



CLOSE TO HOME

# LAS VEGAS:

*As luck would have it, or, a rice-straw carrying boat*

Photo by Laurie Anderson

It's a mistake to not look up when walking through The Venetian in Las Vegas. Author David Campiche, right, ponders the ceiling.

Story by DAVID CAMPICHE

I had never traveled to Las Vegas. It simply wasn't — I believed — “my kind of place.” Why go to the Paris Las Vegas, I reasoned, and enjoy a half-sized copy of the Eiffel Tower when, for not much more money (basically, a difference in air fare), a traveler could enjoy the real thing! The real thing in lovely Paris! There you have it.

Our hotel concierge called us “virgins.” Indeed, many of my readers have traveled to this infamous city, and traveled there several times.

But my wife, Laurie, and I are in Las Vegas. Yes, right now. Call this the luck of the draw. And here is my first impression, perhaps a common interpretation. Vegas is an adult Disneyland perched on stiletto heels. And secondly, Las Vegas represents a perpetual party pleasure playground with lots of superb food and world-class entertainment. And on a prominent billboard, an advertisement that states that a budding marksman can pay to shoot a fully automatic MP-5. And all this with free hotel pickup up, only \$29. Now, that's an alternative experience! In Sin City's attempt to cater to all tastes, I hasten to think that, as a city, Las Vegas is bipolar.

Speaking of guns, all the big ones are here. Vegas is the Mecca of Emeril Lagase (though he apparently lost his time-share), Wolfgang Puck, Gordon Ramsey, Bobby Flay (Bobby Flay Burger Las Vegas — both yummy and cheap), Thomas Keller (Bouchon), and last but not least, the 35-year mainstay Andre Rochat. Plus a riveting array of lesser-known culinary talent offered to you in every price range and imaginable distinction.

We ate an exquisite meal at Sensi. It was

a near-perfect palette of French, Italian and Asian fusion, each delicate plate a graceful, floral and gastronomic presentation with farm-to-table produce, fresh seafood and beautifully presented organic red meats. And simple things like a ripe Japanese tomato or fresh crisp pea vines, apples or a voluptuous red pomegranate, each enhancing a delicate salad of gathered greens from artisan gardens throughout the West. From the amuse bouche of tuna, cornmeal and miniature greens to the Panacotta dessert, the meal was a celebration of creativity.

A brunch at Thomas Keller's Bouchon was inspiring, and, compared to the tariff at his other famous restaurant, The French Laundry in Napa, a full-meal bargain. Before we lucked into a kitchen tour, there was brunch. We feasted on lovely homemade braided bread with house-made cherry jam, a near-divine tomato soup, and then two entrées, dinner salads really. Laurie's was a simple pile of greens with a warm herbed goat cheese and perfect French vinaigrette. I devoured a rare flank steak on a bed of greens as fresh and verdant as a Northwest spring morning, sunshine after rain. Hot homemade breads and two cappuccinos finished the standing ovation presentation. We escaped with a few dessert pastries and a bag of cookies the sous-chef generously supplied after the kitchen tour, which again, left us awestruck.

But there is so much more in this city. We devoured two salmon and buckwheat crepes at Jean Philippe Patisserie (\$11 each). Later, we split some kind of chocolate mousse festooned in chocolate ribbons and topped with a lime macaroon. There were more choices than days in the month. Need I say more! This treat was housed in the Bellagio, that famous



Photo by Laurie Anderson

A view of Las Vegas by air at night is a colorful sight, indeed.

institution dedicated to remarkable taste, from the Dale Chihuly blown-glass ceiling of maybe 2,000 pieces of blown glass, to floral courtyards spangling with tens of thousands of colorful flowers, each display back-lit with soft flooding light. Handsome passageways with massive chandeliers were graced with every imaginable restaurant and designer boutique. We couldn't buy much but enjoyed the window displays. Everything seemed opulent, even the casino.

Did I fail to mention gambling? Las Vegas is fueled by gambling, over 6 billion big ones a year. When asked, only 5 percent of the tourists claim to come to Sin City for the slots and cards. But leaving Vegas, 87 percent have been lured into this cauldron of temptation.

I am not a gambler. My wife is not a gambler. Two friends deposited \$20 into my wallet and insisted we use the cash as ante. We broke even at the slots and later won about \$100 at blackjack. We were plied with a couple of free drinks. I chose a Manhattan.

The second night we stumbled upon a professional gambler from Montana named Jeffery Flatness. He was playing \$5 slots. That's \$5 a pull. He explained his commitment, which, by my economic standards, was huge. That trip he won \$18,000 and change. He was a decent, cordial man with loads of confi-

dence. On the last visit to the Bellagio, he lost. The hotel covers his tab, as it does for other preferred high rollers. This trip was make-up. “You gotta know when to draw and when to walk.” Didn't Kenny Rogers say something about this? At the least, the experience was educating and pleasant. Around us lights flashed, machines clanked, and the cacophony of money exchanging hands rolled on like the roulette wheel. Ka ching! Ka ching! Like birds on a wire.

We did theater, the first night at a Cirque du Soleil production called “The Beatles, Love.” And the next day, “The Jersey Boys.” Both were world class. I loved the acrobatics of the Cirque performers. The color. The music, which shaped my generation and the world. “The Jersey Boys” contributed great storytelling with superb musical talent. There must have been a hundred shows that night. In this city that never sleeps, it's always a buyer's market.

One may simply people-watch on the Strip. The Strip (Las Vegas Boulevard) rolls on for miles. What can one say about the sheer decadence and salacious behavior of this urban peep show? The only street in America that might trump such excess is Bourbon Street in New Orleans, but other than Mardi Gras, I doubt you will ever see more skin than here. Of course it was nearly 100 degrees in early spring.

In the 17th century, a Japanese zen master and poet named Ryokan scribed in fine calligraphy this haiku:

*Pushing a pole  
a rice-straw carrying boat  
toward the silver moon*

We did something like that in Las Vegas. We drifted on the Boat of Life. The city lured us in like sacrificial sardines into the waiting mouths of a hungry Chinook salmon. I believe we were motivated by fun and perhaps by a sleight of hand tribute to human hedonism. Isn't that Las Vegas?