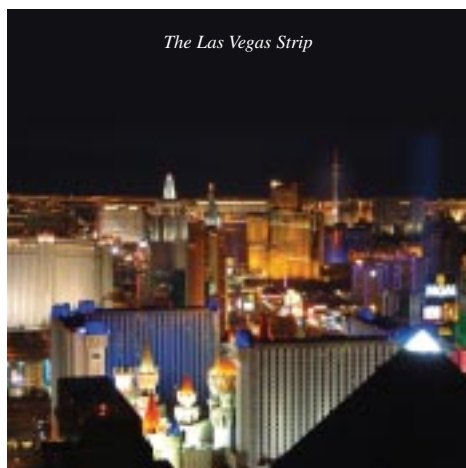
Like I said, you could spend a week in Vegas and never gamble. I almost made it. But after a week of golf, luxurious meals and star-studded shows, I had to try my hand.

On our last day in town, I saw a certain poker player walk into the poker room. He looked me up and down as I sat beside him.

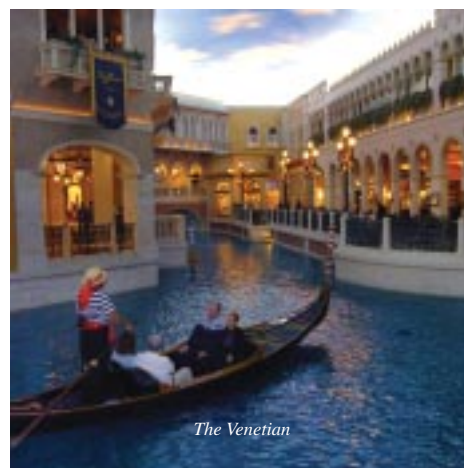
"I want a story to tell back home," I said as I peeked at my hole cards.



Bali Hai Golf Club



The Las Vegas Strip



The Venetian