



We'll call this one, Beer and Loafing in Las Vegas. It's seven in the evening. An impressive sandstorm is sweeping in over the desert. Thunder, lightning, the occasional errant rain drop frying on the sidewalk in the 11:30 dusk. In front of the Sahara, the picket signs of the strikers crackle in the dry wind and the pirate assault on the two ships in the front yard lagoon of Treasure Island is cancelled due to choppy water.

Bummer. Las Vegas, neon fruit of Bugsy Siegel's dream (Build it and they'll come with their quarters), dances in the slot machine sunset of an oddball American hallucination. A glittering monument to denial (there is no desert, there is no desert), its fountains and indoor waterfalls irrigate a sun-baked bit of purgatory that hasn't seen measurable rain for three years. Squatting like an expense account lizard at the hub of a network of package tours, the fastest growing city in the country is a beeping, flashing affront to the natural order.

In spite of which, or because of which, we love this place very much. Say what you will, as far as getaways go, it's hard to imagine anything worth getting away from that can't be got away from effortlessly in Las Vegas. A newcomer, but no one's fool, we did not fly into the belly of the beast alone. We brought Nurse Angela along to make sure matters got out of hand quickly.

Our balcony rooms at the Westward Ho (or, as we came to know it, the Wayward Ho, the cheapest hotel on the package) look out on the Riviera across the street. To our right, at the McDonald's next door, the rear guard of the Grateful Dead concert are swilling 75¢ Heinekens and pooling gas money to get out of town. In the foreground (our seven mythical pools and jacuzzis just beyond), the Wayward's lovely sign reminds us of the prime rib buffet for \$6.95 and the 42 ounce happy hour Margarita, served from one until seven for 99¢. With chips, salsa, and Keno.

We came to call Las Vegas, Las Buffet. Given the mountains of cheap food, the real miracle is that the sidewalks aren't littered with the wheezing bodies of grazers for whom that last barbecued rib was a grisly mistake. If you don't gain weight in Las Vegas, you've been gambling far too much. Or drinking with newfound abandon.

If one shoots craps, plays roulette or, for that matter, sits like a laboratory gerbil pressing buttons and pulling handles on the gaily lit quarter machines, the drinks are free -- brought to you by comely young women in costumes which are, in terms of current politics, deliriously incorrect. Yes, we wore our chest harness. And yes, Nurse Angela kept us on a short leash. Aside from the episode with the seals, wildly distorted in the police reports, our behavior was impeccable. When biting the occasional ankle, we were careful not to break the skin.

An especially civilized touch: one may carry one's gin and tonic out onto the street, rolling the icy glass on one's forehead to ward off sunstroke (the second day, it hit 117°) and ricochet aimlessly into the next air-conditioned fantasy.

Lord how we love Las Vegas. In spite of all we'd heard, nothing prepared us for the city that not only never sleeps, but never even nods off. For a country boy, the sight of a seventy-year-old man (someone's great grampa) sitting in a casino at three in the morning, chewing a cigar the size of a Louisville Slugger, playing Twenty-One for \$500 a hand, puts one's puny attempts at debauchery into perspective. As do the \$100 slot machines with the simple instructions: Insert Bill.

What we were most unprepared for, stalwart Nurse Angela and ourself, was the sheer scale. 'Boggling' pales before the truth. We've mentioned the three-masted pirate ships and the lagoons. We forgot the volcano that erupts several times a day spewing lava onto the miniature desert island.

All well and good, but cheap thrills pale beside Caesar's Palace with its three-quarter scale Roman forum. Where, above the fountain courtyard (dolphins spewing water, the Three Graces sort of thing) and the three metre statues of the gods perched backlit on the temple walls, is the great vault of the sky five stories over head. Dabbling at one's angel hair pasta and a chocolate mocha mousse so decadent it should be a controlled substance, one watches the light change from dawn to noon to deep Las Vegas dusk. Just down a sidewalk in the five-acre reproduction of a first century

Roman neighborhood (where live Gucci and Cartier), a gallery in which an extraordinary cast acrylic translucent Jesus (in, as opposed to on, the cross) goes for \$40,000. As many as the stars in the sky are the dollars that flow through Las Vegas. Its several casinos aside, Caesar's Palace is what all shopping malls dream to be. An ambience from which one hesitates to escape, a world whose lords have learned to short circuit time. Which, in Las Vegas, comes very close to being money.

And what of mighty Luxor, new kid at the end of The Strip? (The Strip is, by the way, two solid miles of casinos.) Behind the full scale replica of Cleopatra's needle and the stately courtyard with its four-stories tall Sphinx (complete with nose), is a black glass pyramid two blocks on a side and perhaps two hundred feet tall. Yes, there's a river inside where one can, if one wishes, ride a barge. Or watch the laserized Mysteries of Luxor on the seven-story Omnimax screen. Or, as a last defense against boredom, eat, drink, and gamble.

What we're dealing with here, campers, is a Disneyland for adults. And, against all odds, it works. Our idea of fun used to be pow-wow with the river people on the Columbia. It still is, those weekends we can't get to Las Buffet.

Nine o'clock in Las Vegas, our last night at the oasis. Nurse Angela and ourself on the balcony, reduced to pleasure sponges, checking the time lest we miss the prime rib. In the twilight just beyond Circus Circus, a metal tower 250 feet tall. We have only a minute to wonder what it is before the tiny human on the platform executes a respectable swim dive. Bungee jumping into the neon sunset of the American mirage.

MEANWHILE, IN NEWPORT



Becoming a restaurant reviewer is a constant, deep and abiding temptation for we ink-stained wretches who write for publication.

Who among us hasn't day-dreamed of a benignly smiling editor saying, "Here, Wordsmith, take this credit card and go ye unto the fanciest, most expensive restaurants in the land and report back to us the venues of the finest foie gras, the most luscious lobster, the sizzlingest of steaks.

"Pay no attention to cost, my boy, the publication can stand it.

"Oh, before you go, may I suggest you draft as companion and assistant for this assignment that young lady from the Home and Garden department. You know, the one who was walking past when you stepped in the wastebasket and fell on your face."

It's a recurrent fantasy, one that strikes most virulently when standing in line at McWhoozit's Fast Fish and Chips emporium or when contemplating the damage done to the beer and steelhead tackle budget by two steak dinners, a decent bottle of wine and a lave or two of brandy to settle the stomach.

Unfortunately, it happens only in fantasy. First, a smiling editor is much more likely to be proffering a pink slip and orders to clean out your desk than a credit card. Second, the term, "Don't worry about expense," is surgically removed from the brain before one is allowed to be an editor. Thirdly, if the pulchritudinous maiden from Home and Garden is going to be nosing with anyone at the publication's expense, that someone will be (yep) the editor. Yet the dream never wanes.

Thus, I hereby state, after years of dedicated research up and down the length of the Oregon Coast, that the best clam sandwich in our domain is served at Newport Steak and Seafood, on hwy. 101 just north of the Yaquina Bay bridge. And yes, I paid for it out of my very own pocket.



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