

LOST AND FOUND IN LAS VEGAS

Think Las Vegas is just a seedy strip of casinos? Think again, says Rosie Ifould, who found a whole new side to the city – and herself

Good morning!' the man grins, extending a hand. The other hand is holding a beer. 'Nice to meet you, what's your name? Are you married?' Yes I am, I tell him, with a child. 'Well, you look good on it,' he says, as I say goodbye. 'You're keeping it all together!' he shouts, across the lobby floor.

It is 6am and I'm making my way through the cavernous ground floor of the MGM Grand, past slot machines, bars and floor-to-ceiling video screens, in search of coffee. Sitting behind my new friend, a fortysomething woman in a sensible office suit is milking a one-armed bandit with the determined look of a professional. I wonder if she's come from work or if this is a quick stop on the way. In other circumstances, this encounter might seem a bit seedy, but not to me, not right now. Right now, it feels glorious. Yes, I think. I am in *Vegas*.

Even if you've never been to Las Vegas, you've probably got a pretty good idea what it's like – or think you have. It's one of those American cities so mythologised by popular culture that you can close your eyes and see it. It's neon lights and the strip, casinos and Celine Dion. Sin City is where people go if they want to lose themselves, but I'm here for the opposite reason. I want to reconnect.

For the past couple of years, I've been fully

immersed in the world of babies and toddlers: I steam vegetables, visit parks, read about dinosaurs and talking pigs. I love it, but at the same time, I look back on photos from my twenties and wonder who it is I'm looking at. I really miss that person. At home, I might meditate or practise mindfulness, but I truly feel, right now, that my route to feeling whole again is going to be via a beautifully made cocktail in a sleek, expensive bar.

Fortunately, the next few days promise a lot of cocktails in some of the world's best bars. I'm here to experience the food culture of Las Vegas – and if that sounds like an oxymoron, it isn't. They're passionate about having a good time here, and this includes making sure you're extremely well fed. It isn't just the big resorts, which have imported some world-famous names (Alain Ducasse, Joel Robuchon, Hakkasan), but also the smaller hotels, which like to promote eclectic menus and experimental mixologists. There's also, as I'm to discover, a thriving foodie scene with more artisanal breads, cheeses and coffees than you could imagine. Over the next few days I'm going to see exactly how it feels to live this style of 'good life'.

I am staying in the MGM Grand, a hotel so huge it feels like a city itself. Slot machines, shops, restaurants and mega-auditoriums where you can

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>>> catch the latest Cirque du Soleil performance mean you could come to Vegas and not leave this one hotel.

This is a city designed by a mad Lewis Carroll, or a benevolent Hieronymous Bosch – everything seems back to front or larger than it should be. The effect is amplified when I go for cocktails straight after breakfast in the incredible Wicked Spoon at the Cosmopolitan hotel, famous for buffet bars that boast pork crackling, pizza and sushi, alongside the standard stacks of pancakes, pastries and fruit. It all seems so outrageous that I giggle like a child as I choose what to eat. This increases when I move on to the Vesper bar for a pre-lunch cocktail. ‘Look up,’ the bartender says, and I see the lights come from a great ruffle of glass and glitter. ‘It represents Alice in Wonderland’s petticoats.’

A theme park for adults

This is the kind of detail that makes it easy to fall for Vegas as a theme park for adults. I try drinks topped with ‘buzz buds’ – Szechuan flower buds that make your mouth tingle. I am presented with towers of grape candyfloss at brunch at Simon (where they make a knockout Bloody Mary). Later on, I go to a ‘day rave’ in the same hotel, where the neon and whistles glint in bright sunshine, rather than after-dark strobe lights.

After an elegant five-course dinner in Sage at Aria, I have cocktails mixed with liquid nitrogen right in front of me. I stare at the extraordinary Fiori di Como ceiling in the Bellagio hotel; made by glass sculptor Dale Chihuly, it has 2,000 hand-blown glass blossoms. ‘We want people to go “wow” when they come here,’ says the Bellagio’s head bartender. Even as a cynical Londoner, it’s hard not to stand in front of the fountains at Caesar’s Palace or giant golden MGM lions, and not feel a surge of pleasure at the sheer audacity of it all.

You might not think you’d learn much about yourself from a few days of living it up in some of the world’s most

extravagant restaurants, but strangely, I do. I remember what a kick I get from making small talk. How I prefer to listen, rather than be centre of attention, and how much I love seeking out weird or wonderful after-hours adventures when I don’t have to be up at 5am with a three-year-old. I learn that while I love the kitsch art of slot machines, I’m not remotely interested in gambling, but I’d much rather embrace all the irony-free bad taste things on offer than be snobbish about them and miss out.

Beyond the bars, there’s another side to Vegas. After the 2008 crash, property prices in the Downtown area nosedived, making it affordable for artists and musicians. Now, the alternative scene is thriving, with places like The Arts Factory and the Commerce St Studios springing up. Last year, Downtown got its own three-day festival, Life is Beautiful. It’s a showcase of the city’s best music and food, and there are also seminars with life coaches and motivational speakers. I visit on the first night and wander among the food stalls, breathing in sweet, smoky barbecue and taking nips of hot whiskey punch. Someone gives me a freshly toasted *s’more*, made with a rich chilli chocolate – I could have sworn I’d gone to heaven. I wander into

“I’d much rather embrace all the irony-free bad taste things on offer than be snobbish about them and miss out”

the El Cortez casino, with its retro 1970s vibe, and out the other side to the main stage where Kings of Leon are playing. The living here is free and easy – to me, it feels like a little slice of a different life.

On paper ‘Vegas’ didn’t sound like my kind of trip – drinking, late nights, no culture, no nature. But what I found was much richer. Yes, you can revel in the seedy showgirl aspects of it, but it only takes a little effort to seek out spectacular fine dining, diverse collections of art, and people who are passionate about where they live. I felt like I lost myself in Vegas, in the best possible way.

The MGM Grand costs \$79 per night (excluding nightly resort fee and tax). Go to mgmgrand.com for best rates. Return flights with British Airways from Heathrow and Gatwick to Las Vegas start from £575, including taxes, fees and charges, see britishairways.com. For more information, go to visitlasvegas.co.uk, lifeisbeautiful.com

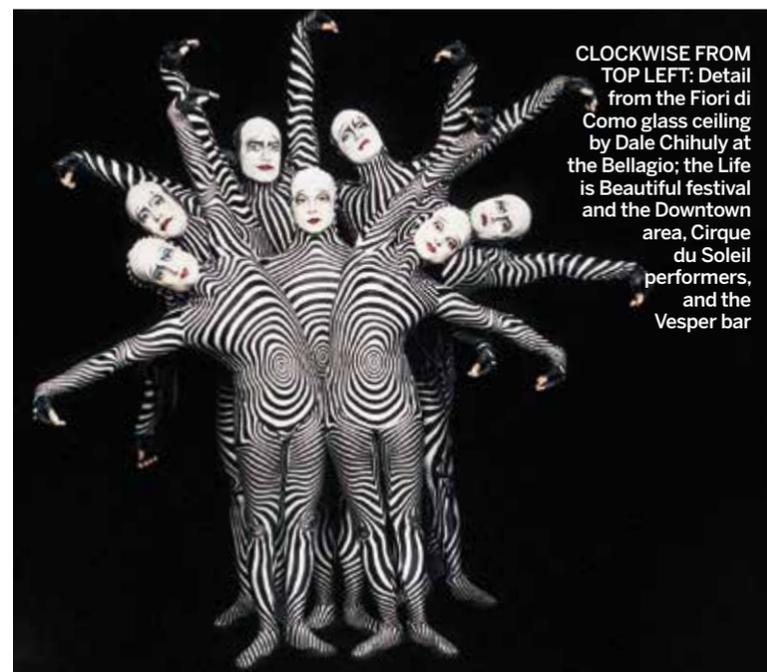
ALTERNATIVE VEGAS

● If you like fine dining, you’re spoilt for choice. At the MGM Grand (mgmgrand.com), you’ll find Hakkasan and L’Atelier de Joel Robuchon, or you could head to La Cave at The Wynn (wynnlasvegas.com), where the food and surroundings have a Tuscan feel. For molecular gastronomy and a knockout wine list, visit Sage at Aria (aria.com). ● Go on a contemporary art hunt – you’ll find original works by Andy

Warhol at THEhotel (thehotel.mandalaybay.com), Jeff Koons at the Bellagio (bellagio.com) and The Wynn (wynnlasvegas.com), and the permanent Fine Art Collection at CityCenter (citycenter.com) boasts works by Henry Moore and Nancy Rubins. ● Wander down the Strip to David Bauman Rare Books, a tiny oasis of dusty antique things in the Palazzo hotel. ● Go to Downtown. First

Friday gallery walks in the 18b Arts District draw thousands of visitors who come to see performance artists or go antiques hunting. At S2 Art, you’ll find 19th-century printing presses used to reproduce works by artists such as Toulouse-Lautrec. ● If you can’t make it to Las Vegas, you can still get in the Life Is Beautiful spirit online via the organisers’ ‘inspirational social platform’. Visit lifeisbeautiful.com.

MAIN PHOTOGRAPH P134/135: GLOWCAM/SIME/ACORNERS PHOTOGRAPHS; COURTESY OF LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL FESTIVAL SHUTTERSTOCK, VERONIQUE VAL



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Detail from the Fiori di Como glass ceiling by Dale Chihuly at the Bellagio; the Life is Beautiful festival and the Downtown area, Cirque du Soleil performers, and the Vesper bar

